Enjoyment of Laughter

Max Eastman

With a new introduction by
William F. Fry

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E. W. Kemble

Spring, Spring, Gentle Spring

Out of sixty students in psychology, thirty-seven reported a feeling of "superiority" to the animals in this picture; twenty-three had no such feeling. How do you feel?

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GEORGE SHANK—"Oop—sorry." from *The New Yorker*

GROPPER—"Aw—Shut up! This is a Free Country!" from *The Liberator*
"You're a Liar!" from *The Liberator*
"An' you mean to tell me that that dog ain't got no fleas?" from *The Liberator*
"Look yourself in the face—are you honest?" from *The Liberator*

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SUPPLEMENTARY

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Introductory

I MUST WARN YOU, reader, that it is not the purpose of this book to make you laugh. As you know, nothing kills the laugh quicker than to explain a joke. I intend to explain all jokes, and the proper and logical outcome will be, not only that you will not laugh now, but that you will never laugh again. So prepare for the descending gloom.

It has seemed to me since school days that all textbooks are wrongly written. All courses of instruction are conducted in a way which ignores the natural operation of the mind. As a result the opinion is universal, and it is under the circumstances a fact, that in order to learn anything you have to study. Since this introduction to humor is probably as near as I shall come to writing a textbook, I want to make it illustrate the manner in which I think textbooks should be written and this unfortunate necessity for study eliminated.

The mind should approach a body of knowledge as the eyes approach an object, seeing it in gross outline first, and then by gradual steps, without losing the outline, discovering the details. A book on American history, for instance—I mean a textbook, for I am not talking about literature, thought, argument, or education in the full sense, but only instruction—should begin by telling in a few sentences the author's conception of the significant form of that history as a whole. America was inhabited by Indians, Europe discovered it, certain phases of development were passed through, and we arrived at the Great Depression—not more than a page. Then should follow a chapter giving the history of America from the Indians to the Depression, and laying in the fundamental explanatory factors, historical, racial, geographical, and economic. Then should follow three or four chapters giving the history of America from the Indians to the Depression, and elaborating these factors. Then should come six or eight chapters giving still further fundamental factors, but some glimpse also of the more subtle elements that developed between the Indians and the Depression. Then

should follow eight or ten chapters in which race, economics and geography retire toward the fringe of consciousness, and the web of the story becomes visible—but still the full story from the Indians to the Depression. Then perhaps a book of twelve or fifteen chapters could be written, similar to those we now have, giving the history of America from the Indians to the Great Depression. This book could be read by the pupil, as it would by a well-filled mind, not only without tedium, but with active thought and understanding.

Those who find such a prospect monotonous are not thinking about the joy of learning, but the pleasure of hearing a story told. To one interested in furnishing the mind, the monotonous thing is to drop in one fact after another until it fills up from the bottom like a barrel of potatoes. To fit new items into a growing *pattern of knowledge* is an exciting occupation. Every scholar knows that the main charm of reading lies not in learning something, but in learning more where much is known. Pupils could taste this charm almost from the beginning, if information were presented to the mind in the manner in which the mind will naturally receive it.

Not only does the understanding of a child in its own free growth advance from general ideas to particular investigations, but the mind of the race has so developed. Only the pedagogues have invented this unnatural habit of beginning at the beginning and plodding through to the end. I think it is the main reason why so few even of the lively minded ever enjoy anything they hear in school except the recess bell. In school they are always laboring through new subjects for the first time, or "going over" them in the same old form. It is only the second time, and with new details, that the proper joy of learning begins.

A study and classification of the kinds of humorous experience upon the basis of a theory as to its nature, is a science, however immature and imperfect it may be. It offers a fair chance to illustrate my method of instruction. It is not, to be sure, a vitally important science. For even if I manage to make clear the distinction between a good joke and a bad, a thing no other writer on this subject has attempted, that will not prevent you from making bad jokes nor enable you to make good ones. It will polish up your successes, and I hope forestall some of your most awful perpetrations. But that is about all. No art can be taught

to the inartistic, and the playful art the least of all. For this reason, and also because my motive has not been purely pedagogical—I am trying to inculcate pleasure as well as information—I have not pushed too far my view of the manner in which textbooks should be written. I have presented a total view of the science of laughter only six times.

Whether under the influence of the humorists, or because this book is a grown-up lecture, I have found it natural to write largely in the first person, and allude to my own experiences in considerable disregard of the ego taboo. I have also quoted conversations with the great and the near-great in a rather scandalous manner. After I wrote the paragraph on page 90 describing James Thurber's art of humor, it occurred to me that I might learn something by consulting Thurber, who was only a few blocks away, and finding out what he thought about it. I learned so much in a brief conversation, not only about him and his colleagues, but about humor in general as it looks from the inside of the creator's brain, that I decided to confer with other popular humorists and comedians and get the low-down, so to speak, on this art of being funny. I have had a rare good time doing that, and as a result my scientific treatise is peppered with such gossipy interpolations as "Charlie Chaplin tells me," "Groucho Marx maintains," "Walt Disney seems to think" . . . I hope the reader will forgive these sins in view of the light-heartedness of the subject.

Humor at its best is a somewhat fluid and transitory element, but most books about it are illustrated with hardened old jokes from the comic papers, or classic witticisms jerked out of their context and tacked up for inspection like a dried fish on a boathouse door. I have tried to avoid this catastrophe by quoting mainly from contemporary American humor, and quoting at some length. For permission to do this I have to thank the humorists one and all, and also their publishers—or they have to thank me. My book, however, is not an anthology. The selections have been made with a view to illustrating the argument rather than covering the field. If you do not find your favorite humorist here, it is pure luck. I did not happen to be reading in him the right passage at the right moment. Also my book is not criticism. If you do not find your pet aversion properly denounced, that also may be luck. This is a textbook in the science of humor and the art of enjoying it—

a book which I invite you to read without mental concentration and in the laziest and most self-indulgent manner of which you are capable. . . .

In return for which gracious benevolence on my part, you do solemnly swear that, in whatsoever objurgations, execrations, hoots, catcalls and traducements you see fit to disport yourself after reading my book, you will never, in public or in private, in speech or in writing, in fair weather or foul, condemn me as a "repetitious" writer. Repetition from a closer view is the essence of my system of instruction.

Introduction to the Transaction Edition

WITH HIS BOOK, *Enjoyment of Laughter,* author and savant Max Eastman created the opportunity for entertaining a large number of people, while informing them on several special subjects for which he obviously had great respect and affection. Those several subjects are components of a collection of ageless human characteristics. They are tightly interrelated in actual human life. Usually they are mutually active, influencing the occurrences and intensities of each other. These subjects are the behaviors, proclivities, and instincts subsumed under the titles *humor, mirth,* and *laughter.*

Eastman's enthusiasm for these entities was strongly manifested; *Enjoyment of Laughter* was written with energy and intensity. It is wide-ranging in its discussions and arguments. Eastman's style of presentation is vigorous, declarative, without hesitation, sometimes pedantic; Eastman may present his viewpoints and opinions as revealed truths. He is forthright, mostly without equivocation. In certain sections, his style of delivery is even pugnacious, especially in the cases of specific philosophers with whom he especially disagreed—particular examples are Plato, Thomas Hobbes, Henri Bergson, and Sigmund Freud (certainly an eclectic selection). In this volume, he assumed the posture of a learned, senior mentor (at age fifty-three) sharing knowledge and beliefs dispensed from his brain and heart, with no doubts about the importance of humor, mirth, and laughter in so many crucial aspects of human life, even beyond usual limitations (more on this latter subject at a later point). At no place in this volume is there given any indication that Eastman considered information offered by him about humor, mirth, and laughter to be dangerous, detrimental, undesirable, irrelevant, or trivial. His statements are positive and powerful. His intensities of presentation force the reader to unquestioningly understand that this author had deep commitment to the subjects of his writing.

Proof of his enthusiasm for his subjects may be derived, more objectively, from sources outside his *Enjoyment* performance. This volume has not existed alone in Eastman's pronouncements on these subjects. In addition to various assorted essays, lectures, public and personal statements regarding humor, etc., there exists another, earlier, less extensive book, *The Sense of Humor*, written by him and published (1921) fifteen years before *Enjoyment of Laughter* (1936).

That earlier volume does not have the verve, scope, and richness of content as does *Enjoyment.* In many ways, it gives indication of being the work of a much younger author. While reading it as part of my research in preparation for writing this Introduction for *Enjoyment*, the impression formed in my mind that the earlier book had many characteristics of a Ph.D. thesis. Later, in extending my Introduction research, I began to read through two autobiographical books by Eastman—*Enjoyment of Living* (1948) and *Love and Revolution* (1964). In *Enjoyment of Living*, on page 296, I came across the following passage:

> I returned to New York for the winter of 1908-09 to register for a Ph.D. in philosophy and psychology (at Columbia University). As the subject of my thesis I put down "The Sense of Humor", and that marked the birth of a large ambition. I was dead sure that a fascinating body of facts and understanding lay behind my observation, that disappointment rather than satisfaction is what we laugh at in a joke. In a preliminary way I felt that I had the explanation of humor . . . The history of that ambition is itself something of an ironic joke. In my first attempt, *The Sense of Humor,* the miracle did not come off. The main reason was that I had not completely developed my theory, and lacked the freedom of mind to handle it playfully . . . In *Enjoyment of Laughter* the theory is complete . . . It supersedes the earlier book on every point. For that very reason I was able to write it gayly enough so that it sold almost as a joke book.

At this point, we are confronted with a puzzle regarding origins. From where did Eastman's enthusiasm for humor, mirth and laughter originally come? To assist us as we grope our way to an answer for that question, we need to know that Eastman's mother was a busy minister of the Congregational faith who received national admiration for her excellent skill in lending humor into her sermons. As a matter of fact, that skill contributed materially to the progressive success of her ministerial career.

While Eastman was growing up in his somewhat dysfunctional family, his mother's capacity for bridging gaps in understanding and felicity with humor protected family members from suffering the consequences of their mutual resentments and antagonisms. Maxie was her youngest child; he described his childhood as "mother's pet," translated as meaning that she favored him, sheltering him in family conflicts or contests. He grew up with the obvious result of deep attachment to her and with admiring affinity for her wise and humorous ways of thought and expression. He wrote in the autobiographical *Enjoyment of Life*, "She was, I suppose, the most noted woman minister of the time . . . You were taken quiet possession of, first by the tone of her voice, and then by the surprisingly candid and wise and joyous, and often humorous, things that she would say."

That affinity evolved as an understandably deep element in young Maxie's *modus vivendi*, but during the younger years of childhood and adolescence, he was almost pathologically shy, retiring, hesitant, and self-effacing in his usual social behavior. In *Enjoyment of Life* he described his personal suffering from, "my extreme timor, (with) a resulting sensitivity to qualities as well as quantities of social elevation . . . I was gauche and speechless." Those unfortunate psychological characteristics blocked any hint of underlying capabilities that were bestowed to him as gifts of his maternal heritage. It wasn't until he began residential studies at Mercersburg Academy ("on special terms as the minister's son") that the hitherto hidden affinity began to emerge as social grace and social vehicle.

Slowly, perhaps in tiny increments of day-to-day, Maxie progressed from a nadir of sociability at the beginning of his life at the Mercersburg Academy eventually to an exhilarating realization of his mother's example. The scholastic challenges of the academy started him on that journey. He was a very good student, no matter what degree of nerdiness ("wart," or "wartiness," were the terms of those days) contaminated his sociability and defeated his attempts for acceptance by his peers.

A wise faculty at the academy apparently became aware of his social anguish and provided him with recognition for his actual "smarts." His reputation for intelligence and scholarliness grew during the academy years; he attained some forms of acceptance—certainly recognition—in his being able to help classmates with school assignments. By the end of his senior year, respect for his brightness had reached the level that he received the

honor of presenting the graduation ceremonies ritual spoof "Prophecies for the Future" for other members of his graduating class. In *Enjoyment of Life*, Eastman wrote about his momentous experience at that occasion.

> . . . the exploding into social expression of my . . . humorous inward life was momentous . . . it changed my whole career. (I was given) a rare chance to uncover that humorous sophistication which my shyness had concealed. I do not mean that I realized this in advance. I was surprised and absolutely swept off my feet by the roars of laughter and almost unintermittent (?) applause that greeted my Class Prophecy. It was the success of the week, and a success in exactly that field in which I had regarded myself as a hopeless dud. Nothing in my life has ever exceeded the joy of that occasion. All my intellectual achievements, my perfect examination papers, my so well self-criticized oratory, dwindled to nothing. I felt that I was a boy among boys, and would be a man among men, and I cared about nothing else in the world.

To be sure, contrasting the early eloquence of a high school academy graduation humorist with that of the seasoned, well-published and respected, time-tempered professional humorist Eastman had become by the time of *Enjoyment*'s publication provides sufficient concrete evidence that Eastman's enthusiasm for humor, etc., was sustained as a dynamic learning factor of his life, and it was *not* simply a youthful whim or an occasional fancy.

Furthermore, a considerable time span is represented in those two contrastive expositions of talent (*The Sense of Humor*, 1921; *Enjoyment of Laughter*, 1936) and qualifies as additional evidence for continued humor enthusiasm. During that time span—despite all else concurrently represented in experiences, events, influences, adventures, learning, marriages, etc.—Eastman's depth of continuing interest in humor, etc., survived a multitude of temptations attracting him to involvements with beguiling alternatives. In truth, those years that separated his academy debut of public humor and the publication of *Enjoyment of Laughter* were lush with other subjects of significant interest, inviting extensive investment of time and energy. It is not that Eastman had nothing else to absorb his attention. Competition for his devotion was not lacking. Already in college, Eastman had begun to be absorbed in several other interests that were to become sources of fascination and that served as the years passed to keep him busily productive in diverse fields.

Poetry was one of those fascinations. He was sufficiently taken by poetry to write and publish his own poetry, eventually with five collected volumes.

He also became the published author of a book about poetry: *Enjoyment of Poetry* (1913). Poetry could be identified as a common medium of personal communication for him, often appearing informally in letters, being used as a more emphatic element of impromptu discourse during meetings, etc.

Philosophy became a life passion, entering his life at a slightly later stage than poetry, but soon acquiring greater importance as a career modality. He taught philosophy; he lectured on philosophy. He wrote many articles, tracts, and essays on Philosophy. His passion for philosophy was exemplified over his lifetime by several published books of philosophic nature: *Journalism Versus Art* (1916); *The Literary Mind—Its Place in an Age of Science* (1931); *Art and the Life of Action* (1934); *Artists in Uniform* (1934); *Enjoyment of Living* (1948); *Love and Revolution* (1964); *Seven Kinds of Goodness* (1967).

His passion for philosophy had started at a young age, before his humor epiphany at the academy graduation. Following that "momentous" event, he went on to undergraduate education and graduation at Williams College. The next step came to be Ph.D. study at Columbia University in New York City, with the stipulation that the degree was "to be attained without compromise with commercialism." He entered Columbia with a double major in philosophy and psychology (initial dissertation entitled *The Sense of Humor*). He soon became deeply involved with creative productions in both areas of major study (many of which developed palpable "commercial" aspects). His creative production with probably the least commercial ties was his remarkable employment by the renowned philosopher and educator John Dewey as grammarian and tutor. "You know how to write; I wish you'd show me how it's done." Dewey had burst out to Max early in his Columbia epoch. The arrangement was established on that simple basis and continued as such for several years thereafter. Obviously, the subsequent benefit for Eastman—though non-commercial—in that "job" was huge.

Eastman's older sister, Crystal, was a cyclone center of causes and projects—also "brilliant" and "beautiful." Max had deeply admired his sister, from his earliest years. She had been a year at Columbia (probably a significant influence in his own choice for his graduate degree) studying sociology and then had transferred to New York University as a law student. She was a philosophy enthusiast, both academically and in her private life. Max quoted her in *Enjoyment of Life*, "I love (New York) for the people

and the thousands of things they think and do . . . especially the radicals, the reformers, the students—who really live to help, and yet get so much fun out of it." In addition to developing many associations at Columbia and NYU, contemporary hotbeds of radical ferment, she made many friendships in New York City's "ethical" Bohemia (Greenwich Village) where she lived and ate many of her meals at the notorious Greenwich House Settlement "where she was in the middle of it."

Quickly, when Max became set for the emigration to New York, she went into action, arranging a large number of assignments and connections for him. His unprecedented first year instructorship teaching assignment at Columbia was arranged through one of her friends. Another of Crystal's contacts arranged for Max to become *tuberculosis impresario* for a local health agency, the Charity Organization Society, presenting illustrated prevention lectures at union halls and religious centers. With her encouragement, it became his practice during leisure hours to "tour the East Side (New York) attending meetings of socialists, trade unionists, single taxers, anyone who aspired to make the social system better." Little brother Max was swirled away with his sister's busy, exciting life.

Brother and sister shared an apartment in Greenwich Village during the "academic" months; Crystal's friends and other visitors to their digs were associated with her many projects and became Max's friends and acquaintances. Long and searching discussions and arguments, deep into the night, were the custom of their household. Max became well familiarized with the political and social issues of the times. He wrote articles (mostly unpublished during the first year or so at Columbia), poetry (a better record of publication), and many, many academic exercises. (One of these—an essay on Platonic theory—was rejected for publication as a book by Scribner's, but was accepted as Max's official Ph.D. thesis when he requested that it replace *The Sense of Humor*, previously submitted and accepted.)

Crystal, in addition to her abundant socializing and busy volunteering for many contemporary "radical" organizations and their activities, was intensely committed to support of the Women's Suffrage movement. Her intensity was infectious; Max found himself involved soon as president of the locally organized Men's League for Woman Suffrage. Other involvements with causes followed; he began to receive invitations to speak at meetings, to consult as new organizations formed, provide philosophic guidance, and

gradually political wisdom. He was hired as an editor of *The Masses*, a provocative magazine with combined interests in art, literature, and politics (later to be investigated and closed as subversive and in conflict with the WWI Espionage Act, with expectable controversy and publicity).

He became acquainted with Marxism, explored the relevant philosophic issues, and learned about the different themes and nuances of socialism and communism. He, along with Crystal, started a leftist periodical named *The Liberator*. The groundwork was laid for his later admiring friendship with Leon Trotsky, who was to become the subject of a biographical book written by Eastman. Other books dealing with Russian revolutionary politics and philosophy were published: *Since Lenin Died* (1925), *Marx and Lenin: The Science of Revolution* (1926), *Stalin's Russia and the Crisis in Socialism* (1939), *Marxism: Is It a Science* (1940).

With all that foaming action and ferment, it is easy to understand that humor, etc., were not exclusive, even primary, preoccupations of Max Eastman during many of those years in which he was laying down major avenues of mature venture and creation. The directions of those avenues did not include active formal orientation to serious formal exploration of humor, etc. However, it is made clear by a special section in *Enjoyment of Laughter* that humor had, persisting despite all the rest, continued to be a frequent topic of interest in discussions and conversations.

The book section to which I refer is titled Supplementary: Some Humorists on Humor. It brings together an assembly of comments about humor made by individuals who had attained some fame from their various career and/or creative involvements with humor. Several individuals were historic, having stated their generic views on humor at times before Eastman lived—such as Voltaire, Cervantes, and Lincoln. Others were contemporary and answered in response to a stock question posed by Eastman to many people with whom he enjoyed social and/or journalistic contacts. The question: "What do you think of the idea that there is hostility, or a feeling of superiority, in all laughter- or, to put it in another way, that all jokes are 'on' somebody and that all laughter is at bottom ridicule?"

Eastman summarized, "The answers are necessarily fragmentary . . . obviously not reasoned opinions . . . (but) their offhand character makes them all the more valuable." Such names appear as Dorothy Parker, Charles Chaplin, Anita Loos, George MacManus (Maggie and Jiggs, cartoonist),

Groucho Marx, W. C. Fields, Will Rogers, Mae West, Walt Disney, and James Thurber with many others who are less well remembered currently. Eastman concluded the section with a comment opposed to a derisive view of instinctive laughter, and ". . . the idea that humor is closely associated with pain. I regard them, in their general drift, as evidence tending to corroborate my theory (of humor)."

We can speculate about the sorts of general response Max received when, in casual perhaps congenial conversations, he suddenly whipped out pencil and notebook, fixed a beady reportorial eye, and posed THE QUESTION. The likelihood of receiving a scientifically valid statistic would be very low. Some respondents were spontaneously amusing. Some quoted were admittedly dull or chilly, caught with their frontal lobes still digesting the luncheon cordon bleu or pork cutlet. However, regardless of the quality of cerebration on THE ANSWER, no legitimate scientific criterion would be satisfied in that transaction. But, varying intensities of amusement could be generated—and were, providing a very valid rationale for the transaction. In truth, bursts of amusement prove to be defensible rationale throughout *Enjoyment of Laughter*.

The criteria for scientific legitimacy are brief and simple. Initially, an observation, discovery, or inspiration is necessary. Second, verification of the new concept or entity is to follow. Subsequently, replication is required. For basic science, the proof is thus established. For applied science, one more step involves a demonstration of application or usage. There are no mysteries, chaos, or arbitrations to bewilder either the would-be scientific tyro or the multiple-Nobeled veteran.

Max Eastman unfortunately misidentified *Enjoyment of Laughter* as a work of Science. In the quotation above, he wrote of his "theory" being "corroborated." In the introductory section of *Enjoyment*, the words "textbook," "lecture," "study," "classification," and "scientific treatise" are used. In *Enjoyment,* the words "textbook," "lecture," "study," "classification," "scientific treatise," "argument," "science of humor," and "instruction" are scattered around. In *Part One* of the "textbook" (*Enjoyment of Laughter*), Eastman listed four *laws* of the *science of humor*, and repeated his identification of his volume as "our textbook." Throughout the book, there are sprinkled footnotes and references to various psychology (etc.) reports, as is common with scholarly publications. All of these supernumerary embellishments are

intended, no doubt, to buttress Eastman's claim for scientific qualifications of the book. But these arguments for the case are inadequate.

Max inexplicably provided, towards the end of the book, a lengthy section titled HOW TO TELL GOOD JOKES FROM BAD. It was divided into two chapters—To Diagram a Joke and The Ten Commandment of the Comic Arts. In the first chapter he took it upon himself to offer line drawings of various humor phenomena, introducing a series of Rube Goldberg-type drawings to illustrate what he considered to be significant humor procedures, mechanisms, and usages. To set the tone of that chapter in an intended style, he wrote of providing this curriculum for "advanced *students* in pleasure." That preliminary was followed with several lines of commentary that shifted without any designated logic from amusing to serious (scientific) back to amusing; "The first thing to do is to draw a diagram of a joke. A joke, remember, is not a thing but a process; and it is not an atom, but a molecule. An atom of humor is an unpleasantness or frustration taken playfully." The accompanying illustrations have little other than playfully distant relevance to the text.

The chapter entitled Commandments follows. The "Commandments" reference might be excused by taking into consideration Max's beginnings as the son of a preacher. But, it also carries into the project design the dispersive effect of adding even greater confusion to the disseminating items of humor, with significant humor used with that procedure of dissemination. But, it began existence in masquerade as a scientific volume. The Commandments of the Comic Arts chapter title further expanded the book identity from humor and/or science to one also composed of religion and art (it is sometimes argued that religion is one of the *arts,* but the reference to the *Commandments* is such a ponderous association with religion that it demands a separate billing).

The Commandments chapter opens with a facetious paragraph, rather than one either scientific, or religious, or artistic.

> In my book on *The Sense of Humor* I remarked that nobody in all the literature on the subject has ever discussed the points of difference between a good joke and bad. And I endeavored to fill this gap by laying down the first eight laws of a code for serious joke-makers. I still remain the sole custodian, so far as I know, of this department of human morals. And moreover, I have received a further illumination (!?) and am now able to add the two missing commandments . . . I would like to formulate them in a better order and illustrate them with some of our modern American sins and transgressions.

The First Commandment is then introduced, "This law is easy to understand. I do not pretend that any of them are easy to follow." Max ends the First Commandment section with, "I will conclude this **sermon** . . . an infallible **recipe** *for* evoking a laugh from any human audience." Truth be told, neither sermons nor recipes are recognizably compatible with the science theme.

The First Commandment is titled, "Be interesting." The following nine are similarly advisory—"Be unimpassioned," "Be effortless," "Be plausible," "Be neat," etc. These commandments are sensible and sincere, but science is significantly difficult to spot. However, there is a great deal of good humor shared with the reader of that chapter. The humor is anecdotal, comedian delivered, jesting by the author, and "canned" (professionally created jokes and puns). Practical delivered, is jesting by the author and is "canned" (professionally created jokes and puns). Practical jokes are brought into the discussion. There are four cartoons to add visual clarification and even a line drawing in the style of the previous chapter entitled To Diagram a Joke (I suppose, as an example of obscure humor). If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the Commandments chapter is not scientific and is not religious. But it is artistic and full of humor.

My comments in the preceding paragraphs might be discounted by some as mere quibbling about an author (Eastman) who is sincerely trying to be serious about a very slippery subject, trying to increase the quota of knowledge in a world sadly in great need of whatever wisdom that might be trapped, attempting to create science-based authority or authenticity for one of the Fine Arts.[1] Although those may be a generally worthy objectives for an author; it seems thoroughly extraneous—perhaps duplicitous, in the Rovian manner—for Max Eastman to have attempted to disguise his *Enjoyment of Humor* as a "textbook," "scientific treatise," or "lecture."

It is my strongest impression that Eastman's book is actually a voluminous compilation of humor, mirth, and laughter, strung together on a fanciful network, purporting to possess a scientific character. This book presents a splendid treasury of humor, etc. It is amusing and clever—recounting, reciting, remembering excellent humor of many different genres and origins.

The human capacity for creating collections of notation on surfaces hitherto virginal is believed to be paradoxically prehistoric. (I've tried to sufficiently broaden this functional designation so that computer notations

are included. That is more difficult than I had expected.) (The paradox sets up with the archeological information that early notations—Egyptian, Chinese were statements of as-of-the-moment inventory transactions, without past or future consideration or intent; i.e., without a history *prior* to the beginning of the concept of history.) The actual time span involved in this human development of an increasingly sophisticated function (writing) is shockingly brief. We are talking of a time span of approximately 15,000 years. Representational pictures were initially drawn or carved onto surfaces about 25,000 years ago. It is possible that earliest samples of pictures or of notations—when they came along—may have had some communicative intent. But how are we ever to know, there being no lexicon or thesaurus provided to accompany them. Nothing exists to tell us what these earliest markings meant to those who viewed them—if anything, except that someone had done something of some sort of interest—(huh!).

In the previous several pages, I have attempted to bring forth information about Max Eastman and his life that would illuminate some of his complexities and eccentricities. Max Eastman seems to have been one of that sort of person who is driven to pound messages in stone. He wrote a quite large number of books; he published numerous essays, pamphlets, poems, stories, etc. He had a fertile imagination and wide range of interests, and left many records of his interests and his involvements with them. Max was a very talented person, but also very complicated—to the extent that there was much in his own functioning that he didn't understand, and didn't recognize. (And there was much that he *did* understand and *did* recognize.) It's not easy to get to know much about people like that. A person like that is often surrounded by a high fog of confusion—others being confused about him or her, or him or her being confused about themselves.

People expect it of us psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts that we are doing that sort of thing all the time, trying to clear away confusion, getting to know what's going on inside, mind reading. People don't like the idea that their minds are being "read" without their permission by a bunch of eggheads wandering around in horn-rimmed glasses. I usually try to disarm that stuff by saying that's my business, that's how I make my living, and I'm not going around giving it away for free. But there's a certain bit of truth to the public expectation. It's difficult to completely avoid speculating. It's a natural curiosity about how people function, how they

get around in this complicated world, what are their thoughts and dreams. And when you get a contact that is as complicated as Max Eastman was, the temptation can be impressively strong.

When I run into a tough riddle like Eastman, I want to use extraordinary measures. One of the human resources available for this type of demand is creative imagination. That is a subconscious facility that can be called up by anyone. At night, when we are sleeping, it's called dreaming. During the day, it's commonly called ingenuity, inspiration, or fancy. In this instance, with Eastman, I will call it "phantasy" (instead of fantasy), because phantasy is somewhat off the beaten track, more exotic. And the confusion regarding Max Eastman and his creations is certainly not your ordinary, commonplace, on-the-beaten-track type. Let me illustrate.

There is a phantasy (more closely related to *phantasm, phantasmagoria,* and *phantom* than to *fantasy*—the emphasis is not trivial) that can be usefully instrumental in considering the development of the literature of humor over the ages, and providing us with a perspective for estimating what was added to that literature by Eastman's *Enjoyment.* Limiting and objectifying our interest the *literature* of humor is a very practical thing to do. That practicality arises from the uncountable, enormous number of instances during which humor inserts itself into our daily/hourly/momentary lifetime experiences—so enormous that a simple (digital) numbering cannot take place, it is an actual infinity of humor.

Eastman designated humor as a *process* in the lives of humans (and other creatures, exemplified by many, including a certain black Labrador dog whose favorite toy is a plastic pink flamingo that she carries around by its neck and beats on the ground when she wishes to dismay other dogs), rather than an border-bound entity that can be defined as such. The phantasy I am about to recommend makes it practicable to deal with the *process* nature of humor as it exists in life, by attending to a make-believe image with concrete abstractions.

Imagine that you are sitting at the top (highest elevation) of a smoothly sloping, round hill of modest height, but higher than any other feature of the landscape so that you have total, unobstructed vision in every direction (360 degrees) around you. Everywhere around you is a smooth and empty expanse. It is similar to what you can imagine it must be on an unknown planet in limitless empty space. It is silent. Nothing is ap-

parent but the vision of that smooth, tan surface sloping up the sides of your hillock.

Then, you become aware of a personal ability to influence time and space by some process that you don't understand or even recognize. (It's a sort of mental magic that is free and available to everyone—thanks to quantum physics and computer technology.) When that's clicked in, you find that there is some sort of vague activity going on out there on the flat expanses. There seem—here and there—to be little bulges developing in that otherwise flat expanded surface. Some of these bulges remain low, a rise comparable to that of an inverted saucer. Others continue to grow, approaching the height of your promontory but not exceeding its height. The pattern of distribution of these curiosities is random in direction and distance from each other and from your hillock.

Further peculiarity is found in that these bulges seem to be organic, in part. Some are enlarging, but also are later seen in the process of shrinking; then swelling again, and maybe shrinking thereafter—having the appearance of pulsation. Others show an initial rise in prominence, staying at that degree for as long as you observe them. As that organic quality becomes more familiar to you, you begin to realize that this fascinating panorama represents the extent of all recorded literary history, and the "organic" bulges represent collections of physical essences of literature itself—the books, the ledgers, the documents, the papers, papyrus, baked clay, parchment, hieroglyphics, cuneiform, cyrillic, Chinese, and all the other pictographic languages of the eastern, northeastern, and eastsouthern migrations—and across into the Americas the ancient Aryan language, Hebrew, Arabic, etc. A few lines previous, I wrote of the prehistory "history"; these, of which I now write, are HISTORY itself, as it exists in *literature.* And the bulges, you must realize, are the recognizable accumulations of that history (as it exists in literature). The height or prominence of the hillock represents the degree of human recognition and attention pertaining to each.

You discover that one hillock could be the *Iliad*; another, the *Odyssey*. One is the Confucian Analects; another, the Letters of Paul. Some are documents and some are fictions: *Beowulf, The Tale of Genji,* and *The Canterbury Tales*. Some are ancient; some, more recent: *Don Quixote, Tartuffe,* Rousseau's *Confessions*; some modern: Joyce's *Ulysses*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*. Some are poetry: Shakespeare and others;

some are drama: Shakespeare and others. Some are history: Shakespeare and others. Some are humor: Shakespeare and many, many others.

Where are the bulges designating literature created by Max Eastman? Just now, they aren't that conspicuous, not so easily identified. One reason is that the Eastman mounds are scattered around in different groupings—compatible with their being of so many different natures and subjects—philosophy, poems, politics, history, humor, biography, autobiography, memoirs, travelogues, a novel, and even several translations. Bulges are grouped by many specific categories, depending on what you are looking for: philosophy or history; Tennyson, Plato, or Socrates; Travel in Europe; The Japanese Language; Shakespeare—what category?

In contemplating such complexity as is now rapidly presenting itself in this imagery game, it is becoming apparent that this particular phantasy is losing its utility, is becoming more confusing than clarifying. But note one thing before discarding it. We should identify the Eastman group of mounds and examine the current status of *Enjoyment of Laughter,* as indicated by the appropriate bulge. As I stated above, locating *Enjoyment of Laughter* is difficult for the reason already mentioned. Additionally, the *Enjoyment* bulge, when finally located, is seen as quite small. It presents evidence of having been larger in the past, but presently quite dwindled—to the point of being very difficult to differentiate from the expansive matrix all about. This phenomenon represents a rather dramatic loss of recent reader attention to *Enjoyment.*

Metaphor—usually identified as a "figure of speech"—is a very powerful communicational device that establishes otherwise unapparent relationships between entities, with the result that information can be developed about either, or both, entities if two entities are being considered or more if so desired. The metaphor I have used above—considering literature in terms of geographic features—has been very useful in expressing several complex issues more easily than if metaphors were not yet available in human communication. But it is very important to know when to terminate the metaphor or you may end up in an unusual world where you never know what will happen next—as in Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo* or Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland.*

There are debates often carried on about whether creatures other than humans are able to, or are accustomed to, utilize metaphor in their com-

munication behavior. It is evident that many other species of animals can, and do, communicate with metaphors. One behavior in which metaphor is most commonly observed, is play. It has become generally accepted that play behavior is widespread among all creatures capable of movement. And, when a "play" signal is being communicated, metaphors are operative. One of my mentors, Gregory Bateson, summarized the complex transaction involving metaphor use, "The behavior is so altered that it communicates the message, 'This is play'; it does not have the same meaning as that behavior that it resembles," used most commonly in differentiating between aggression and playing.

Regardless of whether Eastman was or was not appropriate in his multiple attempts to identify his literary treasure of humor as a science treatise, in *Enjoyment* he did include comment regarding four factors of humor that have subsequently received scientifically derived verification as being significant to the nature of humor as it has existed during at least the past two millennia. Eastman's recognition of these four factors does not mean that he discovered them, or invented them, or even was legitimately able to verify his "theory" of humor through his being familiar with them.

The four factors, portrayed clearly and in detail by Eastman, are: the play frame; the precipitation of incongruity (with or without resolution); the precipitation of paradox; the presence of ambivalence. Recognition of the *sine qua non* nature of these four factors distinguishes modern scientific understanding—observed and verified—of humor. Research exploring and confirming these factors has been carried out in a variety of disciplines, especially during the past forty years. These have been linguistics and paralinguistics, psychology, psychiatry, biology, zoology, primatology, anthropology, physiology, ecology, information theory, computer science, epidemiology, psychosomatics, gelotology, and mathematics. This list is only of scientific disciplines and is not meant to deny or minimize the unforgettable contributions to humor studies made in other, nonscientific fields of learning.

Questions may be raised about the recent dwindled prominence of *Enjoyment of Laughter* as an item of humor literature. A clue that should help in dealing with these questions is already available, in the text of Eastman's note regarding the gestation and birth of *Enjoyment*. Recall that he stated:

> I was dead sure that a fascinating body of facts and understanding lay behind my observation, that disappointment rather than satisfaction is what we laugh at in a joke. In a preliminary way I felt that I had the explanation of humor. The history of that ambition is itself something of an *ironic joke.* In my first attempt, *The Sense of Humor* . . . I had not completely developed my theory . . . In *Enjoyment of Laughter* the theory is complete . . . I was able to write it gayly enough so that it sold almost as a **joke book.**

Max carried out an evaluation of his two books on humor and in 1948 gave the impression that he was not satisfied with either. He believed that the first had been too constricted; the author (himself, of course) hadn't experienced sufficient joyfulness or playfulness to roll with the story as he was composing it; it was too serious, too intense. In the second book, he had found the degree of playfulness he had missed earlier, the "joy" he considered to be essential for a proper book on humor. He perceived *Enjoyment of Laughter* to have achieved a balance between "learning" and "entertainment." But he wasn't yet satisfied; he questioned whether it might be judged as frivolous, too entertaining—a "joke book."

When that evaluation by Eastman of deficiencies of his *The Sense of Humor,* and his evaluation of what he considered to be the excessively amorphous status of *Enjoyment of Laughter* are matched with the advances in scientific humor studies referred to just above, it becomes clear that he was outdated in his information—not a shortcoming of his appraisals, but mainly a result of the fact that time and achievement no longer sits around waiting (for Godot) as it was accustomed to do during the dark ages and medieval times. Especially, advances of the past forty years have been unprecedented in most fields of science. Pure and simple, Eastman was born too early for being able to achieve what he felt the urge for.

Of course, who can predict the future to that extent? How could Max Eastman know what he didn't know about his future? Those forty "science years" I identify above were strictly in the future. But also, he was mistaken in his appraisal of *Enjoyment*—negative, missing completely the powerful value of what he was just figuratively flipping out the window, "almost a joke book." As if that were even less than nothing.

It would seem in those dismal words Max's "extreme timor" of youth may have been experiencing a revival. If there were a whiff of "timor" in the breeze, it would necessarily have arisen from another source than the humor book itself. (A strong candidate for cause of a "downer" at that time

of Max's life could have been the status of his relationship with socialism as a philosophic entity. The rosy hopes he had enjoyed during the 1920s for the Soviet experiment to deliver solutions to world economic imbalances and disasters were experiencing a steady poisoning by the Stalin dictatorship. Those repugnant Stalinist politics had an even more personal meaning through the warm friendship that had grown up between Eastman and Leon Trotsky, who in 1929 had been exiled from Russia by Stalin and in 1940 was murdered—by Stalinists?)

Assessments of "inadequacies" disturbing Eastman in regard to *Enjoyment of Laughter* must be reconsidered due to the extent of book identity confusion created by himself. Eastman wrote of it as a "science" book, with all accompanying paraphernalia, such as theories and hypotheses, laws, and "textbook," etc. He then suggested that it was likely read as a "joke book." He followed up that obfuscation by filling almost every page of the book with a vast compilation of outstanding humor of many, many types. That imposition of identity confusion plops the issue right onto Max's own doorstep. His addition of issues of religion and the fine arts (as discussed above) didn't help. What sort of book had that man intended to write?

Recall that Max wrote in 1948 of an *ironic joke* regarding *The Sense of Humor* (1921). It is not clear what Max meant by "ironic joke." "Irony" is one of the forty-five techniques of humor listed by the eminent humor scholar, Arthur Berger.[2] But Max's use of the word doesn't conform to any of the recognized uses. He suggested that he somehow had been the object of that "joke." And subsequently, he wrote of *Enjoyment* in such a way as to depict it as having slipped out of its science collar and had become too frisky in its playfulness—a "joke book" out of his control.

Both matters are humor-related, and his comments regarding them indicate an uneasiness on Eastman's part with respect to his relationship with their essence (humor). It is clear from Max's personal history that he could not fail to recognize and be fascinated with that essence (mother's pulpit talent, the Mercersburg Academy epiphany, the Columbia University acceptance of his *Sense of Humor* dissertation, his undoubtedly widespread recognition of the magic of humor in social interactions [first, New York City sophistication—*The New Yorker* magazine then, cosmopolitan sophistication] two years in France, continental travel) and in many other more personal settings such as his understanding of the reputation of humor as

"The Universal Solvent." Eastman, no doubt, recognized and understood many of the ways in which humor is such an irreplaceable element of life. It is not unreasonable to expect that Max would stand in some degree of awe of what he understood in that regard.

"Fascination" and "high respect," what a powerful combination! It is so understandable that Max Eastman would be intense and intent in interaction with that entity. Study of humor, use of humor, understanding of humor, relationships with humor-talented people, and exploration of intricacies of humor in all manifestations; these and other drives or impulses are totally expectable under the circumstances.

But, amazingly, there are two additional time-bound factors to calculate into the formula of Max Eastman's involvement with humor. One of these is a unique, but a very general factor. This factor relates to history and can be better understood by referring back to my phantasy of time and space that I earlier evoked in exploring the relationships between Eastman's humor creations and other humor literature. Eastman's involvement with humor began and matured during a very special time in humor history. The invention of the movable-type printing press (Gutenberg, 1456) resulted in the global explosion of communication that is only now showing change of its magical course as influenced by electronics. As far as humor is to be considered, any features of the communication explosion that apply in general, also apply to humor.

The special feature of cartoon humor deserves particular comment. Cartoon humor began its fuller blossoming in a time pattern coincidental with Max (his birth date, 1883) and grew into the social institution that it now is during his years of childhood, youth, and adulthood. This was a background motif of laughter, clowns, wisecracks, wit, farce, jokes of a range only limited by the scope of imagination. A new art form developed and has flourished worldwide. Color, even, was introduced to mass media by Pulitzer and Hearst via cartoons while Max was still a child.

The printing conveyance of humor was only the first of two global communication explosions involving humor. The other was radio. Setting roots in the early 1900s, the "golden tones" of radio expanded to global proportions immediately during the post-WWI era and held its ascendancy until TV came coincident with WWII. During the 1920s and '30s, radio delivery of humor became proverbial—with the days of the week being marked

by each special weekly comedy show. The ubiquity originally owned by radio was subsequently taken over by TV and now an expanding variety of electronic derivatives. But these expansions have merely added volume, not replacing the already-established basics. Humor continues to surf the waves in all divisions of the human communication network.

These historic features—enormous, extraordinary expansions of human communication media, featuring humor as a prominent theme—presented the matrix on which Max's life was lived. We all live each day at a time, but each day melds into the next, and into the next, and the next. Thus, we live to a pattern, rather than a sequence. Humor was a highly significant element in Max's life pattern. Recognition of that significance brings us to the second of the two additional factors I noted above as being essential in any worthy understanding of the man.

Max Eastman was, according to all indications, a very complex person. Most information about him that was left by him indicates that he was aware of that complexity and valued it but was not completely comfortable with it. With that uneasiness, it is not inappropriate to expect the presence of some blank areas of self-understanding—some regions of his existence that escaped his notice—some of those, would be puzzling and troublesome for him.

Max presented strong evidence of possessing a remarkable sense of humor. Deficiency of self-recognition regarding that attribute is documented by him, at least in 1921, 1936, and 1948. Every human is born with the potential of developing a sense of humor; that potential is a biologic heritage. And every human does develop a sense of humor—of one sort or another—and people's senses of humor change depending on life circumstances. Furthermore, everyone's sense of humor is at least slightly different from everyone else's, as everyone's life is at least slightly different. (In the interest of warding off critical comment in this area, I affirm my belief that humans are not the only creatures endowed with inherent sense of humor. An excellent mentor and very good friend, Dr. Lawrence Pineo, gifted me with that knowledge.)

Max was fascinated by humor and respected it. He enjoyed it and prized it in a wide range of its manifestations. He collected humor and shared it with others. He cultivated friendships with humor enthusiasts, humor professionals, and humor scholars. He had formal experiences with humor; many

forms of humor had prominent roles in his personal life. He used humor freely in his many different occasions of communication with others. He was discriminating in his humor preferences and collecting. And in all of his experiences with humor that he described, he gave positive credit for its value as a human asset.

These outstanding effects of his fascination with and respect for humor are vividly documented in *Enjoyment of Laughter*. The book is, above all, a treasure house of humor. Humor is found in his repartee and comments during the unfolding of the book. And jewels of humor created by others are present in massive assemblage. These bursts of precious brilliance are the proof, not only of the excellence of Max Eastman's sense of humor. They are also the measure of the true richness of *Enjoyment of Laughter*.

—William F. Fry, 2008

Notes

1. It being one of the many arguments in which I have engaged over the decades on the subject of humor, that humor is one of the fine arts. My essay on that subject is available: "IS HUMOR ONE OF THE FINE ARTS?" *Humor and Health Journal*, 2003, vol XII, #4.
2. Berger, Arthur Asa. *Blind Men and Elephants*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995.

Part One

FUN AND FUNNY

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PART ONE

Fun and Funny

THE FIRST LAW of humor is that things can be funny only when we are in fun. There may be a serious thought or motive lurking underneath our humor. We may be only "half in fun" and still funny. But when we are not in fun at all, when we are "in dead earnest," humor is the thing that is dead.

The second law is that when we are in fun, a peculiar shift of values takes place. Pleasant things are still pleasant, but disagreeable things, so long as they are not disagreeable enough to "spoil the fun," tend to acquire a pleasant emotional flavor and provoke a laugh.

The third law is that "being in fun" is a condition most natural to childhood, and that children at play reveal the humorous laugh in its simplest and most omnivorous form. To them every untoward, unprepared for, unmanageable, inauspicious, ugly, disgusting, puzzling, startling, deceiving, shaking, blinding, jolting, deafening, banging, bumping, or otherwise shocking and disturbing thing, unless it be calamitous enough to force them out of the mood of play, is enjoyable as funny.

The fourth law is that grown-up people retain in varying degrees this aptitude for being in fun, and thus enjoying unpleasant things as funny. But those not richly endowed with humor manage to feel a very comic feeling only when within, or behind, or beyond, or suggested by, the playfully unpleasant thing, there is a pleasant one. Only then do they laugh uproariously like playing children. And they call this complicated thing or combination of things at which they laugh, a joke.

That is about all there is to the science of humor as seen from a distance. That is Part One of our textbook.