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## What Freud Actually Said about Jokes

A good joke is the one ultimate and sacred thing which cannot be criticised.

—G. K. CHESTERTON

No scholar who has even the slightest connection to the study of humor can be unaware of Sigmund Freud's book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. First published in 1905, the book was revolutionary in its understanding of jokes, the comic, and humor and extended the domain of psychoanalytic theory from symptoms, dreams, and slips of the tongue to the arena of the aesthetic. One has to give some credit to Deuticke, Freud's publisher, for taking on the project. After all, Deuticke had sold only some 350 copies of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published five years earlier (Freud 1960, 8:xx). As it turned out, it would take Deuticke another five years to sell all copies of the first edition of the dream book, and a second edition of the joke book would not appear until seven years after the first.<sup>1</sup>

Even though Freud's book on jokes is widely recognized, it is not necessarily widely read. Yet even those who have never read Freud's book would probably be able to give a reasonable, if brief, account of Freud's theory of jokes. Undoubtedly, such accounts would sound very much like what popular writers and scholars present in their own books and essays. Max Eastman, for example: "Witty jokes, like myths and dreams and daydreams, slips and errors, art and poetry, are frequently employed as vehicles of expression by repressed impulses . . . Jests often liberate the surging wishes prisoned in us. They remove our lid of culture, and let us be, in fun at least and for a second, animals" (Eastman 1936, 250–51).<sup>2</sup> This view is not peculiar to popular writers on humor alone (although I would hesitate

to characterize Eastman's book as merely popular). One can find elements of his view repeated in the works of the most serious and dedicated humor researchers. For example, Joel Sherzer: "Humor and laughter . . . in the case of Freud, [are] an expression of latent, especially sexual repressions and aggressions" (Sherzer 1990, 96); Christopher Wilson: "The joke, then, is assumed to offer pleasure by temporarily reducing the tension of repression; and might also be gratifying in reducing the tension of the impulse itself—'in allowing unconscious elaboration of a repressed wish'" (Wilson 1979, 95); John Morreall: "Joking (like dreaming) serves as a safety valve for forbidden feelings and thoughts, and when we express what is usually inhibited, the energy of repression is released in laughter" (Morreall 1983, 111).

Psychoanalysts characterize Freud's theory of jokes in a similar fashion. Norman Holland: "Freud's recognition of the similarity and style between jokes and dreams (and, to a lesser extent, symptoms and slips of the tongue) meant that he could establish a relation between funniness and unconscious mental processes generally . . . A joke allows the id's impulses to thread their way through the ego's defenses" (Holland 1982, 47, 52); Martin Grotjahn: "According to Freud, laughter occurs when psychic energy is stimulated, then temporarily repressed, and finally freely and suddenly released without guilt or conflict . . . An aggressive intent must be stimulated, then repressed from consciousness into the unconscious; there it must be carefully disguised by the work of the unconscious censorship and finally allowed to emerge again—now in the disguise of a joke which expresses the hostile aggressive intent successfully . . . The dream symbolizes and fulfills symbolically a wish; wit expresses an aggressive trend in disguise" (Grotjahn 1970, 162). And finally, Alan Dundes: "One element of emotional maturity is the ability to accept restrictions on pleasure-seeking (id) drives and to redirect the energies into secondary gratifications (sublimation). These energies must find some secondary outlet. One most effective substitute gratification is wit, especially as an aggressive expression . . . Even the spoken aggression may be further ameliorated by being couched in symbolic terms" (Dundes 1987, 42, 44).

One could cite many other examples (Schaeffer 1981, 12; Neve 1988, 37; Nilsen 1988, 344; Ziv and Gadish 1990, 248; Norrick 2001, 205; Lefcourt 2001, 36, 39; Billig 2005, 151). It should also be noted that these quotations have been lifted from more detailed descriptions of Freud's work in which nuances, complications, and ramifications are discussed at greater length and in greater depth. Nevertheless, I would contend that these descriptions of Freud's theory of jokes are representative and correct in their essentials. Jokes are like dreams and slips of the tongue. They all allow for the expression of thoughts repressed in the unconscious, and their articulation in jokes serves as a kind of release and relief necessary for both

the psychological and physiological functioning of the individual (Keith-Spiegel 1972, 20–21; Goldstein, Suls, and Anthony 1972, 160; Rothbart 1977, 90; Charney 1983, 2:111; Apter 1982, 191; Morreall 1983, 28; Ziv 1984, 20, 48; Morreall 1987, 111; Dundes 1987, 44; Haig 1988, 23; Wyer and Collins 1992, 664; Davis 1993, 7, 81; L. Rappaport 2005, 19–20; Billig 2005, 169–71; Morreall 2008, 222–24; Kuipers 2008, 362; Hurley, Dennett, and Adams 2011, 44).<sup>3</sup>

But to what extent are jokes like dreams? In Freud's view, dreams are wish fulfillments. The wishes they fulfill are those which have been repressed—have been made inaccessible to consciousness—and that would greatly disturb the dreamer were they to become conscious. These wishes—the latent thoughts underlying the dream—are disguised in the language of the dream. This language utilizes a set of transformational rules that make the dream thoughts unrecognizable: *condensation*, *displacement*, *pictorial representation*, and *secondary revision*.<sup>4</sup> Freud calls these transformations the “dream-work,” the work that the psyche must do to convert the unconscious thoughts into a dream. Were the latent dream thoughts—which are largely sexual and aggressive in nature—recognizable to the dreamer, they would disturb sleep. In the dream, however, the wishes are fulfilled while remaining unrecognizable. The function of the dream, in Freud's view, is to fulfill these wishes in order to preserve sleep (Freud 1953, 5:644, 678).

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud first attempts to unravel the techniques of jokes. He distinguishes between the *joke envelope* (*witzige Einkleidung*, actually “joking costume”) and the *joke thought* (*Gedankenwitz*). The envelope is what makes a thought a joke. It is the product of joke techniques. To understand the techniques of a joke one must engage in the joke's *reduction*, a process that gets rid of the joke by minimally changing its mode of expression but retaining its underlying thought. For example, Freud reduces the following witicism by Felix Unger, professor of jurisprudence and president of the Supreme Court, to its underlying thought. “I drove with him *tête-à-bête*.” *Tête* means “head,” *tête-à-tête* means “in private conversation,” and *bête* means “beast” or “brute” in French. The joke means, “I drove with X *tête-à-tête*, and X is a stupid ass.” The joke depends upon the change of the initial phoneme in *tête* to the one in *bête*. Freud describes the technique of this joke as “condensation accompanied by slight modification” (Freud 1960, 8:23–25, 93). Condensation, however, is also one of the operations of the dream-work. Freud goes on to identify other joke techniques—displacement, indirect representation, allusion, unification, faulty reasoning, absurdity, representation by the opposite—all of which are cognates or subcategories of mechanisms of the dream-work. Freud, in fact, calls the techniques that transform a thought into a joke the *joke-work*, based on his previous analysis of dreams (8:54). For Freud, there is a significant correspondence between jokes and dreams.

In 1899, when Freud's friend Wilhelm Fliess was reading page proofs of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he commented that the dream examples that were analyzed seemed too full of jokes. Freud responded: "All dreamers are insufferably witty, and they have to be, because they are under pressure, and the direct way is barred to them. If you think so, I shall insert a remark to that effect somewhere. The ostensible wit of all unconscious processes is closely connected with the theory of jokes and humour" (Freud 1954, 297). It is unlikely, however, that Fliess's comment first awakened Freud to the analogy between dreams and jokes. First, Freud's response to Fliess's observation seems fully formed and the result of previous reflection rather than off the cuff. Second, two years before, in June 1897, when Freud was deep in the analysis of his own dreams, he wrote to Fliess that he had "recently made a collection of significant Jewish stories [jokes]" (211). Third, in a footnote in *Studies on Hysteria*, first published in 1895, Freud comments on the analysis of a patient's hallucinations. Although he did not explicitly label them "jokes," he remarked nevertheless that they "called for much ingenuity" (Freud 1955, 2:181n1).

The distinction between the joke thought and the joke envelope is an important one for Freud, although it is rarely emphasized in reviews of and commentaries on his work (but see Billig 2005, 155). In his book, Freud distinguishes other aspects of jokes as well. He notes the difference between "verbal jokes" and "conceptual jokes," that is, between jokes that rely on their linguistic formulation and those that are independent of such formulations (Freud 1960, 8:91). Freud also distinguishes between "innocent jokes" and "tendentious jokes" (8:90–91). The innocent joke is an end in itself and serves no other particular aim. Innocent jokes, however, are not necessarily trivial or lacking in substance. They may actually convey a significant thought. What defines the innocent joke is that it is not tendentious. The pleasure it produces is purely aesthetic and fulfills no other aim in life. The tendentious joke, however, serves purposes beyond entertainment that are inaccessible to the innocent joke. According to Freud, there are two purposes a joke may serve: "It is either a *hostile* joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, or defence) or an *obscene* joke (serving the purpose of exposure)." Such purposes can be fulfilled by both conceptual and verbal jokes as these joke species have no necessary connection with their purposes (8:96–97). It should become obvious from what follows that there is in reality only one purpose, and obscenity is a subset of hostility or aggressiveness.

The obscene joke is itself a transformation of what might be called an "archetypical scene," although Freud never uses this term. Freud sees the obscene joke as related to *smut*—the bringing to prominence in speech of sexual facts and relations. The purpose of smut is typically, Freud claims, to excite a woman and

to serve as a means of seduction. If the woman resists, that speaker's purpose is inhibited, and what began as seductive speech is transformed into something hostile and cruel. The resistance of a woman is almost guaranteed when another man is present. But in such cases, the hostility is maintained against the woman, and this interfering third party is converted into an *ally* who is bribed into laughter by the "effortless satisfaction of his own libido" aroused by the obscenities. It is typically the appearance of a barmaid that initiates smutty speech in a tavern (Freud 1960, 8:99–100).<sup>5</sup>

I am not sure where Freud acquired his ethnographic information about smutty speech, through reading or by visiting taverns during his vacations in the countryside. The point is that he regards smut as the basis for understanding the obscene joke. The obscene joke, in Freud's view, is essentially domesticated smut that takes place in higher levels of society. Whereas the presence of a woman at lower levels of the social order would arouse smutty speech, at higher social levels smut is not tolerated except to the extent that it is enclosed within the envelope of a joke. Those who could never bring themselves to laugh at coarse smut, however, can laugh when a joke comes to their aid. Even then, an obscene joke would be exclusive to the company of men and not permitted in the presence of ladies (Freud 1960, 8:99–101).

The same can be said for jokes that have a hostile purpose. Where the expression of open hostility is inhibited, it may still be articulated in the form of a joke. Thus the joke about Serenissimus (the name used by the German press for a royal personage) who, upon seeing a man who strongly resembled his royal person, asked: "Was your mother at one time in service at the Palace?"—"No, your Highness; ' was the reply, 'but my father was'" (Freud 1960, 8:68–69).<sup>6</sup> The reply circumvents an inhibition against insulting a monarch. Freud identifies four categories of tendentious joke: the *obscene joke*, which is directed against a woman; the *hostile joke* proper, which is directed against persons more generally; the *cynical joke*, which is directed against a social institution; and the *skeptical joke*, which is directed against the strictures of knowledge and reason themselves (8:108, 115). In other words, all tendentious jokes are hostile jokes. It is only their targets and manner that vary.

Freud sees the joke process—at least the tendentious joke process—in very much the same terms as he sees the smut process. It involves *three* people: the one who makes the joke, the one who is the target of the joke (who may not be present), and the one for whom the joke is made and who laughs at it. Freud is concerned with the question of why the one who makes the joke does not laugh—or at least, does not laugh in the same way as the one to whom the joke is told. Freud holds that the joke teller needs the one who hears the joke to stimulate his own

laughter. Although he feels pleasure, the joker does not laugh, according to Freud, because of the expenditure of energy made by the joker in the creation of the joke, an expenditure that the third person—the listener—does not have to make. Thus, there is no overall saving of energy by the joker; the energy that would have been saved by circumventing the inhibition is expended in the joke-work (Freud 1960, 8:150). This is the case for jokes that are of the joker's own invention. In the case of what are today called "canned jokes," the joker is merely passing on the joke and is already aware of both its thought and its formulation—what it says and how it says it. The joker cannot be seduced by the joke envelope. Canned jokes must be novel in order to succeed (154). And that is why the joker needs the third person—because he is unable to laugh at the joke himself. "We supplement our pleasure by attaining the laughter that is impossible for us by the roundabout path of the impression we have of the person who has been made to laugh" (155–56). Laughter is contagious.

After his consideration of the purposes of jokes, Freud inquires into the sources of pleasure they provide. These are twofold: the pleasure afforded by the techniques of the joke employed in the joke envelope, and the pleasure that results from the inhibited thought expressed in the joke. Innocent jokes are pleasurable solely for their techniques (Freud 1960, 8:118). Tendentious jokes are doubly pleasurable: for their technique and for the inhibited thoughts they express. The pleasure of the tendentious joke results from an economy in the energy that is expended in the inhibition of the sexual or aggressive thought that is revealed in the joke. The joke, through its techniques, circumvents that inhibition and brings the thought to mind.<sup>7</sup> The energy that had been involved in maintaining the inhibition thereby becomes superfluous and is experienced as pleasure and ultimately released in laughter (119, 147–48). Furthermore, the pleasure of a tendentious joke is greater when an *internal* inhibition is overcome, such as the inhibition against the naming of sexual parts and functions, rather than an external one, such as the inhibition against exacting revenge on a royal personage for a received insult (118).

The argument for the pleasure underlying the innocent joke is a little more subtle since it would appear that there is no obvious inhibited thought that is overcome and consequently no psychical energy to be made superfluous. Freud, however, maintains that any joke, by virtue of its technique, links words and ideas together in nonsensical sequences that are inhibited by "serious thought" (Freud 1960, 8:120). But because these joke techniques still result in something that makes *some* kind of sense, the thoughts they contain become permissible and are protected from criticism. This again results in an economy of psychical expenditure, as the inhibition against nonsense is bypassed and the energy dedicated to

the strict maintenance of sense is liberated. Such economies engender pleasure in even the most innocent of jokes (127–30).<sup>8</sup>

A joke thus promotes a thought and guards it against criticism. Consequently, the joke envelope is a formation of considerable power. When brought into association with a hostile purpose, as in a tendentious joke, it bribes the listener with a yield of pleasure and turns that person into a co-conspirator in the aggression. Suppose a person wants to insult someone but feelings of propriety stand in opposition to this wish. A change in the person's mood might produce an insult, but that would result in unpleasure because of the violation of social conventions. But a joke constructed from the words and thoughts of the insult might not meet with the same resistance as a direct insult. The joke makes the insult possible but the pleasure that results is a product of the pleasure produced by the joke technique (Freud calls this the fore-pleasure [1960, 8:137]) and the additional pleasure of the inhibited aggression (136). In some sense, a tendentious joke, with its technical and aggressive components, is somewhat like a nuclear bomb. A chemical explosion is needed to bring the fissile material to critical mass to trigger the much greater nuclear denotation. People who laugh at a tendentious joke do not strictly know what they are laughing at—the chemical or the nuclear reaction (102, 132).

Nevertheless, it certainly doesn't require much reflection to discern that the kinds of thoughts underlying the jokes that Freud is talking about are well within ordinary awareness. In another of Felix Unger's witticisms, the aggression is again clear enough. In remarking on the author of a series of essays in the Vienna newspaper about the relations of Napoleon with Austria, Unger said, "Is that not the *roter Fadian* that runs through the story of the Napoleonids?" (Freud 1960, 8:22–24). *Roter* means "red" and *Faden* means "thread," so the entire phrase suggests a scarlet thread or theme that runs through the newspaper articles and ties them together. But the author of these pieces was known to have red hair, and *Fadian* means "dull person," so the criticism of both the essays and the author were transparent. The joke conveyed that these were mind-numbing essays produced by an uninspired (and red-haired) author. Unlike a dream, this joke formation is in no way impenetrable. Its message could have been deciphered with relative ease by almost any literate person in Vienna at that time. If the thoughts underlying jokes are accessible to anyone with the requisite social, cultural, and linguistic knowledge, what exactly are the relations of jokes to the unconscious in Freud's theory? Are jokes really like dreams or are they fundamentally different?

The formation of a dream depends on residue from the day's thoughts and activities being dragged into the unconscious and conjoined with an unconscious wish. This material is transformed by means of the dream-work and represented,

TABLE 1.1. Comparing dreams and jokes

	<i>Dream</i>	<i>Joke</i>
Source	Unconscious wish	Preconscious thought
Inhibition	Repression	Suppression
Mechanism	Dream-work	Joke-work
Format	Images	Words
Message	Unintelligible	Intelligible
Context	Asocial	Social
Personnel	One person	Three people
Outcome	Prevent unpleasure	Produce pleasure
Purpose	Preserve sleep	Preserve civility

for the most part, in images. Censorship will not permit the conscious mind to become aware of the unconscious wish except as an unrecognizable formation produced by the dream-work. That unrecognizable formation is what we remember of our dreams. It is what Freud calls the dream's "manifest content"—which we know as an absurd collage lacking logic; coherence; wholly familiar characters, activities, and settings; or meaning (1960, 8:61).

Jokes, as we have seen, make use of the joke-work, which employs mechanisms that parallel those of the dream-work. But in the case of jokes, a *conscious* or *preconscious* thought is dragged into the unconscious and transformed and then released back into consciousness. The techniques of the dream-work and the joke-work are the transformational rules of unconscious thought. The thought that is transformed in the unconscious by the joke-work is not an unconscious one, and it is fully recoverable after its transformation has been effected. In this respect, a joke is *unlike* a dream. A dream remains unintelligible without arduous analysis. "It is a completely asocial mental product" that has nothing to communicate to the dreamer, nor to anyone else. The joke, however, is the most social of all the pleasure-producing mental functions and has a requisite "condition of intelligibility." According to Freud, "A dream is a wish that has been made unrecognizable; a joke is developed play" (1960, 8:179). The comparison between jokes and dreams is summarized in table 1.1.

The real similarity between dreams and jokes lies only in the strong analogy between the dream-work and the joke-work. It was this analogy that brought Freud to his interest in and understanding of jokes. The analogy does not lie only in the similarity of their technical methods, however, but in the fact that a thought is dragged into the unconscious and undergoes *unconscious revision* in both cases. The dream-work and the joke-work are, in a sense, the *grammar* of

the unconscious responsible for the creation of both dreams and jokes. In almost every other respect, however, dreams and jokes differ substantially. Jokes originate in the preconscious. The preconscious is not the unconscious. The preconscious consists of knowledge, memories, and habits of thought that are outside immediate awareness but accessible to consciousness (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, 325–27); it is what today would be called by psychologists “long-term memory” (Hurley, Dennett, and Adams 2011, 105). The dream thought is repressed; the joke thought is suppressed. The dream is mainly constructed in images (a result of regression) and the joke in words. The dream is unintelligible without protracted psychological analysis; the joke’s thought is seized upon in an instant. The dream is a solitary production and, for the most part, uncommunicable; it begins and ends with the dreamer. The joke, however, demands communication and thrives in social interaction. Ultimately, the dream serves to prevent the arousing of unpleasure in an effort to maintain sleep; the joke is dedicated to the production of pleasure in the effort to preserve civilized life.<sup>9</sup>

I think the notion that jokes serve as a “safety valve” (Dundes 1987, 44; Morreall 1987, 111) that allows for the reduction of “tension” (e.g., Wilson 1979, 95; Haig 1988, 23; L. Rappaport 2005, 19) created by impulses that well up from the unconscious is off base. Freud’s theory of jokes is not really a “release” or “relief” theory. Of course, any theory that ties humor to laughter will to some extent involve release since energy is, in fact, released in laughter. But to show that energy is released in laughter does not imply a release theory unless that release is the *point* of the humor and not merely a consequence of it.

People have a full set of means at their disposal for the expression of unconscious sexual and aggressive thoughts. There are identifications with characters and actions in literature, film, or sport. There are the numerous waking fantasies to which we all, at times, give ourselves over, as well as regular nighttime dreams. There is even the possibility of outright assault. With jokes, however, the matter is different. It may be true that the ultimate source of our sexual and aggressive impulses is the unconscious. Certainly, any expression of sex or aggression is linked to the unconscious in the sense that it draws energy from it (Freud 1960, 8:101), although individuals might not recognize that their lust and rage are—from Freud’s perspective—connected to the lust and rage they felt as infants and originally directed toward their parents. As Freud says, “Nothing that takes form in the mind can ultimately keep away” from the impulses sequestered in the unconscious (133). But jokes—unlike dreams and slips of the tongue—are largely recognized for what they are. They are not simply the result of unconscious forces seeking release and relief. When people produce a hostile joke, they usually know quite well what they are doing.

The energy that is released in a joke that creates pleasure and engenders laughter, according to Freud, is *not* the energy of an unconscious impulse. Rather, it is energy that has been devoted to the inhibition of such forms of expression in the task of maintaining a well-ordered society (Freud 1960, 8:118).<sup>10</sup> These forms of inhibition, of course, are well known to us: do not murder, do not assault, do not blaspheme, do not spout profanities, be sexually modest, be polite. Indeed, in civilized societies these inhibitions are often codified in law, and they are explicitly taught and absorbed in the course of a moral education from early childhood. So the energy that produces the pleasure in jokes, according to Freud, is that energy that is mobilized and stands in a *constant state of vigilance* against certain forms of behavior and expression. The source of pleasure is *not* energy that is escaping from the unconscious, although the unconscious may be implicated in some ultimate sense, as it is with everything we think, say, and do. The unconscious impulses are a constant. Joke telling is situational.<sup>11</sup>

A hostile intention precedes the making of a joke, and that intention is recognized for what it is. The person who responds to an insult from a royal person is fully aware of the anger he has been made to feel and his desire for revenge. These thoughts are not repressed. They are formed in the conscious mind. What the joke makes possible is not the expression of a hostile thought but the expression of a hostile thought that would be criticized or otherwise penalized if expressed *openly*. A joke deals with a thought that is *conscious* and is seeking a *socially acceptable* means of expression. Both smut and the obscene joke are perfectly conscious expressions. Both the smutty talker and joke maker know perfectly well what they are doing. An obscene joke, however, can find a path into upright society in a way that smut cannot (Freud 1960, 8:99–100). In sum, the joke emerges not as a manifestation of unconscious forces seeking release but as a literary construction that authorizes the communication of conscious, though prohibited, thoughts in public settings. When viewed in this light, Freud's theory does not appear as a theory of release and relief at all. More than anything else, it deserves, I believe, to be regarded as a *rhetorical theory* of the joke. Freud almost says as much: "Where argument tries to draw the hearer's criticism over on to its side, the joke endeavors to push the criticism out of sight. There is no doubt that the joke has chosen the method which is psychologically more effective" (133).

The first three-quarters of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* is devoted to an analysis of jokes and the formulation of a theory. In the last quarter, Freud extends his discussion to the comic and humor. The category *humor* might be thought to include wit, jest, and the comic. These terms, however, do not map directly onto German terminology, especially the terminology in the nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries. There was a difference between wit and jokes [*Witz*] on the one hand and humor [*Humor*] on the other. Wit and jokes could be caustic and mocking and emanate from a sense of superiority. True humor, however, is based on a sense of kinship with all of humanity (Richter 1973, 88, 91). Humor is noble in a way that witticisms, the comic, and jokes are not.<sup>12</sup>

Freud's dissertation on jokes is relatively clear. His foray into the comic is difficult, dense, and full of expressions of uncertainty about the classification of the materials as well as about his observations and analyses (e.g., Freud 1960, 8:181, 211, 212, 214, 227). The intention here, however, is not to completely unravel Freud's sense of the comic. It is only necessary to grasp his basic approach in order to amplify and clarify his theory of jokes and the source of their pleasure.

The comic, unlike jokes, is found rather than made. And it is found primarily in the words and actions of human beings. It is found in animals and things only by extension (Freud 1960, 8:181). If jokes require three people (the joke maker, the object or target of the joke, and the person to whom the joke is directed), the comic requires only two: the person who engages in the comic action or expression and the person who observes it. The first type of comic action that Freud explores is naïveté. Unlike the joke maker, the naïve person does not overcome an inhibition. The naïve person is simply unaware of the inhibition; for him it does not exist. Naïve action or expression occurs regularly in children and uneducated adults (182). There may be a similarity between naïve speech and jokes in terms of their wording and content, but the psychological mechanisms are different. No pleasure is obtained by the naïve person from his naïve expression. The techniques that are employed to overcome inhibition in jokes are completely absent. The naïve person can produce nonsense or smut because there is no internal resistance impeding their production (185). Simply fulfilling an unconscious impulse does not produce laughter. It is only in the overcoming of an inhibition that utterances and actions become funny.

When a person sees or hears someone do or say something naïve, it affects him as a joke would. The inhibition, which *does* exist for the observer, is lifted simply through the act of seeing or listening. The psychical energy devoted to maintaining the inhibition becomes superfluous and produces pleasure and is discharged in laughter. The only difference in the response to the naïve as opposed to the response to a joke is that the second person—the observer—must understand that the inhibition does not exist in the first person. In the absence of that understanding, the second person might respond with indignation rather than with pleasure and laughter. Thus a certain degree of empathy is necessary in grasping the comic aspect of the naïve. The first person's state of mind must be taken into account (Freud 1960, 8:186).

The comic of action, as in the exaggerated actions of a clown, is also discussed by Freud. He argues that a person encountering an exaggerated action automatically compares it to the action the observer would have made in achieving the same end. Even grotesque facial features and bodily postures are evaluated in terms of the effort necessary to re-create these grimaces and bearings. Freud posits an *ideational mimetics*, that is, the notion that ideas have neuromuscular consequences. They give rise to innervations of the muscles that anticipate a genuine movement that is never, in fact, realized. When one witnesses an exaggerated movement, one puts oneself in the place of that person making the movement and has an inclination to make the same movement. When the observer suddenly perceives that the expenditure of energy to make that movement is unnecessary, the energy that has been mobilized to make it becomes superfluous and is free to be discharged in laughter (Freud 1960, 8:190–94). The same might be said of mental characteristics. Mental characteristics become comic when a person has expended too little energy in confronting a problem or situation. The difference between what one would expend oneself on the problem and what one expends in empathizing with the first person's insufficient effort becomes available for discharge in laughter. Freud goes on to discuss other types of comedy: the comedy of situation, caricature, parody, travesty (following Lipps [1922]), but it is unnecessary to examine these here. What is critical is grasping Freud's understanding of the comic as an exercise in relative expenditures of psychological energy: "The source of comic pleasure [is always] . . . a comparison between two expenditures both of which must be ascribed to the preconscious" (Freud 1960, 8:208).

At the very end of his book, Freud turns to the matter of humor. He reiterates that distressing emotions can interfere with the comic as well as with jokes. Humor, however, occurs when there is an inclination to release a distressing emotion, but the emotion is dismissed at the moment of its being produced (Freud 1960, 8:228). There is the story, for example, of the criminal led out to his execution on a Monday who comments, "Well, this week's beginning nicely." The fate of the man might well arouse pity, but this pity is immediately extinguished when it is recognized that the man himself dismisses his situation as inconsequential rather than being overcome by it. As Freud remarks: "There is something like magnanimity . . . in the man's tenacious hold upon his customary self and his disregard of what might overthrow that self and drive it to despair" (229). It is the emotion that is at first aroused, but which finds itself misplaced, that produces both pleasure and laughter (229–30). The various types of humor depend upon the particular emotion that is made superfluous: pity, anger, pain, tenderness, and so on, and these types are constantly being extended (231–32). Unlike the comic, humor can remain a solo affair and can occur entirely within a single person. The

presence or participation of another person is not necessary and would add nothing to it. And the pleasure an observer might derive from that person's situation would be comic rather than humorous pleasure (229).

We are now in a position to understand the formula that Freud presents at the conclusion of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*: the pleasure in jokes arises from an economy of expenditure upon inhibition, the pleasure in the comic from an economy of expenditure upon ideation (the psychological energy invested in ideas), and the pleasure in humor from an economy of expenditure upon feeling (Freud 1960, 8:236). Jokes, the comic, and humor are about *savings* in the expenditure of energy; and they are distinguished from one another in terms of the sources of the energy that is saved. Whether one finds Freud's formula illuminating, useful, or convincing is another matter entirely. But it should be clear that Freud's thesis is not fundamentally about the release of forces welling up in the unconscious. The proposition "that humor can serve to reduce aggressive (and sexual) drives is the most widely tested hypothesis in the field of humor research" may be true, but it is not true that this proposition is "one of the central themes of Freud's theory" (Goldstein, Suls, and Anthony 1972, 161). Jokes, the comic, and humor are not analogues of dreams, slips of the tongue, or hysterical symptoms. Jokes, the comic, and humor all have their origins in the preconscious; dreams, slips of the tongue, and symptoms originate in the unconscious.

I do not believe that this exposition of Freud's theory of jokes is based on a particularly nuanced reading of Freud. I think, in fact, it is rather straightforward, although it has been necessary to skip over or simplify a number of issues. Nor would I claim that Freud could *never* see a joke as successfully camouflaging an unconscious thought.<sup>13</sup> This discussion, it should be noted, is put forward neither as a defense of Freud's propositions nor as a critique of them. I am not a champion of Freud's theory of jokes (Oring 1992, 16–28; 2003, 27–40, 41–57), although I admire the comprehensive scope of his inquiry, the boldness of his thought, the originality of his ideas, and the perspicacity of some of his observations and guesses. I do think, however, that the central idea informing Freud's theory has largely been misread. The thrust of Freud's theory seems clear. One need only examine the corpus of examples that Freud employs to realize that nothing about jokes is truly unconscious except for the *means* by which a joker converts a thought into the form of a joke. That is the fundamental relation of jokes to the unconscious featured in the title of Freud's famous book.