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PHILOSOPHY OF LAUGHTER

From the time of King Solomon downwards, laughter has been the subject of pretty general abuse. Even the laughers themselves sometimes vituperate the cachinnation they indulge in, and many of them

——'laugh in such a sort,
As if they mocked themselves, and scorned the spirit
That could be moved to laugh at anything.'

The general notion is, that laughter is childish, and unworthy the gravity of adult life. Grown men, we say, have more to do than to laugh; and the wiser sort of them leave such an unseemly contortion of the muscles to babes and blockheads.

We have a suspicion that there is something wrong here—that the world is mistaken not only in its reasonings, but its facts. To assign laughter to an early period of life, is to go contrary

to observation and experience. There is not so grave an animal in this world as the human baby. It will weep, when it has got the length of tears, by the pailful; it will clench its fists, distort its face into a hideous expression of anguish, and scream itself into convulsions. It has not yet come up to a laugh. The little savage must be educated by circumstances, and tamed by the contact of civilisation, before it rises to the greater functions of its being. Nay, we have sometimes received the idea from its choked and tuneless screams, that *they* were imperfect attempts at laughter. It feels enjoyment as well as pain, but has only one way of expressing both.

Then, look at the baby when it has turned into a little boy or girl, and come up in some degree to the cachinnation. The laughter is still only rudimental: it is not genuine laughter. It expresses triumph, scorn, passion—anything but a feeling of natural amusement. It is provoked by misfortune, by bodily infirmities, by the writhings of agonised animals; and it indicates either a sense of power or a selfish feeling of exemption from suffering. The 'light-hearted laugh of children!' What a mistake! Observe the gravity of their sports. They are masters or mistresses, with the care of a family upon their hands; and they take especial delight in correcting their children with severity. They are washer-women, housemaids, cooks; soldiers, policemen, postmen; coach, horsemen, and horses, by turns; and in all these characters they scour, sweep, fry, fight, pursue, carry, whirl, ride, and are ridden, without changing a muscle.

At the games of the young people there is much shouting, argument, vituperation—but no laughter. A game is a serious business with a boy, and he derives from it excitement, but no amusement. If he laughs at all, it is at something quite distinct from the purpose of the sport: for instance, when one of his comrades has his nose broken by the ball, or when the feet of another make off from him on the ice, and he comes down upon his back like a thunderbolt. On such occasions, the laugh of a boy puts us in mind of the laugh of a hyæna: it is, in fact, the broken, asthmatic roar of a beast of prey.

It would thus appear that the common charge brought against laughter, of being something babyish, or childish, or boyish—something properly appertaining to early life—is unfounded. But we of course must not be understood to speak of what is technically called giggling, which proceeds more from a looseness of the structures than from any sensation of amusement. Many young persons are continually on the giggle till their muscles strengthen; and indeed, when a company of them are met together, the affection, aggravated by emulation, acquires the loudness of laughter, when it may be likened, in Scripture phrase, to the crackling of thorns. What we mean is a regular guffaw; that explosion of high spirits, and the feeling of joyous excitement, which is commonly written ha! ha! ha! This is altogether unknown in babyhood; in boyhood, it exists only in its rudiments; and it does not reach its full development till adolescence ripens into manhood.

This train of thought was suggested to us a few evenings ago, by the conduct of a party of eight or ten individuals, who meet periodically for the purpose of philosophical inquiry. Their subject is a very grave one. Their object is to mould into a science that which as yet is only a vague, formless, and obscure department of knowledge; and they proceed in the most cautious manner from point to point, from axiom to axiom—debating at every step, and coming to no decision without unanimous conviction. Some are professors of the university, devoted to abstruse studies; some are clergymen; and some authors and artists. Now, at the meeting in question—which we take merely as an example, for all are alike—when the hour struck which terminates their proceedings for the evening, the jaded philosophers retired to the refreshment-room; and here a scene of remarkable contrast occurred. Instead of a single deep, low, earnest voice, alternating with a profound silence, an absolute roar of merriment began, with the suddenness of an explosion of gunpowder. Jests, bon-mots, anecdotes, barbarous plays upon words—the more atrocious the better—flew round the table; and a joyous and almost continuous ha! ha! ha! made the ceiling ring. This, we venture to say it, *was* laughter—genuine, unmistakable laughter, proceeding from no sense of triumph, from no self-gratulation, and mingled with no bad feeling of any kind. It was a spontaneous effort of nature, coming from the head as well as the heart: an unbending of the bow, a reaction from study, which study alone could occasion, and which

could occur only in adult life.

There are some people who cannot laugh, but these are not necessarily either morose or stupid. They may laugh in their heart, and with their eyes, although by some unlucky fatality, they have not the gift of oral cachinnation. Such persons are to be pitied; for laughter in grown people is a substitute devised by nature for the screams and shouts of boyhood, by which the lungs are strengthened and the health preserved. As the intellect ripens, that shouting ceases, and we learn to laugh as we learn to reason. The society we have mentioned studied the harder the more they laughed, and they laughed the more the harder they studied. Each, of course, to be of use, must be in its own place. A laugh in the midst of the study would have been a profanation; a grave look in the midst of the merriment would have been an insult to the good sense of the company.

If there are some people who cannot laugh, there are others who will not. It is not, however, that they are ashamed of being grown men, and want to go back to babyhood, for by some extraordinary perversity, they fancy unalterable gravity to be the distinguishing characteristic of wisdom. In a merry company, they present the appearance of a Red Indian whitewashed, and look on at the strange ways of their neighbours without betraying even the faintest spark of sympathy or intelligence. These are children of a larger growth, and have not yet acquired sense enough to laugh. Like the savage, they are afraid of compromising their dignity, or, to use their own words, of

making fools of themselves. For our part, we never see a man afraid of making a fool of himself at the right season, without setting him down as a fool ready made.

A woman has no natural grace more bewitching than a sweet laugh. It is like the sound of flutes on the water. It leaps from her heart in a clear, sparkling rill; and the heart that hears it feels as if bathed in the cool, exhilarating spring. Have you ever pursued an unseen fugitive through the trees, led on by her fairy laugh; now here, now there—now lost, now found? We have. And we are pursuing that wandering voice to this day. Sometimes it comes to us in the midst of care, or sorrow, or irksome business; and then we turn away, and listen, and hear it ringing through the room like a silver bell, with power to scare away the ill spirits of the mind. How much we owe to that sweet laugh! It turns the prose of our life into poetry; it flings showers of sunshine over the darksome wood in which we are travelling; it touches with light even our sleep, which is no more the image of death, but gemmed with dreams that are the shadows of immortality.

But our song, like Dibdin's, 'means more than it says;' for a man, as we have stated, may laugh, and yet the cachinnation be wanting. His heart laughs, and his eyes are filled with that kindly, sympathetic smile which inspires friendship and confidence. On the sympathy within, these external phenomena depend; and this sympathy it is which keeps societies of men together, and is the true freemasonry of the good and wise. It is an imperfect sympathy that grants only sympathetic tears: we must join in the

mirth as well as melancholy of our neighbours. If our countrymen laughed more, they would not only be happier, but better; and if philanthropists would provide amusements for the people, they would be saved the trouble and expense of their fruitless war against public-houses. This is an indisputable proposition. The French and Italians, with wine growing at their doors, and spirits almost as cheap as beer in England, are sober nations. How comes this? The laugh will answer that leaps up from group after group—the dance on the village-green—the family dinner under the trees—the thousand merry-meetings that invigorate industry, by serving as a relief to the business of life. Without these, business is care; and it is from care, not from amusement, men fly to the bottle.

The common mistake is to associate the idea of amusement with error of every kind; and this piece of moral asceticism is given forth as true wisdom, and, from sheer want of examination, is very generally received as such. A place of amusement concentrates a crowd, and whatever excesses may be committed, being confined to a small space, stand more prominently forward than at other times. This is all. The excesses are really fewer—far fewer—in proportion to the number assembled, than if no gathering had taken place. How can it be otherwise? The amusement is itself the excitement which the wearied heart longs for; it is the reaction which nature seeks; and in the comparatively few instances of a coarser intoxication being superadded, we see only the craving of depraved habit—a habit engendered, in all

probability, by the *want* of amusement.

No, good friends, let us laugh sometimes, if you love us. A dangerous character is of another kidney, as Cæsar knew to his cost:—

'He loves no plays,
As thou dost, Antony; he hears no music;
Seldom he laughs;'

and when he does, it is on the wrong side of his mouth.

Let us be wiser. Let us laugh in fitting time and place, silently or aloud, each after his nature. Let us enjoy an innocent reaction rather than a guilty one, since reaction there must be. The bow that is always bent loses its elasticity, and becomes useless.

MARGARET FULLER OSSOLI. ¹

The authoress of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, known also in this country by her *Papers on Literature and Art*, occupied among her own people a station as notable as that of De Staël among the French, or of Rahel von Ense in Germany. Mystic and transcendental as she was, her writings teem with proof of original power, and are the expression of a thoughtful and energetic, if also a wayward and undisciplined, mind. One of the two compilers of these Memoirs (Emerson and W. H. Channing) observes, that his first impression of her was that of a 'Yankee Corinna;' and such is not unlikely to be the last impression of ordinary readers, ourselves among the number. In a letter, dated 1841, we find her saying: 'I feel all Italy glowing beneath the Saxon crust'—an apt illustration of her mental structure and tone of sentiment, compounded of New Worldedness, as represented by Margaret Fuller, and of the feelings of Southern Europe, as embodied in the Marchesa Ossoli. Without at this time pausing to review her literary position, and her influence upon contemporary minds, we proceed to draw from these interesting, but frequently eccentric and extravagantly worded Memoirs, a sketch of her remarkable life-history.

Margaret Fuller was born at Cambridge-Port, Massachusetts,

¹ Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli. 3 vols. London: Bentley. 1852.

in May 1810. Her father was a shrewd, practical, hard-headed lawyer, whose love for his wife 'was the green spot on which he stood apart from the commonplaces of a mere bread-winning, bread-bestowing existence.' That wife is described as a fair and flower-like nature, bound by one law with the blue sky, the dew, and the frolic birds. 'Of all persons whom I have known, she had in her most of the angelic—of that spontaneous love for every living thing, for man, and beast, and tree, which restores the Golden Age.'² Mr Fuller, in undertaking the education of his daughter, committed the common error of excessive stimulation—thinking to gain time by forwarding the intellect as early as possible. He was himself a scholar, and hoped to make her the heir of all he knew, and of as much more as might be elsewhere attained. He was a severe and exacting disciplinarian, and permanently marred the nervous system of his child by the system he adopted of requiring her to recite her tasks on his return home at night, which was frequently very late. Hence a premature development of the brain, which, while it made her a youthful prodigy by day—one such youthful prodigy, it has been justly said, is often the pest of a whole neighbourhood—rendered her the nightly victim of spectral illusions, somnambulism, &c.; checked her growth; and eventually brought on continual headaches, weakness, and various nervous affections. As soon as the light was removed from her chamber at night, this ill-tended girl was haunted by colossal faces, that advanced slowly towards

² Mr Fuller's Autobiography, which comprises the first sixty pages of these Memoirs.

her, the eyes dilating, and each feature swelling loathsomely as they came; till at last, when they were about to close upon her, she started up with a shriek, which drove them away, but only to return when she lay down again. 'No wonder the child arose and walked in her sleep, moaning all over the house, till once, when they heard her, and came and waked her, and she told what she had dreamed, her father sharply bade her "leave off thinking of such nonsense, or she would be crazy"—never knowing that he was himself the cause of all these horrors of the night.' Her home seems to have been deficient in the charms and associations appropriate to childhood. Finding no relief from without, her already overexcited mind was driven for refuge from itself to the world of books. She tells us she was taught Latin and English grammar at the same time; in Latin, which she began to read at six years old, her father, and subsequently a tutor, trained her to a high degree of precision, expecting her to understand the mechanism of the language thoroughly, and to translate it tersely and unhesitatingly, with the definite clearness of one perfectly *au fait* in the philosophy of the classics. Thus she became imbued with an abiding interest in the genius of old Rome—the power of will, the dignity of a fixed purpose—where man takes a 'noble bronze in camps and battle-fields,' his brow well furrowed by the 'wrinkles of council,' and his eye 'cutting its way like the sword;' and thence she loved to escape, at Ovid's behest, to the enchanted gardens of the Greek mythology, to the gods and nymphs born of the sunbeam, the wave, the

shadows on the hill—delighted to realise in those Greek forms the faith of a refined and intense childhood. Reading was now to her a habit and a passion. Its only rival attraction was the 'dear little garden' behind the house, where the best hours of her lonely child-life were spent. Within the house, everything, she says, was socially utilitarian; her books told of a proud world, but in another temper were the teachings of the little garden, where her thoughts could lie callow in the nest, and only be fed and kept warm, not called to fly or sing before the time. A range of blue hills, at about twelve miles' distance, allured her to reverie, and bred within her thoughts *not* too deep for tears. The books which exercised most power over her at this period were Shakspeare, Cervantes, and Molière—all three students of the 'natural history of man,' and inspired by fact, not fancy; reconstructing the world from materials which they collected on every side, not spinning from the desires of their own special natures; and accordingly teaching her, their open-eyed disciple, to distrust all invention which is not based on a wide experience, but, as she confesses, also doing her harm, since the child, fed with meat instead of milk, becomes too soon mature. For a few months, this bookish life was interrupted, or varied, by the presence of an English lady, whom Margaret invested with ideal perfections as her 'first friend,' and whom she worshipped as a star from the east—a morning-star; and at whose departure she fell into a profound depression. Her father sought to dispel this rooted melancholy, by sending her to school—a destiny from which her whole

nature revolted, as something alien to its innermost being and cherished associations. To school, however, she went, and at first captivated, and then scandalised her fellow-pupils by her strange ways. Now, she surprised them by her physical faculty of rivalling the spinning dervishes of the East—now, by declaiming verses, and acting a whole *répertoire* of parts, both laughter-raising and tear-compelling—now, by waking in the night, and cheating her restlessness by inventions that alternately diverted and teased her companions. She was always devising means to infringe upon the school-room routine. This involved her at last in a trouble, from which she was only extricated by the judicious tenderness of her teacher—the circumstances attending which 'crisis' are detailed at length in her story of 'Mariana.'

Her personal appearance at this time, and for some following years, is described by one of her friends as being that of a blooming girl of a florid complexion and vigorous health, with a tendency to robustness, which she unwisely endeavoured to suppress or conceal at the price of much future suffering. With no pretensions to beauty then, or at any time, her face was one that attracted, but baffled physiognomical art. 'She escaped the reproach of positive plainness, by her blond and abundant hair, by her excellent teeth, by her sparkling, busy eyes, which, though usually half-closed from near-sightedness, shot piercing glances at those with whom she conversed, and, most of all, by the very peculiar and graceful carriage of her head and neck.' In conversation she was already distinguished, though addicted to

'quizzing'—the not unreasonable ground of unpopularity with her female friends. Emerson alludes to her dangerous reputation for satire, which, in addition to her great scholarship, made the women dislike one who despised them, and the men cavil at her as 'carrying too many guns.' A fragment from a letter in her sixteenth year will illustrate her pursuits at that period:—'I rise a little before five, walk an hour, and then practise on the piano till seven, when we breakfast. Next, I read French—Sismondi's *Literature of Southern Europe*—till eight; then, two or three lectures in Brown's *Philosophy*. About half-past nine, I go to Mr Perkins's school, and study Greek till twelve, when, the school being dismissed, I recite, go home, and practise again till dinner, at two. Sometimes, if the conversation is very agreeable, I lounge for half an hour over the dessert, though rarely so lavish of time. Then, when I can, I read two hours in Italian, but I am often interrupted. At six, I walk, or take a drive. Before going to bed, I play or sing, for half an hour or so, to make all sleepy, and, about eleven, retire to write a little while in my journal, exercises on what I have read, or a series of characteristics which I am filling up according to advice.' Greek, French, Italian, metaphysics, and private authorship—pretty well for a miss in her teens, and surely a promissory-note on the *bas bleu* joint-stock company!—a note which she discharged in full when it became due. Next year (1826), we find her studying M^{me} de Staël, Epictetus, Milton, Racine, and Spanish ballads, 'with great delight.' Anon she is engrossed with the elder Italian poets, from Berni down to Pulci

and Politian; then with Locke and the ontologists; then with the *opera omnia* of Sir William Temple. She pursued at this time no systematic study, but 'read with the heart, and was learning more from social experience than from books.' The interval of her life, between sixteen and twenty-five, is characterised by one of her biographers as a period of 'preponderating sentimentality, of romance and dreams, of yearning and of passion.' While residing at Cambridge, she suffered from profound despondency—conscious of the want of a home for her heart. A sterner schooling awaited her at Groton, whither her father removed in 1833. Here he died suddenly of cholera in 1835. Now she was taught the miserable perplexities of a family that has lost its head, and was called to tread a path for which, as she says, she had no skill and no call, except that it must be trodden by some one, and she alone was ready. In 1836 she went to Boston, to teach Latin and French in an academy of local repute; and in the ensuing year she accepted a 'very favourable offer,' to become 'lady-superior' in an educational institution at Providence, where she seems to have exercised an influence analogous to that of Dr Arnold at Rugby—treating her pupils as ladies, and thus making them anxious to prove that they deserved to be so treated.

By this time, she had attracted around her many and devoted friends. Her conversational powers were of a high order, by common consent. Mr Hedge describes her speech as remarkably fluent and correct; but deriving its strength not from fluency, choice diction, wit, or sentiment, but from accuracy of statement,

keen discrimination, and a certain weight of judgment; together with rhetorical finish, it had an air of spontaneity which made it seem the grace of the moment: so that he says, 'I do not remember that the vulgar charge of talking "like a book" was ever fastened upon her, although, by her precision, she might seem to have incurred it.' The excitement of the presence of living persons seems to have energised her whole being. 'I need to be called out,' are her words, 'and never think alone, without imagining some companion. It is my habit, and bespeaks a second-rate mind.' And again: 'After all, this writing,' she says in a letter, 'is mighty dead. Oh, for my dear old Greeks, who talked everything—not to shine as in the Parisian saloons, but to learn, to teach, to vent the heart, to clear the head!' Mr Alcott of Boston considered her the most brilliant talker of the day. Miss Martineau was fascinated by the same charm. It is thus characterised by the author of *Representative Men*: 'Talent, memory, wit, stern introspection, poetic play, religion, the finest personal feeling, the aspects of the future, each followed each in full activity, and left me, I remember, enriched and sometimes astonished by the gifts of my guest.' Her self-complacency staggered many at first—as when she spoke, in the quietest manner, of the girls she had formed, the young men who owed everything to her, the fine companions she had long ago exhausted. 'I now know,' she has been heard to say in the coolest style, 'all the people worth knowing in America, and I find no intellect comparable to my own.' Well may Mr Emerson talk of

her letting slip phrases that betrayed the presence of 'a rather mountainous me.' Such phrases abound in her conversation and correspondence—mountainous enough to be a hill of offence to the uninitiated and untranscendental. At anyrate, there was no affectation in this; she thoroughly believed in her own superiority, her subscription to *that* creed was implicit and *ex animo*. Nor do we detect affectation in her most notable vagaries and crotchets. She loved the truth, and spoke it out—we were about to write, manfully; and why not? At heart, she was, to use the words of an intimate and discerning friend, a right brave and heroic woman—shrinking from no duty because of feeble nerves. Numerous illustrations of this occur in the volumes before us. Thus we find her going from a bridal of passing joyfulness to attend a near relative during a formidable surgical operation—or drawing five hundred dollars to bestow, on a New-York 'ne'er-do-weel,' half-patriot, half-author, always in such depths of distress, and with such squadrons of enemies that no charity could relieve, no intervention save him.

In 1839, she removed from Groton, with her mother and family, to Jamaica Plain, a few miles from Boston; and thence, shortly, to Cambridge and New York. Boston, however, was her *point d'appui*, and in it she formed acquaintances of every class, the most utilitarian and the most idealistic. In 1839, she published a translation of Goethe's *Conversations with Eckermann*; in 1841, the *Letters of Bettina*; in 1843, the *Summer on the Lakes*—a narrative of her tour to Lake Superior and

Michigan. During the same period she was editor of the *Dial*, since conducted by Emerson and Ripley, and in which appeared her papers on Goethe and Beethoven, the Rhine, the Romaic Ballads, John Sterling's Poems, &c.

Exhausted by continuous exertion in teaching and writing for the press, Miss Fuller, in 1844, sought refreshment and health in change of scene; and, desiring rather new employments than cessation from work, she accepted a liberal offer from Mr Horace Greeley of New York, to become a regular contributor to the *Tribune*; and for that purpose to take up her abode in his house, first spending some time in the Highlands of the Hudson. At New York, she took an active interest, after Mrs Fry's manner, in the various benevolent institutions, and especially the prisons on Blackwell's Island. For more than a year she wrote regularly for the *Tribune*, 'always freshly, vigorously, but not always clearly.' The notice attracted by her articles insured fresh hosts of acquaintances, and she became a distinguished character at Miss Lynch's réunions, and at literary soirées of a similar order. In 1846, she left her native land—for ever, as the melancholy event proved—to join Mr and Mrs Spring in a European tour. Her letters home contain much pleasant gossip about some of the Old-World notabilities. Thus she records her interviews with Wordsworth in his Rydal retreat, with Dr Chalmers, Dr Andrew Combe, Mr De Quincey, the Howitts, &c. She visited Paris in the winter, and became acquainted with Lamennais, Béranger, M^{me} Dudevant, and others. Thence, in the spring of 1847, she

went to Italy, where she remained until she embarked in 1850 on board that doomed ship, the *Elizabeth*. As a resident in Rome, her safety was seriously imperiled during the French siege of 1849. She was appointed by the 'Roman Commission for the succour of the wounded,' to the superintendence of an hospital, and all along took the liveliest interest in the fortunes of Mazzini and the republic. She was then a wife and a mother, having been married privately to the Marquis Ossoli, a Roman, 'of a noble but impoverished house,' whom she described, in a letter to her mother, as 'not in any respect such a person as people in general would expect to find with her,' being a man 'absolutely ignorant of books, and with no enthusiasm of character,' but endowed with excellent practical sense, a nice sense of duty, native refinement, and much sweetness of temper. The peculiar circumstances attending the marriage in that country, and at that agitated crisis, involved Margaret in numerous afflictions, and taxed her powers of endurance to the very uttermost.

She had to suffer compulsory separation from husband and child—the one in hourly peril of a bloody death, the other neglected and pining away in the hands of strangers: penury, loneliness, prostrating sickness, and treachery on the part of those around her, were meanwhile her own lot in the land of strangers. How this season of trial affected her character, may be inferred from the remarks of her friend Mrs Story, then sojourning in Italy, who says, that in Boston she had regarded Margaret as a person on intellectual stilts, with a large share

of arrogance, and little sweetness of temper; and adds: 'How unlike to this was she now!—so delicate, so simple, confiding, and affectionate; with a true womanly heart and soul, sensitive and generous, and, what was to me a still greater surprise, possessed of so broad a charity, that she could cover with its mantle the faults and defects of all about her.' Her devotion to her husband, and her passionate attachment to her little Angelo, were exhibited in the liveliest colour: the influence she exercised, too, by love and sympathy, over Italians of every class with whom she came in contact, appears of a kind more tender, chastened, and womanly than that which previously characterised her. When the republican cause at Rome left no hope of present restoration, Margaret found a tranquil refuge in Florence, devoting her mornings to literary labours, and her evenings to social intercourse with cultivated natives and a few foreign visitors, among whom the Brownings occupied a distinguished place. Greatly straitened in means at this time, the repose she and her husband enjoyed at Florence, in their small and scantily-furnished room, seems to have been peculiarly grateful to both. Soon, however, arrangements were made for their departure to the United States; for Margaret was heart-weary at the political reaction in Europe, and the pecuniary expediency of publishing to advantage her chronicles of the revolution, seconded by a yearning to see her family and friends once more, constrained to this step.

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