

## Review

**Lydia Amir. *The Legacy of Nietzsche's Philosophy of Laughter: Bataille, Deleuze, and Rosset*. Routledge, 2021. \$160 (Hardcover). 486 pages.**

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**Giorgio Baruchello<sup>1</sup>**

Once in a blue moon, there appears an academic book the title of which corresponds, honestly and competently, to its actual contents. Lydia Amir's new volume is precisely such a book. In a refreshingly unassuming, unaggressive, erudite and eloquent style, Amir opens her work with a rather short prologue, in which she offers a concise account of Nietzsche's un- or under-theorised yet distinctive and recurrent theme of laughter, which plays a pivotal role in the German thinker's conception of the good life. In addition, Amir depicts with great attention, and with greater aptitude, the reverberations of this important Nietzschean theme throughout 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century French and Francophone philosophy.

Amir's work continues by way of three considerably heftier chapters, each of which focusses on a specific French thinker who, while tackling the problem of the good life, produced extensive reflections on both Nietzsche's philosophy of laughter and the topic of laughter itself, whether cast by this name or *via* cognate ones, e.g., "humor," "the comical," "comedy," "parody," "satire," clownish "idiocy," etc. The three thinkers at issue are Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze and Clément Rosset.

A lengthy set of concluding remarks follows these three hefty chapters, providing a nuanced overview of the supplementary philosophical studies of laughter and/or cognate notions that appeared in French in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, independently of Nietzsche's own share of insights about this matter. This rich overview is itself preceded by another overview, this time concerning the many Nietzschean French thinkers of the same age, who did not address the theme of laughter, and/or who failed to present an articulate conception of the good life. In the process, Amir includes as well a detailed panorama of the critical literature accompanying all these philosophers, starting with Nietzsche's Francophone commentators of the 1920s and finishing with Kreutz's study of irony and sarcasm in 2020.

Although the prologue and the concluding remarks are scholarly informed and commendably informative, the three chapters about Bataille, Deleuze and Rosset are the true

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Akureyri, Iceland;

[giorgio@unak.is](mailto:giorgio@unak.is)

heart and veritable “meat” of Amir’s book. Also, these three thinkers are meant to complement two more venerable “triumvirates” of Western thought that Amir has individuated and investigated in as many books of hers, both of which are devoted to humor—broadly understood—and the good life. The former book is entitled *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard*, and it was published by SUNY Press in 2014. The latter book is called, at least for the moment, *Laughter and the Good Life: Montaigne, Nietzsche, Santayana, (Bergson)*, and it will be released in the near future by the same publishing company.

It is then within this larger and ambitious project that Amir’s volume on the French reception of Nietzsche’s philosophy of laughter must be understood, and the same applies to her selection of the three major modern French thinkers who did not shy away from a theme that, rather frequently in the history of their discipline, has been regarded as far too common, and *ipso facto* marginal, for any extensive inquiry of it to be launched by any serious, self-respecting, academic professional.

Each of the three big chapters about, respectively, Bataille, Deleuze and Rosset, begins with an account of the selected philosopher’s conception of the good life, advances with an analysis of the philosopher’s juxtaposition of tragedy and comedy within it, and ends with an explanation of why laughter and/or more specific cognate concepts—“humor” in particular—can be conducive to the good life, i.e., the end-goal that Amir’s wider philosophical endeavor aims at eviscerating in fine detail and in assisting her readers to achieve.

Thus, Bataille is shown to be a quasi-mystical, post-Christian and innovative philosopher—indeed a sort of conceptually articulate and thoroughly secularised Pascal—seeking to find a path for personal fulfilment within the tragi-comic context of everybody’s inevitably frustrating and inherently futile mortal existence, in which the realisation of desire is always qualitatively poorer than initially hoped for. At the same time, Bataille’s self-styled “philosophy of laughter” is said to be arguing that the frustrated desire of our species- and person-defining aspirations is significantly less so in crucial, sporadic, intense moments of authentic and un-Christian elation, such as those of profound anguish, stupendous drunkenness, carnal pleasure, deep meditation and, above all, overwhelming laughter. In these infrequent, powerful, precious moments, a person can truly lose him/herself and experience an existentially meaningful fusion with the unfathomable, unconceptualizable and unspeakable forces of the universe, in which we are bound to live, whether we like it or not, and to perish.

For his part, Deleuze’s oeuvre is bravely synthesised and keenly interpreted by Amir as the daring work of one of the greatest French metaphysicians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose

hermeneutically creative, stylistically experimental, and mathematically and scientifically informed books: (1) build coherently upon each other over the decades; (2) presume at each new step the results of the preceding studies; and (3) generate an all-embracing re-description of Being, i.e., of all possible virtual and actual processes at work in all universes. Deleuze's re-description of Being finds this Being shining—equally and univocally—through, behind, beneath, around and, perhaps, even above each, every, and any evanescent, pinpointable spatiotemporal event that we may identify perceptually and/or conceptually, i.e., by contributing additional intensities to the event's underlying ones, hence leading to the event's fleeting yet traceable surfacing over the boundless calm totality of Being. Within this quantum-physics-conscious, Leibniz-esque and Spinozistic process metaphysics, “irony” and, above all, “humor,” become highly technical notions casting light over the path toward the good life, insofar as they are claimed to be able to: (1) emancipate each living person from all the limiting abstractions and/or inherited habits that we may have; (2) provide a plethora of “lines of flight” to be explored and possibly enjoyed; and (3) reveal the inherently “schizoid,” “rhizomatic” and “nomadic” character of both the body and the psyche. According to Deleuze, who collaborated for many years with the psychotherapist Félix Guattari, we ourselves are nothing but apparently sensing, thinking and speaking individuals that are, in truth, never-identical and ever-mutating ongoing processes intermingling with countless others.

Rosset, on the contrary, is introduced by Amir as the most vocal self-proclaimed inheritor of Nietzsche's philosophy of laughter in France, if not of Nietzsche's philosophy *tout court*. This proudly Nietzschean self-proclamation did in fact occur a few times in Rosset's career, despite the actual Schopenhauerian tone of Rosset's overall rendition of human existence. As Rosset writes, human existence cannot but unfold in a reality that is so inimical to our happiness, indeed so cruel, that it does not only annihilate our individual and collective beings, meanings and aspirations by the sheer grinding passage of time, but it also obliges us to acknowledge candidly this terrifying cruelty if we wish to lead a human life that is worthy of this name. Laughter, in this gloomy setting, is defended by Rosset as a recognition of the fundamental incongruity between ideality and reality embedded in the very fabric of the universe that we happen to inhabit, but above all as a temporary holiday from pain and despair, a mildly comforting means to “give the finger” at both the utter insignificance of it all and at our own ineludible death. Laughter is not, however, the genuine path toward joy, which Rosset claims to exist nonetheless and manifest itself occasionally, in our miserable earthly transience, without any clear indication of when and why its visitations may take place—indeed, as a sort of unconditional, erratic grace of unknown origin.

Amir's account of the philosophies of Bataille, Deleuze and Rosset is a splendid token of learned competence and explanatory finesse. Her account of their philosophies of laughter, and of their shared Nietzschean roots, is equally so—and points as well in the direction of two important French sources lying in the background of all these authors, i.e., Montaigne and Bergson. Her account of their conceptions of the good life is also accurate and attentive to detail. What she can make out of them in view of her own conception of the good life is, instead, to be found elsewhere. This is not something that Amir explores and explicates at length in the present volume, because she has already done it in her 2019 book entitled *Philosophy, Humor, and the Human Condition: Taking Ridicule Seriously*, published by Palgrave Macmillan.

Whether Bataille, Deleuze and Rosset can be very helpful under such a respect is, in any case, doubtful. Sharing Nietzsche's mixture of tragic dejection and super-manly dreaming, all three of them write a lot about laughter and/or humor, but in the face of radical finitude, nihilistic scepticism, godless groundlessness, pulverised personhood, and the sense-shattering cyclical perpetuity of a cruelly inhospitable universe in which we had the dubious fortune of being born. The laughter of these three French thinkers sounds like the one of soldiers who found themselves suddenly mutilated on the battlefield, or who died chortling rather than crying and calling for their mothers. It is not a laughter caused primarily by grasping some conceptual and/or perceptual incongruity; nor is it one originating chiefly in the "sudden glory" derived from comparing oneself with others or with one's own past self, who might have even had heartfelt faith in the Christian God, in the various confessional ways in which Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard, and Montaigne, did.

These two elements, i.e., incongruity and superiority, are both well-known to humor scholars and may be at play in these three French philosophies of laughter, but they do not come across as predominant at all. Quite the opposite, the only seemingly mirthful responses that Bataille, Deleuze and Rosset offer *vis-à-vis* the absurd character of human existence resemble the minimally relieving, sadly desperate, and dramatically mad laughter induced by overwhelming psychological pressure. War and mortality do count as exemplary settings in which such a pressure may build up. Yet, even mundane contexts can provide us with some telling instances, e.g., when we catch ourselves laughing during a heated argument or as a reaction to a most embarrassing situation. Perhaps, this sort of laughter is all that fervently irreligious, contingency-stuck, absurdist irrationalism can aspire to, whether internationally or in France. Emblematically, Deleuze's own last line of flight was out of his apartment's window in 1995.