Mirth and Mockery: The Devil’s Way

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In the Towneley play of The Creation, Lucifer boasts gleefully, ‘My myrth is most of all’. This association of the diabolic and the comic was typical of the mystery devils and also occurred frequently elsewhere in medieval art, literature, architecture, and music. Along with the fire-cracking devils of the mysteries, the grinning vices of the moralities, the gargoyles which leered mockingly from the sacred edifice of the cathedral, and the grotesque caricatures on the canvasses of Bosch and Brueghel, all illustrate the intimacy of evil and the comic in the Middle Ages. Even the mystic Julian of Norwich, when she had a vision of the devil, reacted by bursting out laughing. This seemingly unholy alliance of hell and humour was not a mere association of the comic and evil, but rather a profound philosophical conception of the comedy of evil.

The comedy of evil in Christian art was the inevitable consequence of the definition of evil in Christian metaphysics, a definition that remained remarkably constant from the origin of Christian theology to its decline in the seventeenth century.¹ From the patristic period through the Renaissance, the intellectual leaders of the Church, whatever their speculative differences on other subjects, reveal impressive agreement on this one. Its long history, from Origen and Augustine to Aquinas, can therefore be readily summarised. First formulated by Origen in the third century, evil was defined as the privation or the diminution of good.² Of itself it has no reality, no essential being, but exists only negatively, like darkness, which is in reality nothing but the absence of light. In short, evil is non-Being. As Aquinas put it, ‘Malum est non ens’.³
One point may need clarification. When in the fifth century the pseudo-Dionysius argues that evil does not exist at all, what exactly does he mean? Evil does exist experientially, but not essentially, even as black exists to the senses because real colour is lacking. In the metaphysical formulation of reality, however, evil is merely an appearance: shadow, not substance.\(^4\)

The fullest commentary on privative evil appeared in the thirteenth century in the massive *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas. Expounding the idea of privative evil in greater detail than any of his predecessors, he makes it clearer why and how evil should be laughed at.\(^5\) He distinguishes between the non-being of evil in the physical and moral realms of creation. Moral evil, unlike physical evil, is permitted rather than willed as part of creation. Moral evil, therefore, has a cause by way of an agent, who becomes enacted as the mystery devil and the morality vice. Physical evil involves the doctrine of the Chain of Being. What was higher on the Chain was more spiritual, and the lower was more material. Matter was not considered totally evil but associated with evil because of its lack of spiritual good. Hence the typical depiction of the devil as a beast. The bestial aspects of privative evil are associated with the lower order on the Chain of Being.

Occupying a mid-point, Man has a double nature and is therefore capable of both physical and moral evil. Man’s laughter is the result of this middle position. Since the higher can comprehend the lower, laughter is the disdainful comment of the soul on the inferiority of the mortal, material body. Laughter is the response of Being to exposure of non-Being. In other words, laughter occurs when that which is real perceives the absence of reality pretending to be real. As C. S. Lewis remarked in his *Preface to Paradise Lost*, ‘At the precise point when Satan meets something real, laughter must arise, just as steam must when water meets fire.’\(^6\) It is at this point that the subject of evil becomes wedded to the mode of comedy.