The ›Affective Turn‹, Literature, and Humor

As with all concepts, it is difficult to adequately begin a discussion of ›literature‹, ›affects‹, humor, and their interrelations without telling a story or recounting an existing one. In more recent works, various (con-)texts in a general sense are reconsidered for their affective meaning as cultural products in connection with the so-called ›affective turn‹.[1] There is a growing body of literature on ›affect‹ (in the humanities, social sciences, neurosciences, and cognitive sciences) and, increasingly, in literary studies.[2] This ›turn to affect‹ should not, however, be understood as a cohesive and intrinsically more or less unified episteme or academic field. Rather it seems more accurate to understand the turn to ›affect‹ as a ramified, inconsistent, conflicting, and, to an extent, contesting, perforated net of approaches that both implicitly and explicitly work with one or more aspects of the different terms that depict different ›affects‹ or different approaches to ›affects‹ (Ingraham 2003; Leys 2017; Seigworth/Pedwell 2023). These approaches include the study of terms understood as individual ›affects‹ (like ›love‹, hate, fear, shame) and the relationship between these ›affects‹, cognition, and consciousness in their philosophical, phys-

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1   There are different and opposing overviews on the so-called turn to ›affect‹, itself a contested term. Ruth Leys' account (2017) is a detailed, concise, and critical of the debate's positivist reliance on ›scientific‹ results – as an aftereffect of the backlash of poststructuralist theory. Leys considers these approaches as uncritical and unreflected regarding their presumptions. Ali Lara, opposing this view, contends that affect studies are not against questions of ideology or ›race‹, but that ›they‹ rather »just want to theorize other cases that remain to be exlpored« (Lara 2020, 8). Jan Slaby differentiates between different approaches to ›affect‹, assuming that the varying focuses of research mirror not only disciplinary academic cultures, but also different political stances (cf. Slaby 2018). A first anthology that opens up the field of the ›affective turn‹, a term coined by sociologist and gender studies scholar Patricia T. Clough, is her and Jean Halley's *The Affective Turn – Theorizing the Social* (2007). Here, the affective turn is linked to the work of the body and of ›emotions‹ within feminist and queer studies (ix). See also Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth's *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), an anthology that brings together different influential approaches in the field. This is somewhat differently but nevertheless affirmatively emphasized in a more recent publication that promises to provide an overview of some of the main concerns in this contested field. See Seigworth and Pedwell (2023).

2   For an overview of the discussions in literary studies, see Patrick Colm Hogan (2016); Donald R. Wehrs/Thomas Blake (2017); Nancy Armstrong (2014); Stephen Ahern (2019, 2024).

ical, neurological, or psychological processes and/or effects. The main focus lies on the understandings of the meanings of ›affects‹ for themselves as well as for thought and society. The question is whether ›affects‹ are to be seen as autonomous from other external and internal factors or if they must be seen through the lens of intentionality with regard to ›objects‹. Many aspects of these approaches are interdisciplinary, ranging as far as philosophy and cognitive neuroscience.[3] It would exceed the scope of this discussion to take into account the various approaches to come to terms with the existing studies. However, I wish to highlight a few points that I consider to be of key importance. The term ›affect‹ emphasizes an abstract discourse, which is considered one of its problematic aspects. On the whole, many debates in ›affects studies‹ are expressed in a rather cumbersome fashion, often with such vigor that I am tempted to say that that the term ›affect‹ seems to represent a labyrinth of views on *an abstract other* per se in much of the literature on the topic. My hunch is that, after *feelings* and *emotions* were assigned to the realm of *the other* of ›reason‹ in Western thought, and after the emergence and establishment of (feminist) Black Studies, Postcolonial Studies (especially in the U.S. and, more generally, the English-speaking world), as well as feminist and queer theory, have complicated the construction of the *other* as an object of ›knowledge‹ in academia, it seems that this void has been filled by the turn to ›affect‹, which may explain why it has become so explosively fashionable to speak about it (that is, *as other*, something *to gaze* upon).[4]

The affective turn is a discursive trend that has been evident in publications since 2000. It can be traced back to 1995, when two significant publications emerged in the field: Brian Massumi's *The Autonomy of Affekt* and Eve Kosofyky Sedgwick and Adam Frank's *Shame in the Cybernetic Fold* (Seigworth/Gregg 2010, Hallermeier 2023). This attention to ›affects‹ has been implicitly also legitimized with new findings in the neuro- and cognitive sciences. Interestingly, these approaches have often been taken

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3   This is particularly evident in the approaches in German literary studies where a focus on ›emotions‹ as/in literature has emerged in the last decades (in 2006 Thomas Anz speaks of the ›emotional turn‹ in literary studies, in the online platform *literaturkritik.de*), which has since been followed by publications on fundamental questions about the role and understandings of ›emotions‹ and/in literature (and also) film. Simone Winko's much cited book *Kodierte Gefühle* (2003) can be regarded as such a pivotal point of interest in affect studies in literature. See also, for example, Sandra Poppe's *Emotionen in Literatur und Film* (2012) as well as Martin von Koppenfels and Cornelia Zumbusch's *Handbuch Literatur und Emotion* (2016). In English and American literary studies, the focus on affectivity appears to be more transdisciplinary, focusing on the *meanings* of ›affects‹ in ›public spaces‹ in the broadest sense, and of individual ›affects‹ such as ›love‹, sadness, depression, joy, and fear in literary studies, cultural studies, as well as queer and feminist studies. Achim Geisenhanslüke's work on affectivity and/in comparative literature occupies an in-between space in its genealogical, maybe more cross-disciplinary approach (linking philosophy, literary theory, and psychology), bringing into dialogue classical and still influential philosophical texts, such as those of Aristotle, with modernist tendencies in philosophy, (Freudian) psychology, and literary texts. See, for example, Geisenhanslüke (2019). A number of (postcolonial) critical thinkers who have joined this thread of research in Black, postcolonial, cultural, gender, and queer studies include Sara Ahmed (2002, 2010, 2014); Jin Harithaworn (2015); Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas (2011).

4   For a critical discussion of the affective turn, see Sara Ahmed 2014, 204 ff. The peer-reviewed journal *Emotion Review* is regarded as one important source of research on affectivity; another more speculative, open access journal is *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry*.

for granted in the humanities rather than questioned. Furthermore, previous studies have overlooked the question of why ›affects‹ were neglected, despite the fact that many philosophers *did* address the topic in their texts, discussing different ›affects‹ and their possible meanings.[5] In light of the ongoing hype surrounding ›affects‹ and the dependence on positivist research in science and technology, it is not implausible to argue that the turn to ›affect‹ may also be part of a broader ›biologist ontological‹ and ›positivistic turn‹ in the humanities, social sciences, and also cultural studies (see also Clough/Hally 2007; Angel 2004; Brennan 2004). However, this trend is of course not uncontested. The question of where this may lead us, and how (far) critical approaches in the humanities, including literary studies and theory, can contribute to this ›turn‹ remains open. Unsurprisingly, these diverse approaches also center on different terms to depict ›affect‹, such as ›affect‹, ›emotion‹, and ›feeling‹. Notably, ›affect‹ has become the most accepted term, particularly among proponents of cultural studies and related theories.[6]

The following brief overview outlines the various approaches. This outline is of course, reductionist. It should also not be understood as an all-encompassing overview of the various research avenues in this field. It is merely an attempt to provide an overall sense of the influential currents of thought on theories of affectivity, particularly in literary and cultural studies.[7]

Firstly, there are proponents of ›affect theory‹ in psychology and cognitive neuroscience who have had a major influence on understanding ›affect‹ in an interdisciplinary manner. This group includes the works of Silvan S. Tomkins, his students Paul Eckman and Caroll Izard and the neuroscientist Antonio R. Damasio. Secondly, there are philosophical works, especially those of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and those of their English translator, the political and cultural theorist Brian Massumi, which have had a

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5   There is a converse parallel between this new trend of attention to ›affect‹ and the emergence of conceptualizations of ›affect‹ and their function in theories around 1900. As Winko points out in her study this was a time of influential new theories including those of Darwin and Freud and a reevaluation of the body, with major consequences for the humanities (Winko 2003, 158–211). However, her work does not address how this corresponds with the project of colonialism and its manifold effects in theories on ›affect‹ and *Empfindsamkeit*‹ (sensibility). In both historical cases, this indicates a paradigmatic shift that I think correlates with processes of othering, (self-)racialization and ›identity‹ (and the attempt to implicitly bracket them). Sara Ahmed (2002), for example, indicates the hierarchization of ›emotions‹ within colonial terminology around notions of ›cultivated/civilized‹ and ›non-cultivated/non-civilized‹.

6   While all three terms are frequently used, ›emotion‹ is often related to approaches in philosophy that consider the term to refer to individualized states with intentional content that cause different effects in the body and the mind. See, for example, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (2010), and Margaret Wetherell (2012). Also see Jan Slaby (2016). Within cultural studies approaches, see, for instance, Sara Ahmed's discussion of the terms, Ahmed (2014, 204–225). Although, in her earlier work, Ahmed is critical of the term ›affect‹ and often uses ›emotion‹ instead, she regards herself as a scholar of ›affect‹. She points out that her use of the term ›emotion‹ has political implications and aims to reinforce the feminist underpinnings of any theorizations of ›affect‹ that are often overlooked in the more recent focus on ›affect‹.

7   Jan Slaby differentiates between three different approaches to ›affect‹ whereby he assumes that the various research foci mirror not only various disciplinary cultures, but also different political stances. Cf. Slaby (2018).

significant impact on the field. Important to both groups are the philosophical works of Baruch Spinoza and William James. Though these works differ, I believe they share enough similarities to group them under one heading. Both Antonio Damasio, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Brian Massumi draw on Spinozian approaches that see the body as the locus of affectivity and of the mind in contrast to René Descartes, who claimed a dissociation between body and mind. Antonio Damasio also distinguishes between the terms ›emotions‹ (bodily reactions to stimuli such as sweating) and ›feelings‹ (registered brain awareness indicating that something is occurring in the form of ›feelings‹ such as fear). The distinction between steps of perception and bodily reactions is reflected in the works of William James, Brian Massumi, and the differentiation of terms such as ›affects‹ and ›emotions‹/›feelings‹ or ›pre-personal-affects‹. This group also considers the works of psychologist and philosopher Silvan S. Tomkins to be important, especially his four-volume publication, *Affect Imagery Conciousness* (1991). In fact, literary and queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick introduced this work to the humanities. In this work, Tomkins distinguishes nine pairs of ›affects‹ based on intensity (interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, distress-anguish, anger-rage, and fear-terror, shame-humiliation and dismell-disgust). Tomkins regards these as universal, whereas he views ›emotions‹ as too complex and elusive to describe and define. Tomkins' students, Paul Ekman and Carroll Izard, developed these ideas in their own influential works. These ›affects‹ and the works expounding on them have gained significant attention and cross-disciplinary interest in the early stages of the renewed interest in ›affect studies‹[8]

Thirdly, there are the works of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, especially those on shame and humiliation, as well as the work and approaches that followed in her footsteps. Sedgwick's works are not structured around ›affects‹ per se, but rather, as evidenced by her readings of Henry James's texts, they constitute an attempt to broaden the scope of critical theory beyond the *hermeneutics of suspicion* (the approaches of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud) and Sedgwick's concept of *paranoid reading*, towards an epistemology of *reparative reading*, as discussed in the previous section. Sedgwick acknowledges the importance of these theories but argues that such *paranoid* approaches, while necessary, are often accompanied by negative ›affects‹. Her strategy is to extend these theories by employing a more empowering philosophy that considers affectivity in a ›self‹-affirming, (›autotelic‹) way while still following critical theoretical approaches that also consider pleasure and joy. She does this by using what – drawing on Silvan S. Tomkins – she calls *weak theory*.[9] One of the major concepts and analytical tools that Sedg-

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8   In literary studies these influences are linked to the work of Eve Kosofyky Sedgwick, especially to her co-edited work with Adam Frank (1995.)

9   What Eve K. Sedgwick though also presupposes is that a ›hermeneutics of suspicion‹ arouses ›negative feelings‹ and that these are ›bad‹ (e.g., sadness, anger, depressive moods, and melancholy). However, rather than categorizing ›affects‹ in an evaluative sense, they can be understood as negatively coded yet still empowering, enabling, and liberating in other ways. (See, in particular, the valuable work of Heather Love in this regard (2007); see also Cvetcovich 2012). This is also evident in Sedgwick's own reading of Henry James's work, particularly her examination of James's use of shame for self-empowerment. Thus, such negatively coded ›affects‹ may be considered affectivities of relief and, in this sense, may count as ›good affects‹. Moreover, as literary critic Sianne Ngai argues in *Ugly Feelings* (2007), paranoia and irritation are ›messed up‹›feelings‹ of ›our time‹, which

wick helped implement in critical and queer theory is the concept of *reparative reading*, which links Tomkins's *weak theory* to Melanie Klein's concept of ›reparation‹. Her work thus differs from ›pure‹, rather uncritical, depictions of ›affect studies‹ and entails an emancipatory, enabling critique of power. Thus, it is still seen as a vital source of and for critical theory in queer and feminist approaches on affectivity, in literary theory and beyond (Ronda Arab/Michelle Dowd/Adam Zucker 2015; Robyn Wiegman 2015, 2016; Ellis Hanson 2011). Several other scholars in feminist studies have also been inspired by Sedgwick's work. They focus on particular ›affects‹ in everyday contexts and have broadened the scope of ›affect studies‹.[10] Sara Ahmed's works, which link ›affect studies‹ to feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theory, are specifically influential (Ahmed, 2004, 2006, 2010, 2014). In her work, Ahmed follows a similar approach to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's, sharing with her a critical poststructuralist approach to theory. Ahmed traces the functionality of specific ›affects‹ critically, considering power relations, and treating ›race‹, gender, and sexuality as intersectional categories of analysis.[11] She follows a ›suspicious‹ reading/writing with a reaffirming one that looks at the enabling potential of thinking along affectivity.[12] Ahmed draws on different philosophical threads that, as with many other scholars in ›affect studies‹, encompass readings of/in phenomenology (a subject often disavowed in poststructuralist texts, as well as in ›affects studies‹). Fourthly, there are important approaches that are critical of the proponents in the mainstream discourse of ›affect studies‹ in the humanities. One of the most prominent critics of more mainstream threads in ›affect studies‹ is Ruth Leys. Notably in two of her essays, published in *Critical Inquiry*: *The Turn to Affect – A Critique* (2011) and *Facts and Moods – Reply to my Critics* (2012) Leys addresses the propositions that are suggested by the proponents of the mainstream affective turn. Leys's critique revolves around the so-called ›basic emotions‹ mentioned above and the duality that is made between cognition and ›emotion‹

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are connoted with negative self-consciousness and powerlessness. However, these forms of affectivity can give rise to agency.

10   For example, see the influential work of Lauren Berlant (2012, 2018). For discussions of Sedgwick's influential readings and her subsequent impact, see, Erin Murphy, J. Keith Vincent (2010), Robyn Wiegmann (2014), and Jonathan A. Allen (2015).

11   Jan Slaby highlights the practice of affective discursivity discussed and employed by Sara Ahmed in her texts to generate and expand insights about ›affects‹ and the affective turn. (See Slaby 2018, 15ff.). In an attempt to shed light on the various angles within the field of ›affect studies‹, Slaby distinguishes between metaphysical, scholarly, and activist approaches. Ahmed's approach, which Slaby considers the most important because it provides insights from marginalized positions, is seen as the ›activist‹ approach. However, this differentiation seems problematic to me, as it suggests that *white* scholars do not engage in political willfulness through their writing by following a specific tradition of scholarly debate and style. From an anti-colonial and postcolonial feminist perspective, I argue that a text's tone, whether detached, engaged, or declarative, does not free it from its sociopolitical context. It always signifies and contributes to a political position. Furthermore, the designation ›activist‹ is becoming a rather stereotyped position of marginality that is increasingly accepted at the margins of scholarly debate. This helps stabilize the debate while simultaneously glorifying the precariousness of scholars of color and those at the margins of the academic machinery.

12   One of her most pioneering works, which is still widely discussed, is *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* ([2004] 2014). See also *Queer phenomenology* (2006), *The promise of happiness* (2010a), and *Willful Subjects* (2014).

and between ›affect‹ and ›emotion‹. According to Leys, these distinctions are both drawn from interpretations of scientific experiments that are taken for granted. Leys acknowledges differences in the mainstream research on ›affects‹, but criticizes the notion that a sharp distinction can be made between ›affects‹, which are seen as ›pre-personal‹, ›biological‹ and ›organism-related‹, and which are understood as having nothing to do with intention, cognition and meaning. She also criticizes the idea that, while some cultural theorists like Brian Massumi reject an uncritical belief in the correctness of scientific results and dualisms, many scholars nevertheless build their own assumptions and philosophical presuppositions on scientific experiments and research, turning them into facts without reading them against the grain and considering their hidden and unhidden presumptions. Leys also notes that many current neuroscience works published around the same time as Tomkins's and Ekman's (Russell 1962/1980/2005; Fridlund 1962/1991) do not privilege biological processes over cultural ones, yet these works have been ignored in the turn to affectivity. She claims that this is also the case with students of Ekman and Tomkins, who have criticized the basic format of the experiments (Leys 2017, 310 ff.). Leys is not alone with her critique in the humanities. In addition to the works she relies on (Papoulias and Callard 2010; Hemmings 2005; Gross 2006; Nussbaum 2001; and Rosenwein 2010), Sara Ahmed, for example, also criticizes the rather masculinist approach in much of the trend in ›affect studies‹ – a trend that uses and privileges the term ›affect‹ over ›emotion‹. This, she argues, emphasizes a highly formalized discourse, thereby ignoring feminist studies – prior to the ›turn‹ – on ›emotions‹/›emotionalizing‹/›emotionality‹ and their function in relation to power and gendered – and I would add racialized – discourses (Ahmed 2014, 204 ff.; see also Garcia-Rojas 2016). The use of the terms ›emotions‹, ›affects‹, and ›feelings‹ remains an unresolved issue that indicates the different approaches to the topic. Finally, in literary studies, the focus of the affective turn is predominantly on theorizations concerning what literary studies can contribute to the understanding of ›affects‹ and how such questions and undertakings can be expressed. Furthermore, the research focuses on taxonomy, model findings, and terminology (Anz 2012, 155–170), as well as questions regarding ›affects‹ and the ›paradoxes‹ of fictionality (Zipfel 2012, 127–153). More recent publications discuss the inherent relationship between literature and ›affects‹, referencing classical philosophical texts, such as those of Plato and Aristotle. These publications address questions such as whether literature is the site and expression of ›affects‹ or if affectivity is used in literature to produce specific meanings (Geisenhanslüke 2018, 2019).

Although some scholars speak of a constructivist approach to ›affects‹ (Wirth 2002; Winko 2003, 208; Eming 2007, 259) this approach is not expressed as a field or problem in its own right in literary studies. Following Jutta Eming, however, one could argue that a constructivist approach to affectivity *literally* makes sense and may contribute to understanding literature's ability to shed new light on the meanings and constructions of ›affects‹ as revealing signs and codes in literary texts, sociopolitical (con-)texts, and the current transdisciplinary discourse about ›affects‹ as such.[13] Here, I therefore, use the term

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13   Overall, the discourse on ›affects‹, particularly in an interdisciplinary context, contributes to an understanding of perception. This is evident in the growing field of approaches to theories of ›affects‹ and/as perception. In addition to the vast array of publications on perception, a philosophical

affectivity also to emphasize the processual and dynamic aspects within an intersectional cluster of sociopolitical, subjective, gender-, ›race‹-, different ability-, age-, and class-related, discursive, and historical phenomena that are bound to the body and mind. In this sense, affectivity is understood as an interacting, interrelated and relational space within and among such phenomena. A body-mind dualism is thereby questioned, and ›affects‹ are seen as the effects of sociopolitical and psychological body-mind processes as well as processes that cause body-mind reactions. The body, as a place and space of affectivity, can easily be related to the canon, the texts, and the texture that inscribe meanings into different surfaces and objects. These processes of affectivity are also reflected in cultural productions and in texts as their linguistic translations. In this sense, affectivity is also understood as part of literary texts, as exemplified, in Sedgwick's work (see also Breithaupt 2018). This study also touches on three questions raised in this context. The first is the concept of *movere* as a rhetorical principle that affects and influences an audience cognitively and emotionally. The second is the *paradox of fiction*: although one knows a text is fictional, one is still affected by it. The third is the functions and presentations of affectivity in literary texts (Morreall 1985; Kuehnast, Wagner, Wassiliwizky, Jakobson, & Menninghaus 2014; Mellmann 2015; Carroll 1990; Barbero 2014; Hillebrandt 2011; Tullmann and Buckwalter 2014).

Interestingly enough, however, both humor and touch are not yet central topics in studies on affectivity. So with this attempt, I hope to shed light on and contribute to debates on this nexus.

From the above discussions of humor, its functions as well the attempts to define its ›essence‹ and effects, a link between humor, its performative and aesthetic quality, and affectivity can be inferred; moreover, a social interrelation between at least two entities – a self and an other – can be presupposed in the dynamics of affectivity as well as in the formation of humor. Furthermore, as noted, not only is humor itself often considered as an ›affect‹, but the relationship that ensues with and through it is also linked to various ›affects‹ (Berlant 2017; Berlant/Ngai 2017).

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encyclopedia of perception is now available. See Mohan Matthen (2015). However, discussions on perception and perception theories remain ontological and are approached in a positivist manner, provoking a critical stance. More interesting, and seemingly a way out of such transcendental undertakings, may be the idea of the *propositionality* of these works. Upon closer examination of discourses on ›affects‹ (or perception), it comes to mind that they are articulated and non-articulated utterances and arguments in different styles and traditions of writing. These un-written approaches lend them a ›specific‹ grammar and attachment to finding ›results‹ and insights. Nevertheless, all these works are propositional by nature. The difference between these works and critical works on ›affects‹, such as those by Sedgwick and Leys (works which are often marginalized in writings and encyclopedic entries), is, I think, that the former do not regard their work as propositional or political with epistemological implications. Instead, they seem to perceive their work as ›truth‹-finding practices, which I find problematic. One can read propositions to find out what is claimed and refuted and what is or is not part of the structure of ›knowledge‹. In other words, one can find out what is or is not centralized in the text to understand what the discourses are saying and what they are silent about.

Laugh's Humor – Laugh's ›Love‹

One of the ›affects‹ that is often and in different ways connoted as humor is ›love‹. Different aspects of the affinity between ›to love‹ and ›to laugh‹ are often drawn in these discussions. Especially in the genre of romantic comedy, a link is established that has changed over time but is still recurrent. ›Love‹ is thereby regarded as a laughable (and lovable) condition. It is invoked as a mild ›madness‹ and suffering with a happy-ending reward, qualities that are also connected to ›laughter‹. Both are also often seen as traits that *re*establish the image of a happy society (Frye [1957] 2020, 163; Mizejewski 2009, 17 ff.; see also Ahmed 2010). Both terms require an object or something to which they are related, both are seen in conjunction with a lack, both are connected to the body. The quality of ›love‹, as erotic desire, is regarded as having an affinity with loss and loss of control, qualities that are also discussed in terms of the effects of humor, which, too, signals a (disarming?) loss of control that is mirrored in a bodily feature (for example in laughing) or in the psychic state of confusion in ›love‹ – which can manifest itself in (bodily) neglect. In both cases, the self seems to fall into fragments.

Taking up this relationship between laughing and loving, already evoked in ancient texts, Bevis points out: »[A]s Parmeno explains to one lovelorn gallant at the beginning of *The Eunuch* (161 BC): ›if a matter has no plan or control to it at all, you can't manage it according to a plan.‹ The ›matter‹ here is amorous desire. For Terence and his many followers, to be in love is to have lost the plot« (Bevis 2013, 52). ›Love‹ is thus often discussed *as* humor and an imaginary that is connoted as being lost and losing control, which unfolds within an inter-subjective trajectory. There is also another, underlying relationship between loving and laughing. In many dramas and narratives ›love‹ is used to *generate* humor. ›Love‹, it could be said, is an ›affect‹ that accompanies humor, but is also one through which humor is constructed.

In fact, some theorizations of humor flirt with the humorous in a quite erotized (masculinist) manner, in which humor is assigned as the other of philosophy. This is for example the case with Henri Bergson's approach to the humorous, as Judith Roof remarks. Roof alludes to Bergson's motivation to deal with humor only through the evocation of a (cis-)normative allusion, which she identifies as a general masculinist stance on humor in philosophy, stating:

> »[I]n Bergson's original French version, comedy is not only grammatically feminine, it behaves like a strumpet, always sliding, becoming loose, a little provocative and impertinent challenger to our speculations – or perhaps expectations. Bergson's scene renders comedy a stripper to be ogled, a little thought-teaser who always manages to get away. There it is: the low phallic comedy as both ›low‹ and ›phallic‹.« (Roof 2018, 8)

Roof thus turns the tables and links what is seen in humor as ›phallic‹ and ›low‹ to the heart of Western philosophical aspirations and approaches to humor: In philosophical texts, humor is linked to cis-normative flirtation and erotics, and othered. She thus implicitly discerns a form of psychological transference – a projection – in philosophical discourses on humor, which it shares with ›love‹ and erotics as desired and disavowed ›affects‹ that cannot constitute thought. According to her, then, it is not humor that is ›low‹

and ›phallic‹, but a masculinist trait of philosophical reasoning that somehow tends to clandestinely (and possessively?) constitute and control its own grounds through a sexualized othering of other forms of thought. As Roof points out, Bergson describes ›laughter‹ in an eroticized way, but tries to hide this gesture within the power of his philosophic response in the form of supremacist flirtatious observations (Roof 2018, 8 ff.). Before surrendering himself to the humor he observes, to the call of the other within himself, as it were, Bergson subordinates humor to the power of philosophic rhetoric and saves the language and space of philosophy from humorous contamination and from change. Bergson's writings on humor describe what the explosive work of humor can do, and he neutralizes it within the rhetoric of a masculinized, logocentric, philosophizing where humor – that pleasurable bomb that destroys – is banished from the realm of philosophical thought and, in a degrading, flirtatious way, sublated.

Freud's theories also recogize in humor a form of displaced eroticized lust that he sees at work in the pleasurable pay-off that joking implies and promises. The humor of ›the joke‹ is regarded as both promise and fulfillment. According to this thread, the desire to ›love‹ and the desire to laugh are related to the promise of satisfaction, which is why both are linked to suspense and the threat of rupture with a view to compensation. This can be seen, for example, in the way Freud eroticizes ›the joke‹ as a ›side leap‹ (*Seitensprung)* (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 208 ff.). The term indicates an understanding of humor as rupture. Humor transcends ›the laws‹ of regulatory conventions, the possible consequences of which are nevertheless risked because of the promise that it holds. Humor as *Seitensprung* not only plays with the limits of the sayable, but also echoes the regulatory link of humor and ›love‹ to sociopolitical ›laws‹, to what is allowed and what is forbidden. Humor and ›love‹ thus mark a liminal crossing not only of sociopolitical transgression, but also of the boundaries of power regulations. In his analysis of Freud's letters to his wife and Kierkegaard's concept of ›laughter‹, Geisenhanslüke also suggests another link between ›love‹ and humor as ›irony‹. According to him both eroticism and humor follow a negativity: ›Irony‹ says one thing and means something else, and erotic ›love‹ desires something it does not have, so that both seem bound to an incongruous experience and expression of lack (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 147 ff.).

A political and caring attitude toward humor and ›laughter‹ *as* a necessary form of self-›love‹, is implicit in Hélèn Cixous's seminal text *The Laugh of the Medusa* ([1975] 1976). In this text, Cixous ponders upon different forms of exclusion in relation to femininity. Cixous links self-›love‹ with humor and ›laughter‹ as a philosophic way of dealing with the (old) biased masculinist imagery that presupposes and excludes femininity (as the other of masculinity) from thought. Although Cixous' text carries the package of an essentialist feminism, it has not lost its actuality. The ›laughter‹ of the Medusa seems to laugh out all forms of colonial, racialized, sexualized, and anti-feminist otherings, calling *for* ›laughter‹ as a sign of self-care as well as resistance. In fact, Cixous's humorous tone unleashes a serious, empowering philosophical proposition. Her call for ›laughter‹ signifies a movement that, coming from the past and facing the (unbearable) present (of power asymmetries), unfolds in a future to come:

»They riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. That would be enough to set half the world laughing, except that it's still going on.

For the phallogocentric sublation is with us, and its militant, regenerating the old patterns, anchored in the dogma of castration. They haven't changed a thing: they've theorized their desire for reality! Let the priests tremble, we're going to show them our sexts! Too bad for them if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one. But isn't this fear convenient for them? Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.« (Cixous 1975, 885)

Cixous' humor here plays with the alleged danger, and not just a psychological one, of the female sex, trapped between two deadly poles: that of the abyss and that of the Medusa, which it signifies, caught within the phallogocentric economy of language, imagery, and discourse. The text is grounded in feminist self-care as well as a in a deconstruction of masculinist male-centered mythologized and psychologist assumptions: Not only is the ›castration anxiety‹, often connotated by the female figure rendered absurd. The figure of the siren is also reattached to male masculinist discourses, and detached from images of femininity.

Within a different frame, one that reconciles Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy with empowering feminist readings, Sarah Kofman rethinks humor and ›laughter‹ as an affirmative ›love‹ of life. Kofman reads Nietzsche against the grain, not so much in order to destabilize his approach, but to approach him within a feminist understanding. In doing so, Kofman substantiates Nietzsche's insights. Along the way, she encounters the Greek mythical figure *Baubo* and stresses Nietzsche's Dionysian affinity. She presents *Baubo*, as a figure in the Eleusian mysteries who is also a symbol of fertility and *eternal return*, and who »can appear as a female double of Dionysus« (Kofman 1988, 197; see also Gray 1994, 1 ff.). Dionysius thus appears as a queer and queering figure, a goddess* who symbolizes life and procreation. Kofman points out the aporetic Dionysian affirmation of life and cheerfulness in the face of suffering.

> »The figure of *Baubô* indicates that a simple logic could never understand that life is neither depth nor surface, that behind the veil, there is another veil, behind a layer of paint, another layer. It signifies also that appearance should cause us neither pessimism nor skepticism, but rather the affirming laugh of a living being who knows that despite death life can come back indefinitely [...].« (Kofman 1988, 197)

The figure of ›Dionysus‹ points to a relationship of life and death and to thought and understanding as comprehensive and eternal experiences of life (and death?). Here, sensuality, affectivity, and the humorous are combined in a corporeal expression as ›gaiety and laughter‹, expressing optimism beyond misery and certainties. In reflecting upon Nietzsche's musings on ›truth‹, Kofman find her own voice and a theory of humor that she links to *Baubo*. She writes:

> »Mastery means to know how to keep oneself at a distance, know how to close doors and windows and keep the shutters closed. To hold oneself in the camera obscura, not

to refuse appearance but to affirm it and to laugh, for if life is ferocious and cruel, she is also fecundity and eternal return: her name is *Baubô*.« (Kofman 1988, 1961)[14]

Baubo here signifies ›laughter‹, joy, and ›love‹ that do not succumb to sorrow, but affirm life as the nonsense possibility of recurrence. As Kofman further explains, *Baubo* is sometimes also the figuration of ›woman*‹ itself (Kofman 1988, 197). *Baubo* appears to Demeter, who is grieving over the disappearance and abduction of her child Persephone (sometimes also Dionysus). In order to soothe Demeter, *Baubo* lifts her skirt and shows her belly, on which is drawn the image of one of Demeter's children, Iaachos or Dionysus. Seeing this image, Demeter laughs in joy. Kofman interprets this humorous act of *Baubo* as an apotropaic, loving gesture that offers solace through an embrace of eternal recurrence (Koman 1988, 197). Humor resides here in the corporeality of the birthing female body, as well as in its symbolic, potential ability to give birth to a futurity, to creativity and repetition, to the overcoming of sorrow. Kofman thus interlinks humor to the power to *make* (someone) laugh, within moments of powerlessness, and sees in it a caring, loving motivation *to move*, to change someone's mood and perception. Humor in this sense opens up thought affirmatively toward an un/expecting, not-knowing future.[15] *Baubo* may also represent care, female solidarity, and powers that go beyond the ›known‹ and the norm. *Baubo* uses humor to enchant and empower. She symbolizes that which transcends the plagues of ›reality‹ and oppression, which is the enchantment of the magical as unknown, not-knowing and power-less fields of another form of ›knowledge‹, a ›knowledge‹ that may be contrary to all (known) beliefs. The powerless not-knowing of aesthetics maybe that signifies difference and transformation. *Baubo's* loving humor can thus be conceived as a caring, feminist affirmation within experiences of grief and loss. This loving humor appears here as a proclamation, the herald of a ›neverthelessness‹, an insight, however vaguely experienced, that circuits of suffering may have an end. It is evoked by a joyful ›knowledge‹, which comes from experiences of sadness and melancholy and promises an end to their limbo. Like ›love‹, humor is thus linked to a reassuring act of promise.

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14   Kofman speaks here of a ›camera obscura‹, one of her important concepts, as an inner self and inner shelter that ›knows‹ more than it shows. This surplus of ›knowing‹ entails more than factual ›knowing‹, it also encompasses aporias, contradictions, a past with all its different experiences of affectivity, sometimes at odds with itself, suffering, a ›knowledge‹ that, thus, ›knows‹ the peaks and troughs of life, and that, nevertheless, out of this ›camera obscura‹ remains calm and open to what may come, affirming things as they are. Embedded in this affirmation is also the Nietzschean belief in an eternity that repeats itself. This is what Kofman calls the mastery of keeping oneself at a distance. It may mean acknowledging (one's) suffering and pain, and yet, keeping it as ›knowledge‹ within the self, looking at them and at life from such an inner refuge, a distance that is most intimate to oneself, in order to live on — because of and side by side with a growing other ›knowledge‹: that of the repeatability of living.

15   In the same vein, Frances Gray argues for a *re*reading of the figure of *Baubo* for theorizing humor and its relation to both misogynist and feminist imageries. Cf. Gray (1994, 1 ff.).

Humor's Pain – Humor's Healing

Humor, then, indicates pain as well as overcoming. In this sense, it signifies a form of critique and technique of speaking/writing that is used in relation to theories, which depict suffering and marginalization where it is differently utilized as a form of decolonizing resistance and empowerment, but also in the sense of care, as a self-critical, transformative tool (Lowe 1996; Karman 1998; Harper 2002; Ball 2003; Zimmermann 2003; Franklyn 2006; Pye 2006; Coletta 2009; Moura 2010; Moss 2015; Deveau 2015; Göktürk 2011, 2017; Kotthoff 2017). Often humor is thereby used as a means to destabilize stereotypes and racist signification (Cixous 1976; Gray 1994; Gates 1988; Holoch 2012; Moss 2015), and it is also seen as a healing strategy used by various othered communities (Banerjee 2005; Ridanpää 2014; Göktürk 2017).

Humor becomes a means of trickstery, world-play, deconstructive imagery, and enabling empowerment. As Mona Lisa Saloy says of Black comedians:

> »These accomplished comedians are the product of a culture whose humor rose out of a bitter, often harsh and dangerous racial climate; the result is the common adage that Blacks laughed to keep from crying, giving fuel to Langston Hughes's admonition that ›laughter‹ is the best medicine. Black humor sustained Africans in America from the earliest use of parody, to animal tales, the dozens, in proverbs, to the urban narratives such as toasts, and many other forms such as jokes, the foundation for these contemporary practitioners. Considering the proliferation of professional Black comedians, male and female, rest assured that Black humor exists in pure folk form orally, on the block, in families, neighborhoods, at churches, and still on front porches or street corners wherever Black folks congregate.« (Saloy 2001)

This healing site of humor is also highlighted and analyzed by Sigmund Freud and his so-called *Jewish Jokes*. It is interesting and revealing in this regard that Freud's reference to *Jewish Jokes* is rarely discussed as theory building against antisemitism (and racism in general) or its reparative, healing aspects.[16] Freud's informed analysis remains relevant, however, as he also depicts literary texts to denote humor, but has not been sufficiently considered in this regard. As an example, I will therefore have a closer look at the ways Freud elaborates on (›joke‹-)humor in this sense of resistance and healing in his reading of a literary text.

Freud alludes to the witticism of ›the joke‹ in a peculiar and central way that simultaneously places and displaces ›Jewishness‹ within language and imagery (Freud 2024.8, 41 ff.). He speaks of *Jewish Jokes* by referring to and analyzing them not only in a technical way that remains subliminal, but that also problematizes sociopolitical degradation as well as empowerment (see also Kofman 1986, 35–48). The Jewish German poet

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16   Although these elements of Freudian humor theory are quite evident, they are seldom highlighted as central to his work. One exception is Sarah Kofman's reading of Freud's ideas on humor, which, for reasons that remain unclear, is rarely cited. See Kofman (1986, 26 ff.); see also Menke (2020, 443). Other studies demonstrate the value of integrating his theories with alternative approaches to humor, particularly when exploring its potential as a tool for empowerment and critique. For example, see Gilman (1986); Emig (2010); Göktürk (2009, 2017).

H. Heine (1797–1986) occupies a prominent and central position in this context. Like no other German poet, Heine stands for witticism in both senses of the word, in the sense of highly intellectual as well as pleasurable wit. Humor appears here as a third space of utterance that makes speaking possible and thus enables critique, empowerment and subtlety, community building, and belonging. It allows a critical engagement with anti-semitism/racism and the confrontation and overcoming of socially accepted and conventionalized antisemitic/racist attitudes and images. Heine appears as the (knowing) hero who accomplishes this without a great deal of effort. There is thus a lightness and an ease with which Heine can maintain his sovereignty. Heine is serious, witty, and humorous at the same time. Not without some humor Freud mentions Heine in connection with a so-called ›Kalauer‹, which is not considered to be particularly witty, by saying »of which Heine is guilty [*das Heine zur Last fällt*]« (Freud [1905] 2002, 36). Nevertheless, Freud cites one such ›joke‹ to invoke the work of humor inherent in it, without explicitly addressing the economy of antisemitism that it problematizes:

> »[Heine] Having for a long time represented himself to his lady as an ›Indian Prince‹, he throws off the mask and confesses ›Madam! I have deceived you … I have no more ever been in Kalkutta [Calcutta] than the Kalkuttenbraten [roast Calcutta fowl] that I ate for luncheon‹.« (Freud 2024.8, 41)

What Freud omits is why Heine, a German poet of distinguished fame, would claim to be an ›Indian prince‹, and why Freud would repeat ›the joke‹ without surprise, and, it seems, with some relish. Freud may have left this out, because it is so obvious that ›the joke‹ is not least a response to the economy of normalized forms of othering and anti-semitism that plays at the shores of ›knowledge‹ and power, as Heine's ›joke‹ is both an analysis and a deconstruction of antisemitic slander. The repetition of ›the joke‹ may thus also represent a healing way of dealing with antisemitism. The self-masking and the injuries of (antisemitic) interpellation, othering, exclusion, and the ascription of difference in a degrading sense – ›oriental‹, ›Jewish‹, ›Indian‹ – intersect with the empowering self-idealization and image of »an Indian prince« (a *prince*, that is, of noble descent: from ›India‹, Asia, the desirous beautiful, ›exotic‹ place of imperial fantasies somewhere else, in ›the Orient‹), so that everyone (*white* European of *Christian* descent in Heine's – and also Freud's – context) should feel envious. ›The joke‹, in this way, laughs off the defamation, unaffected by it. But there is also the mourning, the traumatization, and the experience of being permanently exposed to antisemitism, to which humor here serves as a mask. What is masked, by both Heine and Freud, is the injury as well as the tragic basis of the humor itself that makes speaking about this always concomitant antisemitic companion in language, imagery, social interrelation, and the intimacy of ›love‹-relations, possible at all. (But humor goes beyond the moment, opening up to other possibilities of existing and ›humanisms‹, tugging at the imagination.) Seldom does Freud make these allusions to such injuries explicit, but he works with them below the threshold of his analysis in subtle and empowering ways. Humor in this sense is critical, a site for and of empowerment and healing, and it means an undoing of antisemitic/racist representational

connotations.[17] Humor, furthermore, unleashes a double, divided address. It addresses at least two different ›audiences‹, an ›internal‹, (Jewish) insider ›audience‹, which implicitly – or more explicitly – receives the whole wit of the humorous inclinations, empowered by it, and to an external, (*white*) outsider ›audience‹ who may only get parts of it. Freud expressly refers to and makes use of this social, community building effect of ›jokes‹, as well as the *other* subjectivity that is triggered and instantiated by the analysis of *Jewish Jokes* and their reiteration. He makes very clear, which ›jokes‹ he calls *Jewish Jokes* by connecting them to a specific subjectivity. For Freud only those ›jokes‹ about Jews are *Jewish Jokes* that are made and told *by* Jews. He, thus, assertively refers to the complex allusions and processes of vulnerability and repair that are part of these ›jokes‹ and to which only Jews (and other racialized people?) have access. Freud thus clearly excludes from this understanding racist ›jokes‹ made/told *about* ›Jews‹ from antisemetic frontiers and subject-positions. In the chapter on the motives of ›jokes‹ in which he discusses them as social phenomena and processes, he states:

> »A more transparent case is offered, once more, by the Jewish jokes, which, as I have already mentioned (p. 98), are ordinarily made by Jews themselves, while the anecdotes about them from other sources scarcely ever rise above the level of comic stories or of brutal derision [...]. The involvement of the persons concerned seems to stand out as the determinant here, as it did in Heine's ›familionairely‹ joke [to which we will come further below]; and its significance seems to lie in the fact that the person concerned finds criticism or aggressiveness difficult so long as they are direct, and possible only along circuitous paths.« (Freud 2024.8, 124)

In this way, Freud emphasizes the subjectivity of the speaking subject, the one who tells ›the joke‹, as well as of the narrator of ›the joke‹ within ›the joke‹. What he calls *the involvement of the persons concerned* as determinant for the exchange and understanding of ›the joke‹ also refers to the (implied) ›audience‹ of ›the joke‹ as well as to the one who analyzes it. Freud himself, therefore, understands *Jewish Jokes* and can discern them. This is a reading ability, a capacity, that to an extent also reflects the traumatic experience of antisemitism, which has produced a specific subject-position but also a specific ›knowledge‹, power, and community that can negotiate this experience, *make* such ›jokes‹, and reveal their full extent. A pre-designed, discursive, or sociopolitical position is in this way rejected by Freud. Rather than to endure such abusive slander, Freud names them and identifies the gesture as »farcical tale« and »brutal derision«. In this way, he refers to the

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17   Karen Smythe refers to Freud's precarious situation in finding a professorship, and she therefore reads Freud's text also as a distancing from stereotypical, racist images of ›the Jew‹, arguing that Freud uses this distancing to free himself from such images in favor of a wider readership of his work. I would argue, however, that the text should not be reduced to a quasi ›personal‹ defense-mechanism (or rather, that the political in the personal should be considered, not the other way round), especially as Freud indeed explicitly mentions antisemitism. I think insofar as it also transposes a form of social critique and another form of ›knowledge‹ that is sociopolitically marginalized, Freud's ›joke‹-theory follows rather a decolonizing epistemology (against internal European colonization), which goes beyond itself, and opens up other possibilities for thought. Cf. Smythe (1991); see also Kofman's analysis in this regard (1986).

frivolity and violence of antisemitic ›jokes‹, which lack any kind of wit and merely reiterate stereotypical racist insults. He displaces antisemitic discourse and imagery in open and yet concealed ways – the only possible way to take part in (the dominant, normalized, antisemitic, racist) discourse: in the form of a discursive guerrilla war. He thus uses the arena of ›knowledge‹ and erudition to place his own, other(-ed) ›knowledge‹, which has changed the configuration of the dominant ›knowledge‹ system for good. Only in this implicit form is it possible to detect Freud's critical political intervention between pain and pleasure in his analysis of humor in the text.

Freud's analysis of these ›jokes‹ thus implicitly sheds light on antisemitism, on the one hand, and on mechanisms of self-empowerment, on the other hand – without explicitly addressing them. Instead, a tone of mourning and enablement can be inferred from ›the jokes‹ as well as from their shifted repetition and analysis.

›Joking‹ in this sense of interventionist agency becomes a form of *signifyin* (Gates, Jr. [1988] 2014) that is crucial to marginalized communities. In this *re*iterated form of humor, of the *Witz*, the tragedy of antisemitic and racist experiences is not only transformed into an affectivity of relief. It is also transposed into an epistemology that is liberating, *decolonizing the mind* (Thiong'o 1986), and – through its humorous *finesse* that surpasses playfully, with alleged ease, the falseness and absurdity of antisemitism/racism – shows another possibility of *humanistic* thinking beyond the confines of ›race‹ and dominant, oppressive perceptions. The *Jewish Jokes* Freud refers to also have a gentle and caring tone with regard to the ›Jewish community‹, however allusively imagined, or rather to experiences of antisemitism. This is well illustrated in another analysis of a *Jewish Joke* that Freud discusses, in which again, Heine plays a decisive role – as Freud depicts it in one of Heine's works, reflecting on it with delight:

> »In the part of his *Reisbilder* [1824] entitled *Die Bäder von Lucca*, Heinrich Heine introduces the delightful figure of the lottery-collector and corn-remover Hirsch-Hyacinth, who boasts of his connections with Baron Rothschild and finally says: ›And as truly as God will grant me his blessings, Doctor Heine, I was sitting next to Salomon Rothschild and he treated me just like his equal, quite famillionarely.« (Freud 2024.8, 15 (16))

Freud is referring here to the ability of words, »the linguistic and expressive technique« of ›jokes‹, to reformulate meanings. ›The joke‹ makes subtle use of a double ›knowledge‹ that is informed by experiences with antisemitism.[18] On the one hand, antisemitic implications of ›wealth‹ are brought to the fore and rearranged in the *Jewish Joke*. On the

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18   Freud returns to this ›joke‹ several times. On another occasion he problematizes Heine's *auto-biograph*ical, self-ironic *wit* that can also be part of ›the joke‹-humor, maintaining and analyzing this ›joke‹ as an allusion to Heine's own biographical experiences. The figure of ›Hirsch-Hyacinth‹ then becomes an allusion to Heine himself and his relation to his wealthy uncle Salomon, alluded to in ›the joke‹ as ›Baron Rothschild‹. Cf. Freud (2024.8, 12 (13), 15 (16)); also Kofman (1986, 36 ff.); Menke (2021, 450 ff.). This, however, must be seen as only one slice of the ›joke's‹ allusions, for otherwise the word ›famillionairely‹ would not make any sense, since Heine *is* already part of his family, and there would be nothing unusual or witty about it. ›The joke‹ only works in full if the figure of ›Hirsch-Hyacinth‹ is seen as an outsider, a third person, not belonging to the family. In which case, he would be a reference to antisemitism as a common underlying experience and denominator – one that in ironic and ›*knowing*‹ way, makes them ›family‹ through such experiences and their

other hand, the retelling of ›the joke‹ goes beyond the countering of the racist imagery, as two Jewish men (the figure of Hirsch-Hyacinth and ›Heine‹) exchange ›the joke‹ amongst themselves; they do not only understand and try to rewrite the antisemitic implication, but also share this ›knowledge‹ and also *know* how to deal with it; they ridicule it and enjoy the ridicule as well as each other's company. Thus, the retelling of the antisemitic stereotype that ›the joke‹ iterates entails an empowering, critical stance, and the assurance of another ›knowing‹ self as well as another ›counter-knowledge‹. However, there is another dimension to this ›joke‹ that is evoked and retained in the word ›familiarly‹ as part of the phrase ›famillionairely‹. It denotes a form of kinship marked by the suffering inherent in antisemitic attacks. Both, ›the rich‹ and ›the poor‹ Jewish figures of ›the joke‹, form a ›family‹ against the atrocities of the structures of antisemitism. Not only these two economically unequal Jewish figures exchange, understand, and rewrite this other ›knowledge‹ in ›the joke‹, but also the poet and thinker Heine and the psychologist Freud, who both use it in and for their works. The implicit ›knowledge‹ in ›the joke‹ is both a mutual pain and a rewarding pleasure. In retelling and rewriting ›the joke‹, in listening to it, as well as in the dismantling and implicit analysis of it, which remain framed by humor, both affective instances are processed performatively. It is telling that Freud analyzes this ›joke‹ only in a technical way, in terms of its linguistic composition and abbreviation, and that, although he discusses ›condensation‹ here, he does not go into detail about what this means in terms of the sociopolitical aspects of ›the joke‹ (Freud 2024.8, 18 ff.); however, he is more explicit when he refers to the image of the so-called *Schnorrer* in *Jewish Jokes* as a delightful and »democratic mode of thinking of Jews« – a decolonial signifier of Jewishness and Jewish solidarity that transcends class against the backdrop of antisemitism (Freud 2024.8, 98 ff.). The pain-pleasure that is evoked appears in the veiled, masked form of humor, the only place where it seemingly can reside and take shape.

For Freud, humor works with omissions on the side of the narrator and with absences that must be filled by the listener (Freud 2024.8, 68, 145). He also employs the image of the ›Janus face‹ in relation to ›jokes‹, of its double and allusive meanings that hint at unconscious understandings and those that are reflected in more overt forms on the surface of ›the joke‹.

Freud's understanding of ›the joke‹-humor thus alludes to forms of intelligibility that operate on external, sociopolitical, and internal, psychic levels, and to mechanisms of dealing with, negotiating, and working through them. These reveal forms of concealed ›knowledge‹ and concealed power. *Jewish Jokes* thus have a threshold, a liminal place that speaks of suffering as well as empowerment. This two-faced work of humor also expresses a form of experienced trauma and tragedy, as well as self-reassurance.[19] Its

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common ›knowledge‹ about them, as well as the wit to address them in such ways and rise above their mediocrity.

19   On the problematization of double meanings, the sense in non-sense, the Janus face and ›translation‹ in Freud's understanding of humor, antisemitism, Jewishness, and the (healing) function of ›the joke‹, see Sarah Kofman's marvelous reading, where she in fact, in a comparison with Nietzsche, adheres to Freud himself as a Janus God (Kofman 1986, 43 f., 26 ff., 55 ff.; see also Menke 2021, 443 ff.).

joy comes from this double meaning. But Freud is referring to the *deconstructive poetics* of this *tragic-comic* work of humor with regard to *Jewish Jokes* that interogates ›truth‹ and ›knowledge‹ in a much more general, epistemological sense, when he questions the common meanings of humor and philosophy in a nutshell by saying:[20]

> »But the powerful technical method of absurdity is here linked with another technique, representation by the opposite, for, according to the uncontradicted assertion of the first Jew, the second is lying when he tells the truth and is telling the truth by means of a lie. But the more serious substance of the joke is the problem of what determines the truth. The joke, once again, is pointing to a problem and is making use of the uncertainty of one of our commonest concepts. Is it the truth if we describe things as they are without troubling to consider how our hearer will understand what we say? Or is this only Jesuitical truth, and does not genuine truth consist in taking the hearer into account and giving him a faithful picture of our own knowledge? [...] What they are attacking is not a person or an institution but the certainty of our knowledge itself, one of our speculative possessions.« (Freud 2024.8, 101)

Not only is it interesting that Freud speaks of ›knowledge‹ as *a speculative good*, but also the function he ascribes to humor is remarkable, resembling a deconstructive deferral. This deconstructive trace in humor can be perceived as the intrinsic work of the *tragic-comic*, which humor generally ›translates‹ and negotiates as a faculty operating at the limits of conscious and unconscious strands.

The *Jewish Joke* – in this sense of subtly evoked ›knowledge‹ – entails a space of exchange within the shelter of a ›community‹ with similar experiences of oppression; this may be already indicated in a condensed sense and be part of the word *Witz* and the double meaning of ›joking‹ and wittiness. Freud distinguishes not only between the site of the unconscious of ›the joke‹ (*Witz*), which always comprises the meaning of *wit* (*Witz*), but also its manifestation in language in the double sense of the humorous as well as the witty. *Witz* in the sense of *wittiness* and ›joke‹ marks the language of the sociopolitical other and is an answer to antisemitism, oppression, and violence. Humor appears as a sheltering and protective mode of displacement and condensation that creates a space to speak the unspeakable, the tragic that goes with it, as a strategy of inner healing and ›outer‹, sociopolitical resistance. But once set in play, it opens up a space for liberating and empowering ›knowledge‹ formations for everyone to conceive the wor(l)d differently outside of (hurting) meta-discourses.

Thus, the appropriation of antisemitic ›jokes‹ by Jews (and racist ›jokes‹ by other oppressed communities) generally plays in self-reflective ways with the correlation of humor as anti-dominant, healing, reparative, and political work from within the economy of (centuries-old) experiences of repression and sociopolitical marginalization. This understanding of Freud's approach to humor and *Jewish Jokes* can be related to Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s reading of *signifyin(g)*, mentioned above, as well as W. E. B. Du Bois' notion of

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20   Freud is alluding here to a specific *Jewish Joke*, in which ›truth‹ is negotiated through absurdity; here, too, the antisemitic slander that lies behind ›the joke‹ is not further discussed, but only the form and technique of ›the joke‹. See Freud (2024.8, 98 ff., 101).

double consciousness.[21] Not only has it the flavor of a ›knowing‹ humor, a form of ›knowledge‹ that remains itself unmentioned and premised; it also is a playful form of insinuation of the tragic that has almost become another layer of skin, transferred into an anti-dominant, liberating, epistemological aesthetic.

When I use the term *tragic-comic* in the following, I am alluding to this tentative approach, which links the work of humor to a double-sidedness of omissions and allusions based on the tragic and some form of humorous tonality that must be ›filled‹ and ›translated‹, and which may correspond in the end to an *anti-dominant (other) humanistic*, *deconstructive poetics*.

As we have seen, Freud also uses two other terms for the humorous besides *Witz*, which are the German terms *Komik* and *Humor*. While the former is linked to the imagination and understood as a release of imaginative energy, the latter is linked to affectivity and understood as its unresolved release. Moreover, in an essay written explicitly on humor more than twenty years after his work on ›the joke‹, in 1927, Freud centralizes and expands the notion of humor (*Humor*), reflecting in particular on its empowering quality. Here, Freud does not only describe humor as the expenditure of excess energy. Rather,

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21 Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s account of the rhetoric of *signifyin(g)* ([1988] 2014 (see also annotation 7, p. 32f.) can be perceived as a theoretical extension and supplement to Freud's allusions of *Jewish Jokes*, as well as to anti-dominant rhetoric generally with its (infinite), suggestive, open-ended poetics. *Signifyin(g)* plays with ruptures, *sampling* – using snippets of old songs for new ones – the multiplicity of meanings, trickery, and lying (in the sense of telling stories (61), akin to how Nietzsche uses the word, see Geisenhanslüke 2011) in oral as well as written African American diasporic textualities and intertextualities. Gates Jr. tracks *signifyin* as a rhetorical theory of literary form in pan-African mythology and its traces in a wide range of African American vernacular, lyrical, musical as well as literary practices. The mythical character of *Esu* in Yuruba (and other related names) as well as their diasporic kin *the signifying monkey* in African diasporic cultural praxis and literatures, is a trickster-›mediator‹ of textual interpretation und reading, and a figuration of this process. While *Esu* mediates between human and the Gods, reading the written texture, they also create new significations and meanings as such, however transiently and contexually. *Esu* also represents a figure embodying undecidability in terms of sexuality and also within processes of reading, epitomizing »the ambiguity of figurative language« (25), while the *signifing monkey*, a figure of parable in many African American narratives derived from Esu mythology, at the same time, signifies a practice of »various sorts of playful language games« that encompasses the poetics and rhetoric of vernacular *use* of language and discourse on the one hand, and the intertextuality and open-ended texture of signification that is echoed in literature and textuality on the other. Gates Jr.indeed refers to sginifyin and Freud's ›joke‹ -work and dream-work (64); moreover, there exist also Janus-face figurines of Esu, which may reflect their indeterminate, non-binary, in-between figuration (Gates, Jr. 2014, 28, 34–36, 143). Jeanne Rosier Smith (1997) deploys Gates Jr. approach in her analysis of what she calls »American Ethnic Fiction« as a trickster-theory and an underlying form of signature, which I think can only be understood as an aspect of Gates, Jr.'s work that speaks to and challenges theory itself. See also Joseph Litvak's (2009) analysis of US-American antisemitic stereotypes since the 1940s, the role of humor and dominant images of ›citizenship‹ and sociopolitical forms of subjectification. There is also an implicit affinity of Freud's *Jewish Jokes*, and mostly implicit critique of antisemitism, and W.E.B. Du Bois' insight into ›double consciousness‹ (Du Bois [1903] 2005, 3) – a double ›knowledge‹ that comes from racializing, racist experiences, and the ability to form two kinds of ›consciousness‹ at once, one shaped by an understanding of the dominant racist discourse, and one that comes from an inner, other insight that questions it and vaguely senses another ›knowledge‹ outside of these controlling and racist images.

his concept of humor is a pivotal point in the affective, epistemic, poetic, and discursive economy of the ego. Freud regards humor here as a (one of the few good) soothing traits of the super-ego, which helps the ego to overcome feelings of inferiority and to develop a sense of agency in the face of dominant social pressures. Humor becomes the protective trace of the super-ego that shields the child parts of the ego from damage; it makes it possible for the child to remain above insults instead of succumbing to them and being hurt by them. Freud speaks of the magnificent (*großartig*) and elevating (*erhebend*) nature and function of humor. He describes humor as liberating (*befreiend*) and seems to assess it differently from the more technical and linguistic functions of ›the joke‹ (*Witz*) (Freud 2024.21, 147ff., 1999.14, 385.). Freud speaks here of the *humorous process* (*humoristischer Vorgang*) and the *humorous attitude* (*humoristische Einstellung*), both of which indicate a performative quality inherent in the humorous display. What is sought is some form of internal and/or external affective touch, but one that is incongruent with what may be expected. Freud's analysis of humor can also be understood as a two-step form of negotiation and then translation of negative, repressive, depressing, painful affective experiences »to which the situation would naturally give rise« that are transformed into a »jest« (*Scherz*) (Freud 2024.21, 148, 1999.14, 384). Humor thus shifts difficult affective experiences into an empowering attitude. Freud understands the humorous process (*humoristischer Vorgang*), here also as an *echo* and a *copy* (*Nachklang, Kopie*) of the performer in the ›audience‹ or the listener. In this transformative gesture, Freud recognizes a positively connoted triumph of narcissism that serves the self-preservation of the humorous subject, which is transmitted to the listening (reading) subject and affects them as well. (Narcissus and Echo appear here as figurations that both exhibit a complex amplitude in subjects. Narcissus protects the self from harm by transforming painful experience into speakable, performative language; it is Echo's language that *re*presents this transformation process of pain into pleasure, even evoking its resonance as a form of learning in the other.) The process of humor, which takes place in both the narrator and the reading/listening subject in its transmitted form, Freud calls ›unknown‹ (*unbekannter Prozess*) (Freud 2024.21, 148, 1999.14, 385). Humor then appears as a process that also *re*presents non-knowledge (*NichtWissen*) and power-lessness (*OhnMacht*).

Against the backdrop of Freud's definition, humor can be seen as a performative discourse within signifying practices that undermines antisemitic, racist, and authoritative, dominant language. Through the workings of *Humor* and the performance of the *Witz*, humor creates the possibility to carve out an enabling space of shelter within the self and to speak up. The unspeakable, in which the experience of antisemitism and racism resides in the affective form of disgust, pain, pensiveness, and resistance, and the normalized mechanisms in which the concepts of ›race‹ and antisemitism/racism are embedded, can thus be brought to the surface and negotiated. This inner movement is well expressed in the German idiom *etwas zur Sprache bringen*, ›to bring something to language‹. In this sense, humor is a double form of protection: It is a protection against the normalcy of antisemitism/dominance within the historically determined symbolic social order, and it is an inner refuge through which it becomes possible to develop – in an un-conscious, not-knowing, power-less way – a secret and pleasurable inner code of exchange to deal with traumatic experiences and supremacist structures. Humor is then a double movement in the self as well as in language and signification that is used to play-

fully displace and enable other possibilities of meaning while protecting the psyche from harm.

Thus, the (Jewish) ›joke‹, as well as humor in general, functions as a counter-discursive strategy often used by othered and racialized people, whether or not it is recognized, acknowledged, and understood in dominant social structures. It functions as a healing balm, helping the wounded self to overcome hurtful experiences by unmasking and yet silently laughing off (racist) attacks.[22] For marginalized and racialized communities, and sexualized subjects, it is not just the sociability of humor that matters. Rather, humor acquires an existential aspect in terms of (sociopolitical and psychic) survival, as well as in terms of articulating and giving voice to (othered) experiences and forms of ›knowledge‹. Humor also allows such codes to be shared and becomes a powerful and liberating tool of and for (subversive, political) expression – even if only for moments.

Humor 'n Affective Critique

Humor, then, can be understood as a site of engaged, reparative agency that destabilizes dominant discourses while paving the path for various other understandings of what is excluded from ideologies of dominance under code words such as ›reason‹. In the same vein, studies of humor can be seen in relation to social class. This can also be discerned in an intersectional way in Freud's Heine-›joke‹, in which the socially ›higher‹ class evoked by ›wealth‹ is (affectionately) ridiculed and dehierarchized from a subjectivity that symbolizes underprivilege and poverty with all its connotations, while a tone of solidarity based on experiences of antisemitism is wittily maintained. The work of Mikhail Bakhtin and, based on his work, more recent accounts by Terry Eagleton also show the correlation between engaged humor as critique and social class (Eagleton 2019). Here, too, humor is part of affective allusions to self-empowerment, evoked through grotesquery, indicating an attitude of disdain to the observance of tabooed sociopolitical ›laws‹.

Although the links between humor and critique are obvious, humor's ability to destabilize can also be used to reinforce, abusive, conventionalized understandings of normalcy. I have problematized this aspect by calling it *false humor*.[23] In my understanding, this dominant form of humor, performed from a position of supremacy, marks the limits of humor and forms a contrast to the liberating effect of socio-critical, anti-racist, queering, and feminist tonalities of humor.[24]

There is, for example, the image of non-binary and female subjectivity as ›not funny‹, which is, at the same time, a topos of (male masculinist) fun-making (Gray 1994, 1 ff.;

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22 The super-ego in this case may mean more than the residue of parental voices in the psyche. It may also include the effects of counter-discourses. The affective and analytical sides of humor that Freud highlights here are recomposed as a form of affective and affectionate quasi-parental, deconstructive, discursive-countering, and *re*issuing protection of the self against harmful and distressing (sociopolitical) images and racist underpinnings – a quality that characterizes Freud's work as well as that of Du Bois and Gates Jr.

23 See annotation 20, p. 49, see also p. 78 ff. and annotation 21.

24 Such critical forms of humor can also entail and be effective through a »shock value of the obscene«; Cf. Willet/Willet/Sherman (2012, 224 ff.).

Ahmed 2010, 65; Willet/Willet/Sherman 2012, 217 ff; Mizejewsky/Sturtevant 2017, 3; Kotthoff 2017, 147). Along with racist ›jokes‹, this is another example of *false humor*. Read against the grain, it reveals the biased values and evaluations within a specific space-time, shedding light on the discourse it is enmeshed in while providing a context for critical reflection (Critchley 2002, 12, 58 ff.). In this sense, *false humor* also reflects the subjectivities from which it is spoken and is therefore indeed enlightening. Besides a wide range of studies that deal with sexist and racist humor in the analysis of literature and other arts, more recent queer and feminist studies question whether theories of humor – which were largely written by male scholars – are suitable for critical feminist analysis and engagement (Kein 2015, 671). At the same time, there is a search for other venues to critically theorize humor, especially from (Black) feminist positions.[25] Feminist theorists have introduced approaches to the analysis of humor that explicitly address the ways in which humor is used to reinscribe racist and sexist language. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw opens up an intersectional approach to the study of humor and its workings that critically examines anti-racist claims to humor. As she points out, while such (male-dominated) humor may serve as an empowering tool against racism, it sometimes displays misogynist and repressive features, which reestablish and excuse sexist speech acts and structures, while Black women and women of color are presumed to conform to it for the sake of a greater good (Crenshaw 1991, 1292 ff). Another form of engagement with feminist humor is what feminist scholar Rebecca Krefting calls ›charged humor‹ (Krefting 2014, 106 ff.). Krefting builds her ideas on the concept of ›cultural citizenship‹, coined by the Latin@ Cultural Studies Working Group, which emphasizes the work of illegalized citizens who are crucial to the stability and maintenance of the state and yet are rendered invisible (see also Kathryn Kein 2015, 671 ff.). Krefting explores the mobilizing potential of ›charged humor‹ while lamenting its limitations in a market-oriented economy. Other approaches rely on the ambivalence and liminality of humor, which it shares with queer sensibility (Reed 2013; Mizejewsky 2014; see also Mizejewsky/Sturtevant 2017). Mizejewsky and Sturtevant's approach suggests to focus on the notion of ›hysteria‹, which signals both an effect of humor and a complex discursive practice of managing the mechanisms of othering (Mizejewsky/Sturtevant 2017, 1 ff.). Although these works reflect on the workings of humor and its destabilizing and transformative capacities, they only implicitly address its affective sides.

Freud's above-mentioned insights on ›the joke‹ and humor can therefore be considered as still relevant contributions to critical theorizations of humor, which, because of their analytical precision, remain crucial to the analysis of literary texts.

The danger and limitation of humor as a form of empowerment, however, resides in its vulnerability when it is not understood within its subtle signification, but is instead read and used to reinstate racist meanings within the wider public sphere, and when it is turned thus into *false humor* from dominant perspectives.

There are other liminal spaces that humor creates, as we will see in the following subchapters. These liminal spaces will be addressed by considering three approaches to humor as *experiences of a limit*.

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25 Hélène Cixous's feminist approach in *The Laugh of the Medusa* ([1975] 1976, 875–893) remains a central and influential text in this regard.

Liminality I – Fanon's ›Laughter‹ and the Ogling of the Other

As can be seen in Freud's discussion of humor and ›the joke‹, humor is also used as a linguistic, performative tool for the decolonization of the self. In this sense, humor echoes the allegory of the inscription of the dominant and colonial gaze on the body and its effects. Its thematization can also be traced back to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). In this work, Fanon considers the subjectification of both the one who is looked at (and othered) and the Other who looks – and (from a position of power) produces a supremacist self. In the text, the imperial gaze of the Other is enacted by a little *white* girl who, upon encountering the narrator in Fanon's autobiographical analysis, uses the N. word: – »Look, a N. [...] Mama, see the N.! I'm frightened«, – (Fanon 2008, 86). The child associates fear, not with the narrator's sight, but with the sight of the abusive colonial sign that is associated with the racist and violent denotation.

Fanon reflects on the psychological effects of this injurious process of signification, which reduces the other to an object of the gaze, to a thing and, in its abusive demarcation, touches upon the experience of a limit:

> »I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all *historicity*, which I had learned about from Jaspers. Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema.« (Fanon [1952] 2008, 84)

In this passage, Fanon, on the one hand, exposes the limits of ›laughter‹ as a process of demasking. He recognizes that the colonial gaze goes much deeper than anything that can be captured by the eye, by looking back and expressing this absolute crisis in the form of an apotheosis, an absence, a failure of ›laughter‹. ›Laughter‹ with all its possible affective sites is suspended. The voice of a frightened child cannot be dismissed with counter-humor, which blatantly shows how deeply embedded and seemingly invincible the racist gesture is because of its ingrained roots/routs in conventionalized (colonial) discourse as a normalized part of language as well as naturalized bodily acts (alleged *seeing*). The colonial gaze of historically driven discourse has deeply penetrated the body and its senses and functions. On the part of the supremacist, colonizer subject, racism has become almost a compulsive and impulsive bodily response. On the part of the subject in processes of decolonialization, it has an almost arresting and paralyzing effect on the body. The colonial gaze first marks the body of the other as a thing and then places it on the other side of humanity as an object (which *white* children have learned to fear – a projective reversal of the colonizing experience). On the other hand, Fanon uses a complex tone of humor to deconstruct this fixation. First, he emphasizes the ›historicity‹ of the act, and then, with resignation and tongue-in-cheek, points to the very same system of ›knowledge‹ in which he, too, is imbricated (»which I had learned from Jaspers«). The fact of his unravelling deconstructive thought blows up this placement and process of othering, and shows the limits of conventionalized racist thinking but also of decolonial thought, and in doing so exposes its (›self‹-)mendacious, racist, as well as racialized foundation. The liminality of Fanon's analysis has three sides: It is at the liminal of the concept of ›race‹ as a stabilizing as well as destabilizing colonial category. It is at the liminal edge

of an epistemological self-reflexivity that positions the subject of counter-articulation at the limits of discourse, racism, philosophy, and resistance, and finally, it is on the liminal cusp of an *affective humor* that, again, oscillates between pain and pleasure.

Fanon returns the pedagogical, benevolent, sexualized assault of the *white* woman, the mother, by drawing another boundary, which he establishes as the subject of a new historicity and discourse. He does not open the barrier to his skin, but shelters himself, using the insult as an invitation to intervene in the dominant discourse revealed by the encounter, however abrasive, subverting its structure, passing through it to the other side of power, queering its logic. Fanon not only refuses to be placed and appropriated within the Other's discourse, and not only uses the destructive abuse of language to disrupt, however temporarily, the very same abusive discourse, but rather employs language as a tool of and for liberation. This is a movement that is marked by ›laughter‹, at the end of which another self is born. The racist event bounces back into the sphere of the imperial Other to ignite its own fire by questioning it:

> »›Kiss the handsome N.[...]'s ass, madame‹! Shame flooded her face. At last, I was set free from my rumination. At the same time, I accomplished two things: I identified my enemies and I made a scene. A grand slam. Now one would be able to laugh. The field of battle having been marked out, I entered the lists.« (Fanon 2008, 86)

›Shame‹ here is aroused in the Other, because the falsity of the encounter is brought to light by Fanon's return of the slander and his refusal to succumb to its placement within an oppressive configuration. The reparative, healing performance of Fanon's utterance is brought to the fore; the other takes control of discourse. Fanon intervenes in the philosophies of ›race‹, ›humanity‹, and *seeing*, correcting them and *re*orienting their discourse to serve the calculus of a free mind that cannot be imprisoned showing that ›the other‹ cannot be objectified and dominated. His response and speaking back demonstrates the agency of the observed and at the same time invisibilized other, as well as the historical continuum of (imperial) discourse itself, signifying its decay.

Fanon's mischievous humor and ›laughter‹ can be read as a rhetorically deconstructive resignification of discourse, and as an affective effect of a self-liberating, decolonizing subjectivity. It can be said, with Bakhtin, that »[w]hile breaking up false seriousness, false historic pathos«, Fanon »prepared the soil for a new seriousness and for a new historic pathos« (Bakhtin 1984, 439). By reversing and objectifying discourse, Fanon, through ›laughter‹, liberates colonized subjectivity from a predetermined subject-position, nullifying its thingness. At the same time, he enriches the same system of ›knowledge‹ with his impalpable ›double knowledge‹:

> »I have ceaselessly striven to show the N. [...] that in a sense he makes himself abnormal; to show the white man that he is at once the perpetrator and the victim of a delusion [...] Superiority? Inferiority? Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the You? At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness.« (Fanon 2008, 175, 181)

In this way, Fanon passionately intervenes in the formation of a new discourse, calling for a different dialogue that goes beyond the biased abuses of racism by shifting it to the possibility of a different understanding of what ›humanity‹ might mean.

The humor evoked by Fanon in this context signifies a form of ›double knowledge‹ that remains humble and open to any predication and that – despite experiences of abuse – is self-reflexive and self-critical, setting the tone for the possibility of (cis-male?) ›love‹ and a different ›brotherhood‹. But Fanon's humor also marks the process of thinking itself as an unrestrained, ›laughing‹ self-healing act. Humor and ›laughter‹ are here the outward sign, the *clang*, of this process, showing the interconnectedness of an embodied mind. It is a tonality that oscillates between the pain of trauma and the wounded but recovering body-mind. This process of affectivity, inseparable from thought, is the *re*issuing of the ›bad‹ feeling and its transformation into joy. It is the process that Sedgwick mentions in relation to the writings of Henry James and the transformative potential of ›shame‹. This rather peculiar process unfolds its healing power as a strategy in the reflected *afterwardsness* (Freud) of reading, of psychic memory, writing it back into the social and discursive un/consciousness. The fall of the subject – in this case a vicious attack with a performative speech act – does not cause the collapse and disintegration of the (othered) subject; it triggers a self-sustaining subjectivity that takes a stand, which, as Fanon shows, goes beyond the moment of the abusive exchange, and that, profoundly touched by it, thinks along a visionary futurity in which another form of egalitarian encounter may be possible.

Analyzing and transcending this gaze, Fanon uses humor as a knowing strategy of the colonized other in response to such colonial atrocities. Humor, in this decolonizing sense, is an affective effect of thought against violent and authoritative frames of ›truth‹ in discourses of power, which disrupts and frustrates their fixity and authority. It symbolizes a critical gaze back at authoritative language and its effects, disturbing its underlying presuppositions and thus invalidating the imperial gaze.

Fanon's humor goes beyond Bakhtin's ideas of the carnivalesque because it is not ›seasonal‹ and parodic; it is similar to Bakhtin's approach in that it also frustrates and disrupts power relations. Against the racist performative utterance, trapped in witnessing its circles, Fanon not only laughs within a liminal affectivity. Fanon's ›laughter‹ signifies and performs a rectification and exposure of the limits of coloniality and its eager desire (and unwitting ignorance) to limit humanism and then to install it as the norm. But this is not about turning the tables. Rather, Fanon recognizes and identifies the subject of coloniality also as its victim. This recognition and insight does not only come from ›reason‹ and analysis in a narrow sense, but also from the ›non-knowledge‹ and power-lessness of trauma and pain, both of which are evident in Fanon's humor and ›laughter‹. Against this experience – or rather at its other limit/end – Fanon offers another experience of the limit that can lend itself to joyful ›laughter‹ when, at the end of his work, he writes of his decolonizing humanist insight as a *touch*, »a simple attempt« to understand beyond historically conditioned, biased formations – towards other shores.

In the following, I wish to draw on two further notions and uses of ›laughter‹/humor as a border experience, both of which, from very different perspectives, shed light on the threshold and liminality of these phenomena. These can be traced in a text by Friedrich Nietzsche as well as in the writings of the Jewish German philosopher Helmuth Plessner.

Liminality II – Nietzsche – at Crossing Borders

Nietzsche's approach to humor is implicitly invoked in several of his texts, but it is most often associated with *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885). As with many other approaches to humor, there is a spectrum of terms evoked here that haunt each other. Particularly with regard to Nietzsche whose poetic language does not seem to be interested in clear definitions, it is difficult to narrow down the use of humor or ›laughter‹ or to extract ›exact‹ definitions from his work. However, Mark Alfano, like John Kress, considers Nietzsche to be one of the few philosophers who pays attention to humor and uses it in his work (Kress 2008; Alfano 2018). But Nietzsche is not just attentive to humor and uses it in his philosophy and rhetoric. Indeed, humor seems to be an important element of epistemology and critique in Nietzsche's work (Gunter 1968; Kaufmann 1968; Pippin 1988; Conway 2009; Lippitt 1992; Kress 2008; Boddicker 2021). Lydia Amir (2022) draws particular attention to the French reception of Nietzsche, where Nietzsche is read from an early phase as a philosopher *of* humor, ›laughter‹, comedy, and play. According to Amir, Nietzsche's ›liberating laughter‹ combines both destruction and creation (Amir 2022). Thus, it is also the tragic that must be considered as an important element of Nietzsche's understanding of humor (Hatab 1988; Geisenhanslüke 2011; Amir 2022). According to Alfano, indeed a catalog of ethically important ›virtues‹ informs Nietzsche's work, including curiosity, courage, solitude, and *a sense of humor*. Rather than defining what he means by a *sense of humor*, Alfano thus refers to what could be called Nietzsche's attitude towards philosophical insight and ›(self-)knowledge‹ (Alfano 2022).

Humor has different functions in Nietzsche's work. At times, it is tinged with what Alfano calls a ›pathos of distance‹, by which he means a critical stance connoted by contempt and disgust. It appears in Nietzsche's texts around dogmatism, unquestioned beliefs, and commonplace positions. A joyful humor and ›laughter‹, Nietzsche's ›higher laughter‹, appears in a more gentle form when it is mentioned along with curiosity and ›intellectual courage‹ as well as ›wisdom‹ (Alfano 2021, 280 ff.; Gunter 1968). Nietzsche's attention is also drawn to affectivity that he attributes to certain drives, which are considered sociopolitically harmful and hazardous to the status quo. Nietzsche deplores the fact that such ›affects‹ and undesirable desires are associated with specific social groups and members of society, rather than to be seen as ›most human‹ concerns (Alfano 2021, 273 f.).

Humor is also a tool with which Nietzsche mocks his own approaches, not only gauging his achievements with the same critical grid (Conway 1992, 2009; Gilman 2001), but also setting a high standard of self-criticism that any epistemology must be able to withstand and be willing to undergo. Furthermore, Nietzsche uses humor to structure his text and to generate a specific affectivity with respect to his intended ›audience‹ (Boddicker 2021, 448).

In Nietzsche's work, humor leads to an opening up of inquiry or a condemnation of previous beliefs. Nietzsche's sense of humor demonstrates an unrelenting skepticism and is also intended to produce and process self-transcendence by laughing at that very self (Alfano 2018a, 2021). As Pete A. Gunter notes, Nietzsche's claims are part of his philosophical presuppositions, one of which is a harmonious duality he sees in pre-Socratic Greek philosophy, symbolized by the Apollonian and Dionysian figures. While the Apol-

Ionian expresses order, form, and measure, the Dionysian stands for potentially destructive attitudes and drives, but also for creativity and poetry; the ideal synergy of the two forces, according to Nietzsche, is exemplified in the Greek tragedies of Sophocles and in the work of Ovid. With Euripides, Nietzsche sees the beginning, and with the ›reason‹-oriented philosophy of Socrates, the destruction of this necessary interplay and an imbalance of this harmony and understanding (Gunter 1968, 493 ff.; see also Geisenhanslüke 2011, 2012). Humor, in this sense, harbors Nietzsche's epistemological framework and is a tool with which he simultaneously objects to this imbalance and argues for an epistemology that is also informed by Dionysian elements, without which any understanding remains incomplete and in fact an impediment to ›real‹ ›truth‹ (Gunter (1968). Nietzsche is interested in challenging the configurations of thought and corroded beliefs that have acquired the status of ›truth‹, but he is not invested in the crude implementation of another system of ›truth‹ that would merely replace what he criticizes. Moreover, as Alfano notes, humor and ›laughter‹ allow people to abandon fixed beliefs without ›falling into nihilism‹; rather, they lead to the acquisition and maintenance of a positive affectivity (Alfano 2019), which may also be why Nietzsche – the philosopher of affirmation par excellence – uses humor as an affective rhetoric. Humor may be the only vital rhetoric that refrains from self-righteous formulations of ›truth‹. It is therefore no coincidence that Nietzsche's circular philosophy, which may have a (more nuanced) affinity to the figure of Dionysius, emphasizes the work of humor and the intertwining of the tragic and the humorous (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 2012; Amir 2019, 2022).

There is thus a rather complicated theory of humor in Nietzsche's philosophy that remains still undertheorized and has yet to be further unearthed. As mentioned above, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is considered not only as one of Nietzsche's major works, but also as one of his most important works with regard to humor. At the same time, since Nietzsche is not a philosopher of holistic theories, it is probably also risky to look for an explicit theory of humor in Nietzsche's work. With *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche creates a mythopoeic narrative, a form of narrative that he may miss in modernity, another kind of pre-Socratic *Attic tragedy* perhaps. In its literary and philosophical effort, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* does not imitate Attic tragedy but creates a new one, one that emerges from the experience of modernity, which is also the experience of European imperialism, that has left its mark on European ›culture‹, discourse, and ›knowledge‹. These seem to be at least inspired by the ›knowledges‹ of the other(-ed). In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, then, Nietzsche's main character represents two dilemmas at once: While remaining male, he becomes the (*white* man's) other: He represents the image of an ancient ›Persianate‹ (itself a dilemmatic term) ›Prince‹; the European subject thus becomes the other of themselves, and an unwitting anti-hero, in search of a ›truth‹ that is nothing more than this: an awkward, futile, to some extent ridiculous, powerless, as well as tragic search into the abyss of the unknown. The European (like the other) remains a Sisyphean figure (which could be read, with some optimism, as a sign that European philosophy, in spite of itself, perhaps would like to move towards ›equality‹, at least in theory). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's last work, combines tragedy and humor. The humor in the text in fact opens up its tragic elements, and it is written in a highly poetic style. I would like to look at the beginning of the book to see how Nietzsche deploys the other in the figure of ›Zarathustra‹ and how he uses humor to convey this (*Psst!...*):

»**Zarathustra's Prologue 1**

When Zarathustra was thirty years old, he left his home and the lake of his home and went into the mountains. Here he enjoyed his spirit and solitude, and for ten years did not tire of it. But at last a change came over his heart, and one morning he rose with the dawn [*Morgenröte*], stepped before the sun, and spoke to it thus: ›You great star [*großes Gestirn*], what would your happiness be had you not those for whom you shine? For ten years you have climbed to my cave: you would have tired of your light and of the journey, had it not been for me and my eagle and my serpent. But we waited for you every morning, took your overflow from you, and blessed you for it.

Behold, I am weary of my wisdom, like a bee that has gathered too much honey; I need hands outstretched to receive it.

I would give away and distribute, until the wise among men find joy once again in their folly, and the poor in their riches.

For that I must descend to the depths, as you do in the evening when you go behind the sea and still bring light to the underworld, you overrich star.

Like you, I must *go under* – go down, as is said by man, to whom I want to descend.

So bless me then, you quiet eye that can look even upon an all-too-great happiness without envy!

Bless the cup that wants to overflow, that the water may flow from it golden and carry everywhere the reflection of your delight.

Behold, this cup wants to become empty again, and Zarathustra wants to become man again.‹

Thus, Zarathustra began to go under [*Also begann Zarathustras Untergang*].« (Nietzsche/Kaufmann [1883/1954] 1988, 121 f.; emphasis in the text as well as in the original; additions mine)

In the first two sentences of Zarathustra's prologue, we are introduced to the narrative by a more neutral narrator. But from the third sentence on, the rhetoric becomes humorous: »But at last a change came over his heart, and one morning he rose with the dawn, stepped before the sun, and spoke to it thus«. It is aroused by the observant distance the narrator establishes between themselves and Zarathustra. The distance resembles an ironic attitude towards the figure. The ›irony‹ of the text, however, is rather awkward, as it is not clear whether it is meant in a degrading way, or whether it follows more tender feelings towards the character, but does not want to reveal them, thus leaving it to an ›implied audience‹ to decide for itself. Nietzsche's narrator, it could be argued with Wayne C. Booth, is an *unreliable narrator* (Booth [1961] 1983; Shen 2011). One cannot be sure what they are up to and whether one can trust them. Zarathustra's childlike, almost naïve, half-playfully angry embrace of the sun makes him sympathetic and arouses empathy for him; he seems a little foolish, a little silly. It is as if the narrator observes the character from a distance, not only in space but also in time, with an affectionate eye, as if looking at their younger self. An ›implied author‹, however, points Zarathustra – surprisingly in accordance with the chosen name – towards the ›East‹ (of ›Europe‹). This is further indicated by the symbolism of the text, such as the sun, which often represents ›the Orient‹ and by the fact that it awakens him: Zarathustra awakens with the beginning of the day, with the morning and the dawn, as if for the (Zoroastrian, of course, but also Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim?? in any case: ›oriental‹) time of prayer, where Nietzsche, or at least the

narrator, also seems to reside, in order to bring another form of wisdom to the ›West‹. ›Knowledge‹ thus seems to be geographically anchored in the ›East‹ (of ›Europe‹), while both ›Europe‹ and the ›East‹ appear to be unknowing and powerless – landscapes.

Humor also seems to characterize Zarathustra's dialogic monologue with the sun. Firstly, because the sun never answers (and Zarathustra has to read even that) – like all good and *true* texts, it remains a silent and enigmatic interlocutor (maybe because it is so difficult to know and to put into words what it is to know, even if it were clear, what it should be, or what the question is – it seems to echo in the silence). Secondly, in this rather voyoristic act of the narrator, Zarathustra (the prophet) appears somewhat ridiculous to speak to an absent-minded distant *Gestirn* (the sun does not seem to be intimidating, at least Zarathustra does not fear it). A form of self-psychology sets in, which, like Charles Baudelaire's falling subject (as will be seen), must laugh at its self as it realizes the apparent folly of its performance and empty faith. Zarathustra almost becomes the observing self (the European narrator, the ›implied audience‹?). In this way, the text may also annoy other possible ›audiences‹ somewhere in the corners of the text that are inevitably invoked without being implied. The humorous discord with the sun could be understood as a prayer, but also as a farewell, and in all these cases the humorous tonality is supposedly untroubled and happily directed towards the sad and the tragic, towards failure. In a sense, Zarathustra dethrones the sun-goddess*, while at the same time praising them in a rather unruly way, telling them that their greatness needs the faithful in order to exist, and not the other way around. It remains also uncertain whether Zarathustra's decision to decamp can be taken seriously or must be mocked, since he has decided to ›teach‹ his ephiphany to others. Can one ever become a ›teacher‹ to others? Or must we rather remain and regard ourselves as disciples (before the sun? On earth?), the text seems to ask. The ›implied author‹ could have portrayed Zarathustra differently, they could have shown him in a much more noble and more serious mode, praying and talking to his goddess*. But they chose to show Zarathustra in this rather ridiculous mood and in a rather exposed way. Zarathustra is depicted in the narrative in a vulnerable and intimate, too certain, inner state, standing ›naked‹, un-knowing, and power-less before his goddess* – unaware that he is being observed (by the ›implied author's‹ narrator). Finally, Zarathustra does not know that Nietzsche is hiding somewhere out there. Not only does Nietzsche overhear this conversation, but also, in his text, secretly discloses it in detail (to a very large ›audience‹ – even Nietzsche himself probably did not know this –) and without Zarathustra's ›knowledge‹ – against which Zarathustra remains powerless, but where his power may unfold.

Nietzsche's narrator thus shows the most intimate part of a noble hero-prophet in a very delicate position, which in its nakedness resembles that of a child, yet one who is expected to be a *true* ›knower‹.

The humor that Nietzsche evokes through Zarathustra's sincere and simple dialogic monologue, as well as the recitation of Zarathustra's anachronistic, naïve but modernist wise speech-prayer style, exposes a deeper lying state of the subject's helplessness in the face of an untouchable, inaccessible, all-knowing, exhausting Other who rises and sits at will and causes their subjugated subjects to endure their (unknown) will. And despite this tyranny, Zarathustra, in his almost altruistic ›love‹, also praises this Other and worships them – even though there may be (no such goddess*) (to ›love‹ and praise), just a *heavenly*

body. Thus, Zarathustra is from the outset imbued with a tragic, painful humor in the face of sincere humility and fidelity, which leaves him with nothing more than a firm belief in nothingness, a *Gestirn*. The tone of the humor changes at the same time into a more tender, caressing one, which may leave a possible ›implied audience‹ puzzled and perhaps also touched at the sight of Zarathustra – who maybe wishes to thank and get rid of this shining, all-knowing great star – but may nevertheless feel a certain sympathy for him as well, and fear that he may lose himself, if he sets off from this radiant goddess*. Prayer and ›love‹ seem to be thrown into the same pot, imbued with pain, pleasure, unknowing, power-lessness and some tang of care.

This undulating, humorous tone of the narrative is heightened and culminates in the narrator's casual, equally detached yet forgiving statement at the end of the preamble about Zarathustra's *Untergang*, which again resonates in humor, as it evokes several meanings at once. In one quite obvious sense, *Untergang* means *ruin*, which may provoke an ironic smile. But *ruin* can also signify destruction, the destruction of the known, the destruction of the path one leaves behind. It also expresses a state of fear and anxiety that goes with it. Finally, ›to go under‹, ›to sink‹ (*untergehen*) can describe the willingness to let go, to open oneself up to the unknown. Moreover, *Untergang* at the end of the passage mimics Zarathustra's direct discourse, and in this sober repetition evokes a fraction of uncertainty as to whether the narrator is again making fun of Zarathustra or is rather eager to follow Zarathustra's journey into an actual underworld. (Is there an underworld – imaginable – where the sun sets – in the occident? An *Abendland*?) The uncertainty of the humorous tinge also arouses suspense about Zarathustra's path as well as about the kind of underworld he may find. *Untergang*, then, can also indicate Zarathustra's translation of the ›knower's‹ beliefs into a *human*(-istic?) language, and perhaps an effort to develop some kind of ›knowledge‹, to go down into the catacombs of the human psyche and solitary thought, to one's own unearthed possibilities, to form a kind of ›knowledge‹ that is not anchored in binding ›laws‹. And even this movement in Zarathustra's thought appears as a vain, tragic, lost effort, an(other) illusion. The sobriety of the narrator's neutrality and distance, however, produces an intensification of the humorous tone, which oscillates between a slightly superior amazement and fascination as well as sympathy, and which may keep an ›implied audience‹ submissive to the narrator's mood – and open to Zarathustra's teachings. The figure of Zarathustra, indicated by his name, geographizes him outside the borders of ›Europe‹, in the timeless and history-less abyss of the outdated, non-European space, which produces an uncanny humor, as on one hand, Zarathustra seems to be the (backward) other, who can be ridiculed at any time and at any cost. On the other hand, there is too much sympathy to eliminate the figure in such a general gesture of dominance. Although laughed at, Zarathustra, because of his congenial naivety and folly, exudes some form of authority that is unintentional, questioning, and questionable. He speaks to his inner self and would not even be audible if the narrator's report did not reveal the secrets of his thoughts. Zarathustra also appears almost as the inner self of a ›Europe‹ that craves to be critical of itself, a ›Europe‹ that desires the other to know (better than them), a ›Europe‹ that wishes to be taught by the other. ›Europe‹, here in the figure of Zarathustra, loses all distance and becomes the other, so that Zarathustra appears as someone all too familiar to the (European?) ›implied audience‹ – as someone *all too human* and yet different – maybe enough to nullify European

supremacy? The (othered) other and the European self seem to become indistinguishable. This is maybe the staging of an other ›Europe‹, that others ›Europe‹, the other's ›Europe‹ – ›Europe‹ as difference. This makes it difficult to simply laugh at Zarathustra's foolishness and backwardness; it becomes ›Europe's‹ foolishness and backwardness, since the other, too, becomes quasi European. Zarathustra can be read as an ›oriental Europe's‹ effort to learn anew by unlearning from the (naivety of?) one's own self, from one's powerless state of not-knowing. Nietzsche thus may suggest the sublation of dualisms, and of *this* dualism, as something else, from within a state of immanence.

Humor, then, takes the form of a restrained, expectant, slightly suspicious fascination that opens up the possibility of a space of immanence on a plane of equity (not sameness) – or so one might hope …

Nietzsche's deployment of humor therefore generates a liminality with regard to the otherness, with which ›Europe‹ itself is endowed. It also shows ›Europe‹ at the limit of the other, which in fact determines European thought and text. The passage also plays at the liminal threshold of the narrative form, with the distinction between the self and the other, and with the knowing and the not-knowing, the power-lessness that is engendered, as well as with humor and sobriety, all of which seem to merge into each other.

The text also plays with the threshold of literature and philosophy, which seem both foolishly preoccupied with an empty and impregnable ›religiosity‹ and the ›religious‹, dogmatic belief in finding some ›truth‹. These are all liminal spaces that echo an infinite state of uncertainty. From a Nietzschean point of view, then, humor is perhaps ideally construed to induce thoughtfulness, as an impetus to *re*imagine and reflect on things outside any usual box – everywhere.

Liminality III – Plessner – at Border Crossings

Helmuth Plessner's research and work on ›laughter‹ (and crying) has strangely been largely overlooked in the humanities. Although Plessner's approach takes into account ›laughter‹ rather than humor, his insights are nevertheless helpful in understanding the workings of both the tragic and the humorous, and often their at times indistinguishable bodily effects of ›laughter‹ and crying that can affect and shake the whole body. But my focus here will be on ›laughter‹. Plessner's work remains essential in locating ›laughter‹/crying within the body, but also within the mind and in relation to an environment. His work thus examines ›laughter‹ and crying not for themselves nor for their functions, but within a multiplicity of internal and external relations as complex phenomena. The two perspectives on the liminality of humor and ›laughter‹ outlined above, in the work of Fanon and Nietzsche, can be seen as the psychologized and philosophized manifestations of Plessner's work that describes the limits of human understanding. Plessner illuminates the actuality of historically determined textures in which our bodies and minds remain imbued. In this sense, the work of the two thinkers mentioned above could be seen as the two wings of what Plessner calls »eccentric positionality« (*exzentrische Positionalität*), laid out in the volume *The Levels of Organic Life and the Human: Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology* ([1928]2019). Eccentric positionality is the core and cornerstone of Plessner's understanding of ›laughter‹/crying. It refers

to a (human?) capacity that arises from a duality of self-awareness (Plessner 1970, 40; Dobeson 2018, 43–46; Fischer 2016, 275). According to Plessner, human beings become, as it were, human, because they consist of two intertwined properties: of being a body and of having a body; we exist *as* a body and *in* a body and can perceive ourselves from different positions, always in relation to our ›environment‹ (Plessner 1970, 40 ff.; Prusak 2005, 57) – and thus, one could add, the historicity of (sociopolitical) contexts.

Human beings, Plessner argues, can grasp of their bodies both as things and as subjects, what he calls ›impersonal‹ and ›personal‹ perceptions. The human being, Plessner writes,

> »experiences himself [sich selbst] *as* a thing *in* a thing: but a thing which differs absolutely from all other things because he himself is that thing, because it obeys his intentions or at least responds to them. He is borne by it, encompassed by it, developed to effectiveness with and by it, yet at the same time it forms a resistance never to be wholly overcome.« (Plessner 1970, 41)

In this way, a multi-perspectivity of sensibility and perception is possible for the human being who, according to Plessner, »has itself, it knows about itself, it is remarkable to itself, and for this reason is it *I*...‹« (Plessner quoted after Prusak 2005, 55; punctuation and emphasis in the original). »We stand not only at the center of things«, Prusak continues, »but over and against ourselves at the same time, in the middle and on the periphery at once. This position Plessner names ›eccentric positionality‹« (Prusak 2005, 55).

Indeed, Plessner's concept of *eccentric positionality* not only reconciles the idea (and duality) of body and mind. While the body is the experience of a more or less centered corporeality, the mind is the ex-centred, incarnate (corporeal) experience, as well as the capacity *for eccentric experience* that allows one to leave the body, to perceive it as a thing in the world that ›travels‹ through the imagination and all possible senses and sensibilities. It also makes it possible to understand the fractured nature of the subject, the question of subjectivity, the fragmented psyche and their interrelations and discordances.

According to Plessner, human beings have an equivocal rather than a univocal relationship to their bodies as they can perceive themselves *as* corporality (*Leibhaftigkeit*) as well as *in* a body (*im Körper*). Plessner refers to it it as ›ambiguity‹ and an ›actual break‹ in the way one exists, labelling it (very poetically) *brokenness* (*Gebrochenheit*). For Plessner, *brokenness* describes the relationship of human beings to their bodies. *Brokenness* is at the same time the *basis of human existence* and the *source* as well as the *limit* of their capabilities (Plessner 1970, 32). Plessner thus explicitly distances himself from a Cartesian understanding of the subject. Rather, on the basis of his findings, he maintains the ambiguity of the sensuality of bodily experience, which for him means a *living body* in a *physical body* (*Leib im Körper*). More intriguingly, Plessner sees a connection between this understanding of existence and *the experience* of laughing and crying as ›the impenetrability‹ of human beings' ›relation‹ *to* their bodies (Plessner 1970, 32). He states

> »To this end, the inquiry must free itself from the bias inherent in the Cartesian interpretation of human existence. The two-substance theory, which survives as a double-aspect theory, in the rigid and seemingly self-evident alternative: physical or mental, is

> not capable of understanding the phenomena of laughing and crying. Hence it would
> be a crude misunderstanding to reduce the ›ambiguity‹ of physical existence to a du-
> ality of interpretation, that is, to consciousness.« (Plessner 1970, 32)

This brokenness of the human being is thus not consciously graspable, and yet the parts
work together autonomously. According to Plessner, laughing and crying are not ges-
tures, but have a complex ›expressive character‹. Plessner speaks of their ›opacity‹ to the
point of ›meaninglessness‹, as it seems impossible to sharply define and articulate their
significance; and yet he also describes this opaqueness as imperatively ›essential to their
expressive meaning‹ (Plessner 1970, 68). Both reactions, ›laughing‹ and crying, in fact re-
veal the brokenness of our existing *form* (Prusak 2005, 58). ›Laughing‹ and crying are the
experience of a limit where the subject can only respond to something that appears unan-
swerable, with the collapse inherent in *eccentric positionality*. However, Plessner does not
see a duality, contrast, or opposition in ›laughing‹ and ›crying‹, since both can arise from
similar affective states: »Their basis, however, must be sought elsewhere than in the usual
direction« (Plessner 1970, 49). Plessner also distinguishes both from a bodily language.
Rather, he considers both experiences as the ›purest‹ form of ›expressive movements‹ and
as moments in a state of overpowering for both subjects, the one who experiences them
as well as the one who observes them.

Plessner, then, relates ›laughing‹ and crying to each other in a non-oppositional way,
understanding them as modes of multiple meanings resulting from a state of multilay-
ered expressivity, which also represents humor and the tragic. Secondly, Plessner un-
derstands both conditions as states that are beyond the control of the subject, but as
meaningful states of affective as well as bodily and sensual responses to experiences of
overpowering (Plessner 1970, 52–56). In this context, Plessner refers to Friedrich Georg
Jünger's work on humor (*Über das Komische*, 1948). Jünger discusses humor as a relation of
power asymmetries, with regard to the (sociopolitical) rules with which it clashes, and,
in this sense, as the negotiation of conflicts (Plessner 1970, 88 ff.). Plessner speaks of hu-
mor as »the gift of preserving our sense of the comic« (Plessner 1970, 91). Here is a longer
passage that captures central aspects of his understanding of humor within broader so-
ciopolitical relations:

> »The comic is not a logical, ethical or (strictly speaking) aesthetic conflict; it has noth-
> ing to do with the alternatives of true or false, good or evil, beautiful or ugly. They may
> appear in it, but it is not exhausted by them. Comedy belongs to the level to which all
> special applications of norms refer: the level on which man, as such and as a whole, as-
> serts himself in the world and against the world. His position in it, somewhere, some-
> time, i. e., his eccentric position, enables him to accept himself and his world, in which
> he is at home and in which he knows his way around, as at once circumscribed and
> open, familiar and strange, full of sense and nonsense. This is the core of comedy, but
> the normal course of life and its duties make us forget it. We take things in this or that
> way and seal them against ambiguity. But our technique of taking the world seriously
> and binding it to us, actively and contemplatively, rationally and emotionally, has gaps,
> in the particular as in the whole. Things surprise us by their appearance, they take an
> unforeseen turn, they create situations to which we can no longer find a serious re-
> sponse. […] None of this may make us aware of the inscrutability of the comic strip as

such. Nevertheless, it makes itself felt and reminds us, even in its most insignificant expression, of our eccentric position. The art of the great comic, of the caricaturist, the poet, the actor, the clown, knows this and extracts from it the truly striking, truly inexorable effects, which gain in illuminating power the closer they come to the darkness of the tragic.« (Plessner 1970, 91)

For Plessner, then, we are also determined by what we do not know, by the *gaps* in the texture of existence. ›Laughing‹ and crying are self-regulating instances of a borderline experience of not knowing within instances of powerlessness, in which the brokenness of our existence, with all its constructed compositions and lacunae, is revealed in its disintegration, in its falling apart. At the same time, this falling apart is an essential means of transcending the liminal experience of this notknowing and this powerlessness. Both crying and laughing, in this sense, are for Plessner a ›twofold limitation‹ of human behavior to a ›limit situation‹, an experience of disorganization that reveals our fragmentation, our *brokenness*, in response to the experience of a limit. Throughout his work, Plessner points to the importance of (the historicity of) language, and that it is language that transports and transposes all subtexts, often misleadingly, and therefore also as a manifestation of the *conditio humana as* brokenness (Plessner 1970, 18 ff.; Weiland 2019, 86 ff.); but his focus is to emphasize that ›laughter‹ and crying are exceptional expressions of this state. In this sense, Plessner does not dwell on the functioning of language per se as an indicator of this state, and even excludes language from an analysis of ›laughing‹ and ›crying‹ (Plessner 1970, 23; Michelini 2021, 7).

Plessner's concept of ›laughing‹ and crying as liminal experiences of a limit that both humor and tragedy may articulate is quite palpable in Fanon's and Nietzsche's unfolding of ›laughter‹ and the tragic-humorous within the textuality of historically contingent contexts as well as within texts in a narrower sense. In both cases, the tragic-humorous that unfolds foregrounds perceptibility and intelligibility, revealing not despair or nonsense, but the entanglement of the inner and outer worlds that inscribes the body and is inscribed in the body. The experience of *brokenness* that appears in these instances of the tragic-humorous is an intervening *brokenness*. It shifts the ground of previous understandings; in this sense, it resembles a deconstruction in the material textuality of life. Here ›laughter‹ happens in two ways, backwards and forwards, occupying a middle threshold position. It precedes humor backwards as an effect and forwards because of our eccentric and fragmented disposition. Because it is also a bodily felt fragmentation, its reassembly must also involve a meaningful recomposition. This backward ›laughter‹ thus follows the experience of the incongruity of experiencing existence. It is also a ›laughter‹ that is forward-looking, because the previous experience is replaced by the liberating Sisyphean realization that we must always *re*work and *re*arrange ourselves, which, beyond its tragic element (the loss of some kind of ›certainty‹), opens up the possibility, at least to some extent, of *re*assembling ourselves anew in a different way.

›Laughter‹, which Plessner describes as a limit, thus follows an experience similar to the composition of the incongruity of humor in that it, too, involves an incongruity. Whereas in the theory of humor this incongruity is seen in the ambivalence of language, utterances, or actions, Plessner locates it in the composition of experiencing life as such.

In all the above-mentioned instances where humor appears as a liminal phenomenon, it touches a limit of understanding and implies a threshold beyond previous commensurabilities. ›Laughter‹ therefore expresses a possible bodily resonance to this state. It is a state of disassembly on the threshold of reassembly: within this movement, the body and the mind are shifted in distinct ways.

All three outlined approaches show the entanglement of humor with affectivity and sensuality, on the one hand, and with thought and historically conditioned sociopolitical relations and contexts on the other. Humor and ›laughter‹ remain ambiguous, and yet they open up other, hitherto unknown possibilities of understanding. It also becomes apparent that humor has no essence, but can be perceived as a *movement*, a movement that opens up a space for new thoughts or insights. It likewise occurs within a relationality, be it within the self or between the self and an other.

While these theories of humor and ›laughter‹ remain cross-disciplinary approaches, in the following chapters I will draw on insights from literary theory in a narrower sense, where humor is approached differently. These are debates that shed light on the function and workings of humor in a more language- and meaning-related way. My aim here is to combine these already discussed approaches to humor with its understanding in literary theory, in order to arrive at a conclusion as to how *affective humor* can ultimately be perceived, and how and in what ways it can function in texts.

I will start by defining ›irony‹ and discussing some of Paul de Man's most important texts on the subject. I will then consider the importance of humor within the processes of rhetoric and its relation to deconstruction. In a final chapter, I discuss humor as an affective event and problematize this stance by discussing Achim Geisenhanslüke's understanding of poetology and affectivity and its relation to humor as an ingredient of ›non-knowledge‹ that manifests itself in the economy of the text. In my reading of this approach, I will also show the cohesion of non-knowledge with what I perceive as powerlessness that I also argue is part of the workings of humor. At the end of this section, I will outline some of the main points regarding *affective humor* in a synopsis before finally turning to touch, how it is understood, and what it may mean in relation to affectivity and humor.

›Irony‹'s Fall and the Question of Subjectivity

Besides performativity, there are a number of other terms in literary theory that are related to the analysis of humorous elements in language. One of the oldest of these words is rhetoric, or more recently *retoricality* (Bender/Wellbery 1990), which we will return to below. Then there are terms that describe tropes, devices, and genres of and in writing, such as ›irony‹, ›parody‹, ›pastiche‹, ›pun‹, and ›wit‹, and which are considered as ambiguous and inconclusive. All of these terms are associated with humor and often appear in the same text to represent a humorous tonality that the texts try to deal with by centralizing one of them. Two concepts in particular are treated with great intellectual and theoretical vigor: ›parody‹ and, in a much broader way, ›irony‹.

Although all the terms that circumscribe humor inevitably appear as its metonymic tonal repertoire, a more distinct hierarchy seems to dominate the discourse around it.

While there are a number of works of (high) theory on ›irony‹ that attest to the sophisticated status and importance of the term, ironic to itself and thus, as it seems, *true* to itself, the term is often used synonymically to denote humor more generally in (not only theoretical) texts. The theorization of ›irony‹ seems to authenticate a ›cultivated‹ site of the rather vilified status of humor and ›laughter‹ in the realm of (only Western?) thought. This also seems to be the case in (post-)modernist discussions of the humorous, where ›irony‹ gains some allies like parody.

As Linda Hutcheon notes, »irony is a so-called sophisticated form of expression. So, too, parody is a sophisticated genre in the demands it makes on its practitioners and its interpreters« (Hutcheon 2000, 33). Reflecting on Bakhtin's use of parody, Morson speaks of parody as an »etiology of utterance« (Morson 1989, 72) and as a parody of the parodying original, emphasizing the constructedness and semiotic double structure of signification. For Morson, parody goes by various names, such as mimicry or mockery (Morson 1989, 62), which underscores the metonymic structure of its meaning. Morson also points out that parody »can, in principle, take on an infinite number of tones« and is, in fact, a »deviation« (Morson 1989, 67, 69), which makes it an incongruous humorous form of signification.

Although in many of these texts ›laughter‹, ›comic/comedy‹, and ›humor‹ are used in tandem to define ›parody‹ and ›irony‹, the distinction between the terms is not further problematized but taken for granted, as if it were clear what they signify, how they ›work‹, and in what (evaluative) relationship they stand to each other – or to theory. At the same time, ›parody‹ and especially ›irony‹ are distinguished from these other terms by their special (sophisticated) place in literary theory and philosophy, as is echoed in Hutcheon's remark quoted above. The problem that humor seems to pose for (high) theory and philosophy is already indicated by this confusion. According to Amir, many modernist philosophers, such as Nietzsche, Bataille, Rosset, and Deleuze, actually reject the term ›irony‹ for humor or prefer humor to ›irony‹ and implicitly oppose the ›supremacy of irony‹ over humor (Amir 2022, 4). However, it is ›irony‹ in particular that is often treated in literary theory (and philosophy) as the (high theoretical) trope of humorous intonation.

Although definitions of ›irony‹ vary, ›irony‹ is generally defined as saying one thing and meaning another, which comes close to an understanding of incongruity, a key characteristic also associated with humor. David Holdcroft distinguishes this incongruity of ›irony‹ as the rise of expectation (in what is said) and the discrepancy of its performance (Holdcroft 1983, 493).

›Irony‹ is of particular interest to this study, not only because it occupies such a relevant space and is highly valued (however ambivalently), but also because its understanding corresponds to the definition of humor in that both terms are seen as expressing an incongruity, be it verbal, situational, or performative (Muecke 1970, 100; Hutcheon 1992, 219).

There are also other aspects of ›irony‹ that are similar to those of humor. I would venture to say that ›irony‹ is humor in expensive camouflage that was permitted to enter the scene of (high) theorizing from an unconscious venue. The issues discussed in relation to ›irony‹ therefore shed light on its parallels with humor, and help to characterize the way humor works. As humor, ›irony‹ also involves a (surprising) shift from one mean-

ing to another within an utterance, which triggers a kind of thoughtful and/or affective engagement. Hutcheon refers to this as meanings that play off each other »with some critical edge«, opening up a space that is always »affectively charged« (Hutcheon 1992, 220). She also points to the oscillation between the said and its allusion, where the unsaid challenges the said but where both, or one might say different meanings are discernible (Hutcheon 1995, 59). Hutcheon therefore refers to ›irony‹ as a »discursive strategy« that requires a scene (Hutcheon 1995, 3 ff.).

This oblique play of meanings also entails a lacuna that can be called an ›ethical component‹ in the work of ›irony‹/humor because it opens up a relation to an other. It is a relationality that, according to Milan Kundera, »denies us our certainties by unmasking the world as ambiguity« (Kundera 2005, 134). ›Irony‹, like humor, is thus seen in relation to critique and affectivity. It is related to an oscillation between (at least) two meanings and is regarded as a rhetorical device that also needs an ›audience‹ that can catch its shifting meanings or, as Hutcheon points out, an ›audience‹ to whom the ›irony‹ seems as relevant as to the speaker who utters it (Hutcheon 1995, 96; see also Muecke 1970; Booth 1974; Wirth 2017; Jeffries 2018).

Hutcheon also raises two other relevant points that are consistent with the (incongruent) understanding of humor. According to Hutcheon, ›irony‹ has a kinetic element; it sets something in motion. Such *kinetic movement* describes a process of change that not only affects elements outside itself (e.g., position and/or perspective), but also involves some change in the entity performing the movement. In addition, Hutcheon describes ›irony‹ as a political gesture, but calls attention to what it does beyond its (possibly intended) immediate meanings (Hutcheon 1995, 45). This understanding reveals the politics inherent in ›irony‹ and humor, while politicizing them at the same time. But it also acknowledges its aesthetic rather than strictly political properties. ›Irony‹'s humor, its kinetic capacity, thus read, unstates meanings rather than instituting a fixed one, insofar as it alludes to a multiplicity of different meanings without explicitly mentioning or fixing them. Understood in this way, ›irony‹, can be described as a rhetorical bubble of multiple unstated meanings. Such other invocations are left around the corner as possible allusions if one is curious enough (or caring enough) to choose to turn around.

Within postcolonial theorizations, which also celebrate(d?) ›high theory‹, ›irony‹ is understood as an interventionist rupture and interruption. In this sense, it is once again politicized. Its political mark is seen as part of its rhetorical character. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's reflections on ›irony‹, which she proposes through a reading of Friedrich Schlegel/Paul de Man, can be understood in this way. In particular, in one of her essays entitled *Learning from de Man – Looking Back* (2005), Spivak addresses the problem of ›irony‹ and its possible function and significance for postcolonial understandings. In this text, Spivak emphasizes ›irony‹ as a *parabasis*.[26] Instead of questioning the (sociopolitical) setting of this tonality, Spivak, following Schlegel/De Man, describes ›irony‹ as an »undoing of understanding« (Spivak 2005, 31). Her approach to ›irony‹ in its function

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26   See in this regard also Bettine Menke (2002, 231 f.). Menke, drawing on Schlegel, de Man, and others, points to *parabasis* as specific choral parts in Attic comedies in which the chorus addresses, among other things, the listeners and spectators.

as a parabasis is important, because it not only underlines the (political and theoretical) relevance of incongruity and ambiguity, which are also seen as part of humor. It also highlights the parabasic trait: the question of *what* it is that is interrupted. Spivak understands parabasis as the interruption of conventionalized and naturalized dominant discourses and meanings. The humorous interruption of ›irony‹ is seen, on the one hand, in the relation of language to power, its dynamic emancipation from them and the dissociation from their interrelated meanings, and, on the other hand, in the interruption of (political) authority. For Spivak, this disruption of political authority is not only a strategy but also a chance to open up the imagination to alternative ways of thinking and acting in the world, and an imperative requirement of ›being (theoretically) critical‹:

> »[T]he instant of decision must remain heterogeneous to all knowledge as such, to all theoretical or constative determination, even if it may and must be preceded by all possible science and conscience. … [P]ractical performativity is irreducible to any theorem …« (Spivak 2005, 24; punctuation in the original)

The interruptive quality of ›irony‹, understood in this way, can also be thought of as a form of authorization. It is the moment when the subject of enunciation and its (silenced) other can come into being. This would confirm Freud's understanding of the functionality of humor as a protective and empowering moment of the super-ego.

Spivak understands the parabasic character of ›irony‹ as the capacity to state what would otherwise be othered (Spivak 2005, 24). Parabasis is thus linked not only to what is more or less explicitly, however incongruously, signified, but also to what is implicitly and silently referred to, its clandestine properties. Moreover, like Hutcheon, Spivak's emphasis on the other(-ed) traces in meaning that are awakened (or created) by the disruption underscores the ethical element that the disturbance of the supposed integrity of meaning and language entails. Parabasis thus takes on the bent form of a curve, of a detour, so that the other can enter the dialogic character of language:

> »The law of curvature – that one cannot access another directly and with a guarantee (by ›appresentational analogy‹ only, Husserl will write) – is not a deterrent to politics … If you call the imperative – *courbure droiture* to straighten the curve into – a ›madness‹, it is a madness that writes the history of politics.« (Spivak 2005, 24)

The parabasic character of ›irony‹, which breaks with conventionalized understandings, intervenes in a »systematic undoing« of (academized) discourse itself (Spivak 2005, 28 ff.). Spivak also emphasizes an agent function of parabasis. For Spivak parabasis does not circumscribe a negativity, as de Man claims (as we will see below), but rather, as Schlegel understood it, an effective and affirmative, »descriptive figure of action« (Spivak 2005, 21), and thus an invitation and possibility to intervene in the »madness« that the wor[l]d implies (Spivak 2005, 23). Spivak thus relates the ›madness‹ of humorous insight inherent in ›irony‹, not unlike Bakhtin, to the madness of words rather than to the closure of meaning that cannot be (achieved). But this invitation to intervention and invention – always to be understood as performative and singular – is also seen in the texture of ›irony's‹ social and political, spatial-historical configurations:

»Indeed, my not-quite-not disfigurement of the de Manian figure of parabasis, borrowed from Schlegel borrowing from the theatrical practice of Attic comedy, is itself an ›allegory of reading‹. ›Reading‹ here is also a figure, for a transactional or performative relationship with the social fabric, the social textile, the social text.« (Spivak 2005, 27)

Thus, ›irony‹ can be understood as an interruptive humorous tonality that is interventionist, performative, and a discursive strategy of reading that gives other meanings to (con-)texts. In her reading of Freud and Fanon, two (Jewish and Black) psychologists who draw on the role of the other/literature (the other of philosophy), Spivak also points to the literary text as a parabasis. The parabasic character of literature lies in the possibility of imagining what is beyond the known, the possibility of the other. The relationship between literature and *experience*, in which parabasis can be thought of as a seam, is where the two are connected:: »What you are seeing [...] is the idea that the literary is in fact giving you an evidence that is not possible for you to experience so clearly in life« (Spivak 2014, 47).

However, in contrast to the idea that literature is based on experience and that the process of reading resembles (a denotation of) mimetic empirical ›knowledge‹, this understanding also identifies literature as an unempirical and unexperienced field of imagination that expands the senses of experience in and for the everyday and the sensitivity of the im/possibility of an other ›life‹. In this understanding, literature is seen as a form of threshold learning that offers insights outside and beyond what is presumed to be known. At the same time, Spivak points to the danger of pathologizing literature *as* evidence of what and how otherness *is*. Freud's and Fanon's readings are seen for their other epistemological grounding, as they read singular ›minds‹ that, like literature, cannot be generalized. Only when literature is seen as a singularity, and when the text is read in the sense of non-assignment, can the danger of taking literature *as* evidence be overcome. If the text is read as straightforward signification, it encourages an uncritical reading within the structure that produced it – and the reading fails. Spivak's term for a non-assigning reading of texts is ›affirmative sabotage‹, an interventionist disruption, a parabasic form of reading – the way humor works – at the core of conventionalized utterances and their opening, understood as ›entering‹ the system to say ›no, not this‹ in order to use that breach differently in a (possible) next step within thought and praxis.

In his influential approach to ›irony‹, to which Spivak also refers in the above passage, Paul de Man points to other implicit connotations of ›irony‹, a reading that I find problematic and of which I am critical. De Man remains difficult to read, not because of his style, but because reading his texts inevitably raises the question of the ethics and the praxis of research, writing, and teaching. Paul de Man's posthumously discovered wartime activities and antisemitic texts raise – from within (historical) reality – the question of subjectivity, positionality, and the will (not) to choose to act in certain ways within academia. The one good thing that the scandal about de Man may have helped

to bring to the fore is the ethical turn (however short-lived?) in the humanities.[27] But perhaps there has been no turn, only a turning away from (high) theory, which is no solution either, because it means a turning away from reflecting the politics of reading, an always necessary venture in the fractured continuum of contemporary critical thought – or what is left of it. So, ›ethics‹ may have to remain a specter that haunts writing and teaching. It is in this sense of the ghost of the ethical that I formulate a very tentative (and most perhaps mistaken) reading of Paul de Man's approach to ›irony‹, as it is still often treated as central; I therefore look at the ways in which ›irony‹ is contextualized and evaluated in the trajectory of de Man's argument, rather than taking his approach as such as given and verified.

In two of his texts, de Man specifically discusses ›irony‹ – never mind that in both cases the underlying texts on which he builds his argument also discuss ›laughter‹, comedy, and humor, which, however, are readily taken for ›irony‹ (›irony‹ speaking here, humorously and with a roguish smile at this comedy). These two essays are *The Rhetoric of Temporality* from 1983 and a lecture given in 1976 and 1977, and published in 1996 in the volume *Aesthetic Ideology* under the title *On the Concept of Irony*.

In *The Rhetoric of Temporality*, de Man develops an idea of ›irony‹ by discussing Charles Baudelaire's *De l'essence de rire* and Friedrich Schlegel's Romantic approach to ›irony‹, as parabasis. Drawing on Baudelaire, de Man associates humor with a schism and a fall that »come[s] into being only at the expense of [the subject's] empirical self, falling (or rising) from a stage of mystified adjustment into the knowledge of his mystification«

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27   Although it is often argued that de Man's theorization involves ethics, that it in fact *is* an ethical reading, I think the sphere of ambiguity ascribed to his works does not free him from understanding the ethical as a (disinterested) process produced by the text; there is in particular a passage from *Allegories of Reading* (1970, 206) that is often quoted to demonstrate de Man's ethical concern: »Allegories are always ethical, the term ethical designating the structural interference of two distinct value systems. In this sense, ethics has nothing to do with the will (thwarted or free) of a subject, nor, *a fortiori*, with a relationship between subjects. Morality is a version of the same language aporia that gave rise to such concepts as ›man‹ or ›love‹ or ›self‹, and not the cause or the consequence of such concepts. The passage to an ethical tonality does not result from a transcendental imperative but is the referential (and therefore unreliable) version of a linguistic confusion. Ethics (or, one should say, ethicity) is a discursive mode among others.« (Quoted in McQuillan 2001, 124). The question is whether ›ethics‹ can be seen as a ›language aporia‹ (and whether this is not itself a question of how one defines ethics; perhaps in this sense it would be a definition of ›ethicity‹ and would require another dimension of how ethics is treated in some niches of (literary) theory) or the questioning aporia that comes with reading. Without judging de Man or his works in any way, I cannot see an ethical reading in this paragraph, but rather a view of ›ethics‹ as a textual structure that is itself structured (and legitimized) as ›transparent‹. For me, the problem of subjectivity reappears in this passage, as does the (claim to) value-neutral technical readings of texts, which seems to me to be a (sanctioned) dangerous liaison with structures of power – made transparent, concealed behind a (subtly desiring and libidinous) language of academic approach disinterested style. I think what Derrida does with deconstruction is something else: It actually takes up the question of power at its core and in its pursuit. Deconstruction in a Derridean sense thus seems to me to be *ethical* in two ways. It illuminates power asymmetries in thought that are inscribed in language, and it is reminiscent not of mystification, but of an endless awaiting of the other's ›arriving/call‹ (and in this sense maybe almost mystical), akin to a silence or an in-betweenness – a gap held open for the dialogical response of the other.

(de Man 1983, 214). *Mystification* in the Romantic sense is the catchword around which de Man discusses the (non-power of) ›irony‹. Again, on the basis of a reading of Baudelaire, de Man distinguishes between an intersubjective humor and a form of humor that takes place within the subject's consciousness, within thought.

In Baudelaire's text, humor involves a disconcerting *fall*[28] of the subject, a stumbling that divides the subject into multiple parts. This is Baudelaire's *comique absolu*. *Comique absolu* does not occur between different subjectivities, but within the self/thought of a subject. The question that arises is how to read this fall and the splitting of the subject into a multiplicity (from a post-post-structuralist point of view, the subject is already to be seen as multiplicitous/extendable). In discussing this issue, de Man's rather ambiguous understanding of ›irony‹ becomes apparent. It seems that de Man uses ›irony‹ not to discuss it for itself, but to evaluate his favored trope: allegory.[29] What becomes implicitly clear is that he sees a close resemblance between the tropical function of allegory and ›irony‹, but weighs them differently, and on this basis associates the figures of speech with different capacities and a different timeliness (in which ›irony‹ seems quite obsolete).

For de Man, the fall of the subject (into several parts) is ›an expense‹: Although ›truth‹ and ›common belief‹ are questioned in ›irony‹, and its capacity to unmask is acknowledged, in de Man's reading this insight comes at the ›cost‹ of losing ›oneself‹, of losing ›control‹, and thus ending up in an endless chain of deferred meanings, in meaninglessness – whereas in allegory, according to de Man, the subject alludes to deferral without losing itself or breaking into parts, while the falling subject of humor appears to be ›mad‹ in its divided consciousness (de Man 1983, 215 f.).

De Man's reading evokes an interesting reflection on the notions of ›madness‹ and ›consciousness‹ from within ›madness‹ (as consciousness), but he does not explore them further. Instead, de Man seems apprehensive of the loss of the subject (of subjectivity, of power?) that lies in humor. Although this insight could indeed be seen as a cure, since it can demystify ›knowledge‹ as ›madness‹ and vice versa – surely depending on who is speaking in which (power-related) contexts –, instead of such an understanding, de Man rejects the queering capacity of ›irony‹ with the argument that the ›ironic subject‹ cannot ›return‹ to itself. Drawing on Schlegel, de Man calls this mechanism inherent in humor a ›permanent parabasis‹ (de Man 1983, 218). For Schlegel, ›irony‹ is a »permanent disruptive force«[30]:

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28   For a discussion of the manifold meanings of *falls* inherent in the ›wit of humor‹ (beautifully explored in the German language, in literature, literary theory, and with an emphasis on the work of Sigmund Freud as well as Jean Paul), see Bettine Menke (2021).

29   The reference to de Man's involvement with the Nazis and the antisemitic articles that came to light posthumously, and his discussion of ›irony‹, read together, do indeed seem ironic; the question is whether de Man wished to allegorize his acts (even before his own eyes) rather than allow ›irony‹ to overshadow his reputation and consciousness?

30   Ayon Roy (2009) discusses de Man's approach against a different reading of Hegel. See also Bettine Menke (2022, 42).

> »In Schlegel's hands, irony explodes its rhetorical confines, widening into a philosophi-
> cal and existential category. Irony as a permanent parabasis then, seems to be nothing
> less than the abyssal operation by which any claim to stability or continuity – be it artis-
> tic, philosophical, or existential – is incessantly undermined.« (Roy 2009, 107)

Unlike Schlegel, though, who humorously speaks of a continuous effect of the ironic, de
Man regards this fracturing work of ›irony‹ as a fatal error as, paradoxically, it would re-
quire not only a stable consciousness but also a third (God) outside the subject in order
for it to be exited (de Man 1983, 222 ff.). Insight, ›knowledge‹, in this rapturous continua-
tion, ends, according to de Man, in nonsense. Hand in hand with this procedure goes the
splitting of the subject into an »empirical self« »that exists in a state of inauthenticity«
(which would suggest that there is an ›authentic state‹ (?)) and »a self that exists only in
the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity. This does not,
however, make it into an authentic language, for to know unauthenticity is not the same
as to be authentic« (de Man 1983, 214).

De Man uses this understanding of the continuous rapture of ›irony‹ – the ›irony‹ of
›irony‹ – to argue in favor of allegory (De Man 1983, 226 ff.); the ironic can be overcome,
according to him, when it is allegorical, by which he means: when the separation, the
difference within subjectivity, does not take place in the subject, but instead reflects on
the object (the other) in a demystifying gesture (even when this other resides in the self).
For de Man, this shift is a move from the (more) spatial deferral of ›irony‹ to a (more)
temporal deferral of allegory (de Man 1983, 225). De Man's discussion here refers back to
Schlegel's understanding of *reelle Sprache* (authentic language) as a kind of *ur*-language,
a capacity inherent in the work of language.

Schlegel characterizes *authentic language* as encompassing and infinite, as »the origin
of all poetry, to suspend the notions and the laws of rational thought and to replace us
within a beautiful confusion of fantasy in the original chaos of human nature (for which
mythology is the best name)« (quoted in de Man 1996, 181). Schlegel therefore includes
»error, madness, and simpleminded stupidity [*geistreiche naivité*]« as part of this *ur*-pos-
sibility. Schlegel's thoughts, however, seem to alarm de Man. Not only does his concern
revolve around a reflecting (*white* male?) self (of *Christian* descent?), but they also estab-
lish a hierarchy between tropes: up goes allegory, down goes ›irony‹. De Man links the
alleged superiority of allegory, of all things, to the subject. Humor, code-named ›irony‹,
is thus circumvented by de Man through the restitution of a supposedly stable, reflect-
ing, universal subject. De Man's preference for allegory lies – as mentioned – in the belief
that in allegory the splitting of the subject by ›irony‹ is transferred to the meaning of the
text, leaving the speaking subject intact. The question, however, even if this were true, is
whether this is a gain or a loss, especially from an ethical point of view. De Man attempts
to demonstrate his point by discussing William Wordsworth's poem *Lucy Gray:*

A slumber did my spirit seal

I had not human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

According to de Man, this poem is allegorical because the ›irony‹ that could be read in lines 3 and 4 is resolved by the concluding lines, which show the demystification of the (*white*, *Christian* male?) subject in a temporal sequence in which they reflect on death. In allegory, de Man continues, the division and difference does not take place within the subject. Instead, it is shifted to the level of the poem, »in which the conditions of error and of wisdom have become successive« (de Man 1983, 225).

Yet the poem suggests two subjects, apparently a ›male‹ ›I‹ and a ›she‹, and a specific relationship of the ›I‹ to the ›she‹. Although, according to de Man, Wordsworth's ›she‹ is »large enough to encompass Wordsworth as well« and that »Wordsworth is one of the few poets who can write proleptically about their own death and speak, as it were, from beyond their own graves« (de Man 1983, 225), it is notable that this other ›I‹, this death of the subject, is female and is a kind of ›resource‹ for its male subjectivity: While the speaking subject of the poem is the voice of the male ›I‹, ›she‹ is mirrored as the ›memoire‹ (of the ›I‹) and as death, *the other*. ›She‹ is a *triple* other: ›She‹ is memory, ›she‹ is ›death‹, ›she‹ is an almost forgotten, dead woman. In all three instances, ›she‹ not only does not exist, but is also denied a self-naming, a response. However, the final statement of the poem can still be opened up to negotiation and to ›irony‹. She* could, after all, rise from the grave and respond to the reflecting cis-male ›I‹ side of herself*. Perhaps she* would tell him not to be so sure, after all, because there are no certainties, or that one can only work towards them, and that is all there is of misery and joy.

Besides, de Man's implicit distinction between the presumed spatiality of ›irony‹ and the presumed temporality of allegory seems unconvincing, since both the text and an event involve a temporality (of reading and reflection) as well as a spatiality (of reading a page and reflecting on a context); both instances take place in a space and require a space in-between at least two entities (even when it is a negotiation within the self). Moreover, in de Man's definition of the allegorical, the ethical – which is the possibility for the other to speak – vanishes, or rather is erased. It is the ›time‹, temporality, and wisdom of a coherent (seemingly universal, *white*, cis-normative, male?) subject (of *Christian* descent?) that is restated, leaving no space for the other to respond. In the discontinuity of humor, on the other hand, the other (of the self) continuously speaks to itself, disrupting itself, keeping the conversation open – a prerequisite for the ethical to take place.

In addition, the subject's fall in humor is sudden, but must not have an immediate effect. The subject still has to get up (also to their beliefs), and look around (still smiling from the sudden fall), probably with other eyes. As an aftereffect of humor, the subject may look at the space and time of its vanishing presence and at the world with *another* insight. Reading the signs of a text in its temporal and spatial unfolding can shift one's insight from one moment to the next, from one instance of reading to another. In this process, time and space also slide, not only on the horizontal/linear lines of the page, but also in a kaleidoscopic way of different spaces and times that one brushes, enters, and exits in the process of reading (a scene as well as a text).

Moreover, the ›fall‹ of the subject, the insight that is part of it, can also be considered as a *gift*, in its liminal English-German double meaning of poison and medicine, firstly because a demystification of the self begins, a demystification of continuity that is also painful, toxic, and destructive, and secondly, as the mystification of the former belief, of a ›truth‹, can be grasped as an ›untruth‹ and can hence also be a form of healing, a relief from the earlier belief, from a one-dimensional understanding and subjectivity. There is thus a kind of growth, a surplus value in the fall of the subject.

The fall in humor also signals a process of learning, which de Man also acknowledges: »[W]isdom can be gained only at the cost of such a fall« (de Man 1983, 214). There are some presuppositions in what de Man says. He presupposes what he calls ›the subject of irony‹ (which, if anything, can only be thought of as a multiplicity); he further presupposes that this subject serves its two other subjects (the subject of enunciation and the enunciating, which he exchanges in the next sentence with the ›real author‹, ›the one who goes to the grocery store‹, the this-world-bound person, on the actual reading side of the text; that the subject of ›irony‹ is tempted to try again, as it were, and cannot wait to see how its humor develops; that in Baudelaire's (theoretical) distinction between *comique absolu* and *comique significatif* there is a prioritization of the former instead of a ›mere‹ descriptive insight about two possibilities that follow from the humorous (which must not be contradictory; one can give way to the other); and he rhetorically (using the power of rhetoric) places Baudelaire as the authority who would have to decide how his theory is to be understood – and that de Man's understanding is correct (de Man 1983, 217).

But the ›ironic subject‹ must not return to itself for humor to make sense. Firstly, there is no coherent self to which it could return. Secondly, it might be more a turning *to*, as well as a turning *into* another (subject) that may result from the fall. Finally, the ›ironic subject‹, like the subject they produce through humor, may not be involved in the disjunction and discontinuity of this self-partitioning. The self that is engendered by humor might rather be understood as an effect of afterwardsness (*Nachträglichkeit*) in the Freudian sense. Then, there is the question which subject actually falls? The writing subject seems to have already overcome it, because it reflects its fall already in writing, as Baudelaire himself does. This is especially so for literature, since the literary text is already in the process of becoming, in an act of *afterwardsness*. *Literature* is therefore already beyond, or at least within, the fall. It surrenders to an insight from which its narrative takes off. Surrender, therefore, could be the reward of the fall in humor, the surrender to a (delicious) insight. ›Truth‹ and ›common beliefs‹ are questioned and can be seen as a mask; once this is recognized, the subject realizes their own constructedness, and the deconstructive work of humor can begin.

Such an understanding of humor as the fragmentation of the wor(l)d and the schism of the self is in accordance with Bakhtin's idea of dialogicity and Derrida's deferral of meaning in language, as well as the ethics of a deconstruction at work. Deconstruction in the Derridean sense already takes into account the binary and dichotomized trait of language, and thus the relations of power, on which language is centered in order to acquire a specific meaning. With Bakhtin and Derrida, deconstruction could thus be described as a *dialogical way of reading a text*. In a first step, the dialogical can be described as the transparent splitting off of other meanings, images, utterances that a word/image carries (past, present) or alludes to (future). Bakhtin also links dialogue to the splitting or

doubling that is already inherent in a word and with which the humorous rhetoric plays. This doubling/splitting of words in the play of the humorous rhetoric, moreover, ends (in the stated performative), but not forever. It is *the rhetoric* of humor as such that doubles and splits meanings.

What constitutes humor is not the doubling or splitting itself, but the *falling/surrendering of the self* to its deconstructive movement in thought. It is this acknowledgment of dependence on the other speaking within the wor(l)d and the loss of power and control inherent in this movement of the wor(l)d that is a hallmark of the (dialogic trait of) humor. This is why Schlegel is interested in the surplus-value of his questioning movement. If humor does not come to a halt, he seems to ask, what is gained by it, what is the insight? Schlegel pursues his inquiry in a humorous tone that resonates with Freud's idea of *afterwardsness*. Instead of a straightforward or finite answer, he asserts: »*Mit der Ironie ist durchaus nicht zu scherzen. Sie kann unglaublich lange nachwirken*« [Irony is not to be joked with. It can have an incredibly long-lasting effect]« (quoted in de Man 1983, 222; translation mine).

Although at first glance Schlegel's remark seems to double an already humorous tone, it is in fact also a humorous (deconstructive) double response: On the one hand, Schlegel is suggesting that ›irony‹ is a serious undertaking, not merely a ›joke‹. On the other hand, Schlegel's answer to the infinity of the humorous play is its long-lasting effect. The word *nachwirken* not only refers to an affective, pensive, tragic side of the humorous, which might indicate the sadness that humor can also evoke. It implies the possibility of an effect of the humorous play that works *within the self* for a much longer time, beyond the time of its utterance. This alludes to the possibility of change that humor can bring about in the self – a coming to insight in the longer term. The machinery of the humorous tone, understood in this way, is not just humor for humor's sake, which plays with the duplicity of language and understanding (and de Man's circuit nonsense ›madness‹), but an insight, a *gift* that unfolds itself in a time to come. This is what de Man seems to deny in his concept of ›irony‹. What he seems to overlook is the moment of shift in meaning within the work of humor, which already indicates a change *in* time and a change *of* time through language that echoes back to ›the empirical world‹ (de Man 1983, 222).

In *The Concept of Irony*, de Man is more open to the workings of ›irony‹, and his arguments are based closer on Schlegel's idea of ›irony‹ as a ›permanent parabasis‹ than on Søren Kierkegaard's more Hegelian understanding of ›irony‹ as negativity, but he nevertheless devalues Schlegel's joyful reception of ›irony‹.

De Man also writes against Kierkegaard, especially against Kierkegaard's understanding of ›irony‹ as a concept. The title of his text in fact mocks Kierkegaard's work of the same name; this shows the use of humor/›irony‹ as a rather supremacist de Manian style that evokes a range of affectivity – disgust, fascination, resentment – and indicates that there is more to the ›trope of irony‹ and its function, and that it also depends on the desiring subject who puts it to work.

Schlegel's humorous, philosophical invention and intervention not only serves de Man as a starting point for discussing ›irony‹. This theoretical, devaluating reflection, often ironic in tone, actually uses the power of humor to interrupt its disruptive power for which he criticizes it (De Man 1996, 166). This is probably why, in the text presented above, de Man develops allegory as a tropical stop sign for humor, as an attempt to protect

(his own?) texts (and the authority of his theorizing?) from humor's disruptive power. He is aware that ›irony‹ involves a rupturing buffoonery that disrupts the ›narrative illusion‹, which is Schlegel's parabasis as the »interruption of a discourse by a shift in the rhetorical register« (de Man 1996, 178). On the basis of this discussion, de Man finally defines ›irony‹ as the »permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes« (de Man 1996, 179), and he concludes:

> »So one could say, that any theory of irony is the undoing, the necessary undoing of any theory of narrative and it is ironic, as we say, that irony always comes up in relation to theories of narrative that would be consistent. Which doesn't mean that we don't have to keep working on it, because that's all we can do, but it will always be interrupted, always be disrupted, always be undone by the ironic dimension which it will necessarily contain.« (de Man 1996, 179)

For de Man, then, ›irony‹ as a trope is nihilistic rather than dialogical. In this essay he cites Peter Szondi, who, in a defense of Schlegel, in fact writes in a much more generous, lucid, and nuanced way about humor and its decomposing traits. For Szondi, »the comedy of Tieck's plays is due to the pleasure of the reflection: it is the distance that reflection gains with regard to its own structure that is appreciated by means of laughter« (Szondi 1978, 31; quoted and translated in de Man 1996, 182).

Szondi refers not only to the space created by humor, ›the distance of reflection to itself‹, but also to the reflective, epistemic, time-related, interruptive character of humor, as well as to the affective pay-off, the appreciation, and to its possible bodily effect: ›laughter‹. In this definition, humor is not only metonymically linked within an ostensive theorization. It also sheds light on the contemplative, critical function of humor, which, according to Szondi, lies in its ability to create temporal and spatial distance in thought, so that thought reflects itself. Furthermore, Szondi links this critical function of humor to affectivity and pleasure.

Although this affective by-product of humor may not always be joyful and may sometimes be melancholic – since reflection is an internal experience that may involve a range of affective evocations in the (experiencing) subject – it can be thought of as a singular, political act because ›reflection‹ is a singular activity that includes the effect of changing one's mind, of taking the side of the other, and in this sense of becoming the other (of oneself). De Man also cites Walter Benjamin to support his thesis, and he reads Szondi against Walter Benjamin, but Benjamin and Szondi are not so far apart from each other. While Szondi sees humor as a space for epistemological reflection, Benjamin, too, regards it as a process that brings about change. For Benjamin, the humorous works through ›form‹. It disrupts the structure of (a patterned, default) narrative. Benjamin sees it as a »critical act«, that of a »de-construction« (*Abbruch*). Its effect is understood not as negativity, but as a change that comes with the ›destruction‹ of a prior meaning.[31] While Benjamin's observation acknowledges the operation of the humorous as a tonality of critique, it is Szondi's statement that goes beyond critique

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31   De Man quotes Benjamin from Peter Szondi's »Friedrich Schlegel und die romantische Ironie. Mit einer Beilage über Tiecks Komödien.« See De Man (1973, 145–148).

towards an understanding of the multi-dimensionality of humor as an open, critical, encompassing deconstructive process. This is implied in the affective and reflective instances of interruption and its spatial and temporal blank moment of change. This last aspect is also the main point for Schlegel. The strength of humor lies in this non-understanding (*Unverständlichkeit*), in the presumed ›madness‹ of ›irony‹. Non-understanding is not to be understood as negativity, as de Man describes it (de Man 1996, 183), but as an openness to the other. In this sense, it is reminiscent of Geisenhanslüke's ›poetology of non-knowledge‹ (*Poetology des Nichtwissens*), as will be discussed below, which adopts a reflective stance towards discourse as such and plunges into the im/possibilities of ›non-knowledge‹ in order to arrive at insights, however long-lasting, through which an *other* understanding of ›knowledge‹ and another ›knowledge‹ of understanding and its processes can be considered.

Surprisingly, though, de Man rails against Schlegel's *reelle Sprache*: »That sounds very nice, but you should remember that the chaos is error, madness, and stupidity, in all its forms« (de Man 1996, 184). What de Man seems to fear – and what makes him sympathetic, as in his rejection of ›irony‹ at least a form of accountable, ethical responsibility seems to be evoked – is, in fact, a collapse of the narrative of history and its relativization (de Man 1996, 184). He seems concerned about the consequences of Schlegel's approach for historiographical writing, which he perceives as one-dimensional and devaluing – and which is particularly uncanny against the backdrop of his past – and one wonders what has happened to his understanding of rhetoric, which we will discuss in the next section. However, Schlegel's romantic approach need not necessarily be understood as a relativization. On the contrary, it can allow for the critical review of historiographic texts, the righting of written wrongs from marginalized positions, and the disruption of hegemonic and dominant narratives. From a queering (feminist) postcolonial standpoint, for example, this unsettling trait of humor is applicable as a deconstructive reading of authoritative historiographical writings, which must be ironized in order to be questioned. And this, it is argued, is what happens in literature: It can stabilize or destabilize the narrative of history. Thus, it is not in the mastery of ›the performative rhetoric‹ that the complexity of humor, which de Man sees as a (future) solution to the problem, must rest, but rather in the question of the (speaking) subject, whether in the narratives of the ›everyday‹ or in the rhetoric of the novel (or in scientific or academic discourse). Thus, as Freud's analysis already suggested, the question is always who the speaking subject is in the work of humor, and how they position themselves.

In order to address the question of how humor *happens* and what it might imply, in the next chapter I will look at the meanings and workings of rhetoric, on the one hand and subjectivity on the other. A rhetorical definition of narrative may therefore not only be about »somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purposes that something happened« (Phelan 2017, ix), but may also have to consider subjectivity, the question of who this ›someone‹ ›is‹ and how they tell what they tell (in what context).

Humor as the Rhetoric of Deconstruction and Subjectivity

Humor as textual performance is also related to rhetoric. The rhetoric in the text is a basic element for humor/›irony‹ to take place. Humor as rupture and parabasis can be seen as a

deconstruction that is rhetorically pursued within the layers of the text and its narrative line.[32]

I will refer, once again with some trepidation, to Paul de Man. De Man's work places rhetoric within a broader spectrum that extends beyond the narrower classical technical definitions of ›persuasion‹ and similar terms, bringing it into the poetics of the threshold place of everyday speech and some form of the experience of contemporaneity, where the appeal of novels (and perhaps literary texts in general) may reside. The term ›rhetoric‹ here is thus based on Paul de Man's understanding, not only in the »derived« sense of comment, eloquence, and persuasion (de Man 1979, 6), but also in the sense of »common speech«, »when it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices«, which meaning can be regarded as the prevailing one among the different possible meanings invoked in the text (de Man 1979, 10; see also Geisenhanslüke 2013, 107 ff.). But in contrast to de Man's approach that negates ›external‹ influence and – in a quite dangerously subjectless, depoliticizing way – is content with reading the different meanings of the text for themselves, playing with their self-de(con)structive modes, my interest in rhetoric and humor here is driven by the question of the subject and subjectivity. These certainly are not static, but are shaped by historically conditioned meanings and contexts and questions of gender, class, ›race‹, and other intersectionally and sociopolitically determinant categories.

De Man exposes a polymorphic character of the text in its linguistic and grammatical layers. It is this intricacy of different, complex, and possibly contradictory meanings of texts that de Man calls ›rhetoric‹ and a bunch of ›referential aberrations‹. Against the backdrop of this understanding, he defines literature *as* rhetoric per se:

> »Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration. And although it would perhaps be somewhat more remote from common usage, I would not hesitate to equate the rhetorical, figural potentiality of language with literature itself.« (de Man 1979, 10; see also Geisenhanslüke 2000, 15 ff.)

The rhetorical study of texts, for de Man, includes the study of tropes and figures; it is in a narrow sense, perhaps as opposed to Booth's more traditional understanding of rhetoric as the unifying techniques an author uses to give form to a text, that de Man writes (Booth 1983, 74; Bialostosky 1985, 212). Geisenhanslüke broadens the scope of this understanding by identifying an ancient connection between rhetoric, poetics, aesthetics, and literature that had been severed through a rupture in philosophical thought. According to Geisenhanslüke, it crystallized in the nineteenth century with Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) and the central role it assigned to the »genius mind« rather than to the faculty of language (Geisenhanslüke 2000, 14 ff.). Geisenhanslüke attributes de Man's reintroduction

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32 For a discussion of the interrelationship of (techniques of) rhetoric and narrativity in narratology and storytelling and their dependence on the production of meaning within the complexity of affective, ideological, and ethical sites, see James Phelan (1996, 2005, 2017). Rather than explaining this approach by defining the terms, Phelan uses literary examples to make his point within text analysis. For an overview of a modern understanding of rhetoric (»new rhetoric«) as »rhetorical discourse« that uses narratives »to induce social action«, see also Iversen (2014). The ›new rhetoric‹ draws more attention to the functions of rhetoric beyond ›persuasion‹.

of rhetoric to an effort to revive this older thread that rhetoric occupied (Geisenhanslüke 2009, 107).

This rhetorical quality of paying attention to the simultaneously evoked possibility of different meanings is what de Man characterizes as the »semiological enigma« of the text (de Man 1979, 10).[33] Against the background of a Bakhtinian logic and narratological considerations, the »semiological enigma« can also be understood, at least in the novel, as a continuous and sometimes discontinuous shuttling of different narrative voices in the heteroglott and dialogic character of the rhetoric that the text sets in motion.[34] De Man's main argument, however, is that language cannot be decomposed into grammar and rhetoric as two distinct things, as has been the case and assumed in literary studies. Rather, de Man pays attention to the specificity and functionality of grammar and rhetoric as techniques of and in texts and in the work of language that at the same time produce various meanings that the text offers. De Man distinguishes between a rhetorization of grammar and a grammatization of rhetoric (de Man 1979, 16) when the text generates different possibilities of meaning through grammatical use (for example, the form of a question that gives a sentence a rhetorical quality) or through a specific use of figures and tropes that are repeated and thus produce a particular grammatized usage (when, for example, metaphors or, more generally, »resemblance« is used »in a way to disguise differences«) (de Man 1979, 16). Given these considerations, Bender and Wellbery (1990) refer to this more contemporary understanding of rhetoric as ›rhetoricality‹, which also underlies my approach to rhetoric here.

To understand the performativity of humor as a rhetorical work of language also means not only to conceive of humor as an explosive parabasis of conventionalized or expected meaning(s), but to regard the ambiguous performativity of language as its inevitable trait as well. In this sense, rhetoric is also understood as a dialogical procedure that cannot be fixed within a discursive trajectory from one side of a dialogical space. This dialogical, discursive trajectory of language – its rhetoricality – is not only floating but also bound to history and subjectivity, as different approaches in critical, feminist, Black, and postcolonial studies point out.[35] Both Stuart Hall and Edward W. Said refer to

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33   As mentioned above, it is difficult to read de Man's approaches in literary theory without paying attention to his involvement in some antisemitic journalism during the war in Nazi-occupied Belgium, which came to light four years after his death. Dealing with de Man is, for better or worse, also, inevitably, a reading of his approach to such activities. In this sense, his approach to rhetoric can also be seen as a Lacanian return of the repressed, and may indeed be a semiological enigma with regard to what de Man as a scholar and writer was trying to pursue by engaging with the question of rhetoric and deconstruction: an apology, a request not to judge too soon, an apologetic self-persuasion, a haunted unconsciousness? This return of the repressed also raises the question of responsibility in the production of ›knowledge‹. For a discussion of the return of the repressed and the question of rhetoric, see E. F. Dyck (2001, 93–105). For a discussion of de Man's wartime journalism, see Werner Harmacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan (1989). The multiple dilemmas of the return of the repressed are somehow echoed in Jacques Derrida's contribution to this volume, »Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell« (1988). See also Martin McQuillan (2001).

34   Instead of speaking of an enigma, Geisenhanslüke (2009, 95) ties rhetoric to an understanding of meaning as an effect of the text rather than as a verifiable schema.

35   Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's approach to parabasis, discussed above, as an ironic disruption of dominant, conventionalized textual orders that emphasizes the worldliness of texts and the im-

this purposeful arrest of the text when, in different ways, they emphasize the historical and political implications that texts, despite their ambiguity, nevertheless carry.

Hall refers to the communicative context and what he calls the »translatability of a concept and its use in language« (2009, 21 f.). Said, while celebrating Derrida's »heterodox textuality« and the role of teaching as a double meaning of the institution of power and its embodiment in the teaching subject, *le corps enseignant*, nevertheless emphasizes the importance of writing »as the *consequence* of a historical evolution unique and yet absolutely crucial, to the narrative form itself« (Said 1983, 194; emphasis in the original).

Both approaches, Hall's and Said's, challenge de Man's enigmatic play and reintroduce the question of the *authoriz*ing power as the movement of the written text. They thus place the text in a historical context, beyond and in spite of all free floating of significations and traces. Similarly, Geisenhanslüke refers to Henri Meschonnic's approaches and reads his work as the theoretical *re*inscription of the historically situated subject and subjectivity that constitutes itself in language, giving it meaning, rather than seeing language and discourse as ›knowledge‹ production (without a (desiring) subject) (Geisenhanslüke 2009, 87). Audre Lorde's poetic and affirmative assertion that poetry is not a luxury but essential for forming meaning and giving voice to the unspoken, implicitly not only specifies de Man's definition of language and rhetoric as a deconstructive step in the making, but also fundamentally links it to the question of subjectivity, history, power, ›knowledge‹, and access to the institution and institutionalization of literature (and literary studies?). Indeed, Lorde's poetics illuminates de Man's understanding of literature as rhetoric while deconstructing its abstract, supposedly transparent (and universalized) (*white*, cis-male, middle-class subject of *Christian* descent?) stance; in doing so, Lorde asserts the poetic (and rhetorical) function of language as »imagination with insight« that does not diminish de Man's overall point, which, to paraphrase Bakhtin, accidentally emphasizes the heteroglot dialogic site of language (Lorde 2007, 37).

For Bakhtin, in the dialogic, inherent in language, in the act of performative utterances and the performativity of the novel, diverse enunciations coalesce through the figures; the ›implied author's‹ voice, too, is segmented, echoing other voices (Bakhtin 1984 a: 63), all of which are a »genuine rhetorical force« (Schuster 1985, 595). Like de Man, Bakhtin does not distinguish between aesthetic, linguistic, and performative functions of rhetoric. But unlike de Man, Bakhtin, in line with the approaches of Lorde, Hall, and Said, also locates dialogicity inherent in literature within the historically determined political and ideological, underpinnings, as well as within the responsiveness of the ›implied author‹ of a text's rhetoric.

These approaches emphasize the historical foundations of a text's »common sense« rhetoric and thus delimit de Man's ›semiotic enigma‹ by paying attention to the historical as well as the historically determined subject positions of the speaking subjects. This would also imply understanding the rhetoric inherent in the performative quality of humor as a situated deconstructive intervention. Humor as performative rhetoric calls into

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pact of meaning production on the materiality of the wor(l)d, offers another understanding of rhetorical play along the same lines. Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech – A Politics of the Performative* ([1997] 2021, 43 ff.) can also be understood in this way as an analysis of the work of rhetoric and its hazardous but complex sociopolitical dimensions in relations to structures of power.

question the solemnity and serenity of its own claims, and this may be what constitutes its deconstructive energy (and why it may be so feared in philosophy?). Although it can be argued that Derrida also emphasizes the power of language to shift meaning, since there is always an unstable and unfixable trace of *différance* inherent in it, Derrida's approach is more philosophically focused than on the multiple-edged gift of language. The ability of subjects to engage in language appears of secondary importance.[36] He seems (lovingly) too preoccupied with shaking the house of philosophy (frequently and increasingly using a good portion of the free floating poetic properties of language). Nevertheless, Derrida also distinguishes a moment in which power relations and their use are reflected in language. Deconstructive reading, then, is Derrida's attempt to bring to light the binary and dichotomous traits inherent in language, and to shift them into the possibility of an entirely different space where, at least for a moment, things can be different. Deconstruction is therefore not a ›mere‹ reading of allegories in order to make sense, as it is for de Man. Deconstruction in the Derridean sense requires a reflection on the mechanisms of power and how they operate in the »game of the wor[l]d« (Derrida 1997, 50) and in the absences and presences of the (con-)text, of signification per se. A Derridean deconstructive move does not mean a passion for language for its own sake, nor a reversal of the power imbalance, but a shifting of the ground (in thought and language) on which binary and dichotomous thinking is established – which means that it can only be a slow movement that works beyond the expected. Justice »in an unconditional sense is its goal« (Lüdemann 2014, 59–72; Patton 2010, 44 ff.). In *Specters of Marx* ([1993] 1994), Derrida writes:

> »Deconstruction has never had any sense or interest, in my view at least, except as a radicalization, which is to say also in the tradition of a certain Marxism, in a certain spirit of Marxism. There has been then, this attempted radicalization of Marxism called deconstruction [...].« (Derrida 2006, 115)

For Derrida, then, deconstruction is at once a sociopolitical textual and material intervention. It is an intervention from within the texture of the world as text, a texture that is historical, discursive, as well as related to subjectivity, and therefore *auto-bio-graphi*cal: The writing/reading subject is imbued as well as constructed by the texture of the wor(l)d in the making. Such a movement is understood not as a momentum, a final or permanent phase, but as an infinite form of vigilant *re*reading that may not begin with the self, but must first come from the other.

Moreover, especially in Derrida's understanding of language, there is a trait of agency, a coming to language, as part of its rhetorical trajectory, that Derrida opens up with an angle to the other within the structure of deconstruction. These approaches to rhetoric are also reflected in Bakhtin's understanding of the dialogicity of the novel and Sedgwick's understanding of the performative and periperformative, since, on the one hand, the multiple, historically formed meanings of wor(l)ds and sociopolitical power relations are emphasized, and, on the other hand, the opening of these meanings within the heteroglottic character of the literary, novelistic, and social text is differently

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36   For a discussion of Derrida's approach as political resilience, see Said (1983, 175–225).

delineated. It is this characteristic of the opening of words and discourse that Bakhtin calls its ›carnivalesque character‹. The carnivalesque character of the (literary) text thus performs the ambiguity of humor that is unleashed in the text, which is also a political deciphering against the grain of normalized meanings. It is in dialogue with others and performs otherness, not only on the level of the semantics of meanings, but also on the level of the subjectivity of the characters and the different subject-positions that stabilize and destabilize conventionalized utterances as well as understandings. In this way, *affective humor* in the carnivalesque of the novel also reflects and mirrors the performances of the novelistic, dialogical periperformatives.

Terry Eagleton also notices this quality of language when he speaks of rhetoric. According to Eagleton, rhetoric is not just persuasion or a form of linguistic engagement with texts, characters, and tropes per se. Against both approaches, and in line with a Bakhtinian understanding, Eagleton reconceives rhetoric as an activity that is political and context-bound, and »inseparable from the wider social relations between writers and readers, orators and audiences and as largely unintelligible outside the social purposes and conditions in which they are embedded« (Eagleton 2000, 179). Although Eagleton also links rhetoric to its more traditional understandings of »criticism«, »persuasion«, and its »science«, and considers himself a »traditionalist« (Eagleton 2000, 179), he understands rhetoric as a »discourse theory« that is interested in the »formal devices of language« and thus relates the »enigma« of its meanings to a decipherable formalist semiotics. Eagleton also links rhetoric to the ways in which language and discourse produce effects on ›implied readers‹. This means the workings of power and desire in discourse and language within a historically conditioned »symbolic order« that operates through the »signifying practices« of representation and negotiation, the carnivalesque, in different (cont-)texts or in novels (Eagleton 2000, 180 ff.).

In these understandings, rhetoric is seen as the inclination of a text, its drive and desire, however subtle, its orientation toward stability or change against the backdrop of dominant and normalized understandings. The performativity of humor in literary texts, in this sense, propels a deconstructive and dialogic rhetoric in which different meanings are enmeshed and give meaning to each other. This rhetorical performativity of *affective humor* entails not only the sedimentation of different aporetic meanings of the performative form of an utterance, but also the evocation of various possibilities of meaning implied in the humorous display – which, however, also initiate their own fall.

Considering the rhetoric of humor as a form of self-questioning activity makes it possible to analyze how it functions as a *deconstructive rhetoric*. However, *affective humor* must not be understood as an intentional endeavor but itself as a subject-related as well as singular *auto-bio-graph*ical effect of the work of language and discourse, which not only can produce an immediate bodily felt reaction (laughing, for example), but one that simultaneously can open up a plurality of meanings that may be contradictory, paradoxical, and aporetic for further reflection. *Affective humor*, then, is understood as a deconstructive intervention, since it disentangles meanings as well as the form in which they are expressed.

A Poetology of Poetics

Not unlike Eagleton, Achim Geisenhanslüke also rethinks rhetoric in what may be called a *re*reading of a more ›traditional‹ approach by tracing it back to classical Greek philosophy (Geisenhanslüke 2015 a, 2018). Rather than emphasizing rhetoric as such, however, Geisenhanslüke approaches it within a genealogically informed trajectory of poetics.[37]

Although poetics has a comprehensive meaning that includes the theory of literature as well as the techniques of poetic creation, its emphasis lies particularly in the recognition of theoretical insights and implications that are inherent in and part of literary works (Geisenhanslüke 2018, 13). Geisenhanslüke perceives critical readings as part of poetics, and poetics as the field that connects philosophy, rhetoric, and literature (Geisenhanslüke 2018, 15; also Simon 2018, 8). The theorist of poetics, the one who reads and explains poetics, is therefore, according to Geisenhanslüke, not the philosopher, but the *kritikós*, the critic (Geisenhanslüke 2018, 14; Birnstiel 2018, 400ff., 408); as the realm of the praxis of reading, poetics, – and this is an understanding where Friedrich Schlegel's and Achim Giesenhanslüke's approaches to poetics meet – can also be understood as the praxis of critique. Its limits, according to Schlegel, can only be defined »by poetry« (Chaouli 2021, 19), to which it remains bound – and where it thus has a home. Poetics in this sense could be understood as a challenging and emancipatory ›institution‹ in the theory of literature and thought. It may call into question presupposed understandings of ›scientific thinking‹ and writing, which are often still seen as superior, analytical forms of gaining insight and ›knowledge‹. Poetics, as a critical attention to texts, may also require *poetic responses* and a responsiveness that addresses its poetic language, that is, its epistemological as well as aesthetic traits and insights.

> »Poetics involves a theory of literature that is not simply a theory of something, but one that is simultaneously affected by its material […] The line between theory and its subject matter that is [still] inscribed in most disciplines is in a peculiar way annulled in poetics.« (Geisenhanslüke 2018, 14)

For Geisenhanslüke, then, rhetoric entails a poetological endeavor that combines theoretical assumptions with literary praxis and techniques and that also evokes affectivity and sensibility. Moreover, he explicitly links the affective meanings of the text with the rhetoricality that a text evokes (Geisenhanslüke 2018, 103 ff.). Rhetoric thus appears as a *glue* that binds the two instances of poetics – its *aesthetic* and *epistemological* properties –, in order to poetologically generate meanings that have not only an epistemological, but also, as part of their epistemological processing, an affective and sensual aspect. In the

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37   In *Poetik – Eine literaturtheoretische Einführung* (*Poetics – An Introduction to Literary Theory*; 2018), Geisenhanslüke critically examines the philosophical-political context in which the Greek debates took place and are discussed in certain central works. Beginning with Plato and Aristotle, Geisenhanslüke follows various traces of the meanings and developments of poetics from Roman antiquity to modernity and Kant's theory of aesthetics, and finally pays close attention to Hölderlin's poetic reflections. He also links his search to poststructuralist developments and contemporary thought and figures such as Roland Barthes, Henri Meschonic, and Peter Szondi (Geisenhanslüke 2018, 14.).

poetics and rhetoric of the text, there is thus not only an aesthetics that provides intelligibility but also epitemological insights that are aesthetically produced. A poetological approach allows us to see the (literary) text as an (artistic?) construct that also harbors (hidden?) epistemological meanings (sometimes maybe with a will to power and over-power?) in dealing with (the many dimensions of) a matter that goes far beyond a narrow understanding of ›art as aesthetics‹ (see also Geisenhanslüke 2011, 2015 a; Gamper 2012; Vogel 2018).

This is the thread that will be followed in the poetological analysis of *affective humor* in terms of its theoretical assumptions, and it will also be used in the reading of the novels, albeit taking into account historically shaped sociopolitical power asymmetries that largely determine the access to ›knowledge‹ and its institutions, as well as the possibility of speaking (and being heard).

In light of the (language-related and inevitably sociopolitical) understandings, humor and its affective, deconstructive, rhetorical, and epistemological workings will be further explored within the framework of these poetological approaches, which also pay attention to rhetoric and affectivity as well as to the theory and practice of poetological processes, and which then also form part of what ›knowledge‹ seems not to be – non-knowledge.