**The Humor of the Problematic: Thinking with Stengers**

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**Thinking with Stengers**

In the chapter of Gilles Deleuze’s *The Fold: Leibniz and The Baroque,* whereWhitehead makes a surprising and crucial appearance, Deleuze chooses to introduce the English mathematician and philosopher as the successor, or “diadoche,” of what he describes as a *somewhat secret school*. The reason for the secrecy of this school is itself something of a mystery. Even when Deleuze alludes to the question “What is an Event?” as a thread weaving its members together, it cannot be a coincidence that the term he uses to characterize these connections is that of an “*echo.*”For its secrecy speaks not of a desire from its members to remain unknown, isolated, hermetically closed upon themselves, but rather of the fact that the school itself remains somewhat secret even to those who have partaken and continue to partake in it– when has it been instituted as such? Who has ever succeeded in precisely identifying its members, in delineating its borders, listing its tenets, or endowing it with any authority of its own? What is it a school *of*? How can one join in?

That this secret school without name is formed through echoes of questions and problems that bring it and its members into existence suggests that, indeed, what its members undergo is no ordinary schooling. For it is never simply a case of putting someone else’s thoughts to work in relation to one’s own concerns. To be sure, we are too often taught, perhaps regrettably, both to think in this way and to accept that this is how one must learn to think. We sit or stand in classrooms, and we are often faced with problems that are not our own, in which we cannot participate –despite how often we are called upon to participate, or to make others do so– save through the thoughts of someone else; unless we do so only in the form of transposing what somebody else has thought to this or that situation; or *vice versa*, to find, in every situation, in spite of its singularity, its novelty and its immanent requirements, the thoughts of this or that thinker.

Somewhere along the way, such forms of schooling may surely give one certain rights of participation in other spheres of academic or intellectual life, but they will not, in and of themselves, grant one membership to *this* secret school. For again, in the institutional mode, participation often refers to the progressive “authorization” to partake in what Judith Schlanger (*Penser*) would call a professional economy of seriousness, by which academic disciplines, forms of expertise and judgement, sources of funding, as well as criteria of publication and employability, become established. My point here is not to deny that there may be some value in this kind of training, particularly when the cultivation of such habits succeeds in being performed with enough generosity, and with enough contrasts, to populate our thinking with differences and alternatives forming a cultural memory in relation to which, in response to which, one might begin the task of attempting to think. But being let in on this school’s secrets, learning to appreciate its existence and to develop a certain affinity with the problems that animate it; enabling, in other words, the echoes to resonate and reverberate once again (but always differently, as echoes do), turns “thinking” into an entirely different practice– one of learning to think not from, not against, not just after, but *with*.

If the practice of thinking withposes a different kind of challenge, it is because it belongs to the intimate question of *whom* one islearning to think with, and as such situates this apprenticeship as a demand to resist an unthinking participation in the way in which seriousness circulates in thought. To recall the Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar(*La Vuelta al día,* 54), who is perhaps the school’s most secret member and who once asked “who will save us from seriousness?”, the difference is between citing others in order to be right, in order to seek authorization, and citing others because we “want to gather our friends together.” In this way, the attempt to think with others confronts one directly with a kind of influence that is neither that of the historical determinations by which a given epoch determines what matters, what or how it may be relevant to think, nor that of the socializing processes by which one may become a ‘serious’ thinker.

My sense is that what is put into play is a much more intimate and felt influence– a veritable reverberation that shakes up the surface of our being, and whose aim is not that of restoring thought to its origins but of bringing new thinking into existence. To borrow the words of Schlanger again (*Le neuf,* 31), to think with is “to find in ourselves the doings of others as well as our doings upon those others, it is to think that we *become,*” and to become as we think, “through the profound company of others.” It seems to me that the kind of adventure involved in “thinking with” is therefore one that plays out in an encounter with practices to which the questions are not simply about what they “say” or what they “do”, but about what they cultivate in their doing– about what, through their careful gestures, they enable to come into existence, as well as what they attempt to resist. This is a plane of thought where what is at stake is the cultivation of certain sensibilities, certain tones and dispositions of feeling that, as William James (*The*) would put it, make rationality more of a sentiment than a faculty, and that rather than tell us what to think, force us to come to terms with the open problem of taking care of *how* we think.

It is not enough to say that Isabelle Stengers has become a distinguished member of this secret school, or even its contemporary diadoche. Conferring upon their reverberations the power to make her think, the echoes that Stengers has made resonate have turned the school into something of an *open* secret (see ‘L’Insistance’), but not without simultaneously transforming the shape and scope of their waves. One of the distinct motifs of Stengers’s thought in this respect has no doubt been her patient habitation of that very plane of thought of learning to think with significant others. In her monumental *Thinking with Whitehead,* she turned this attention into a modality of exploration of Whitehead’s thought, one deeply sensitive to the specific requirements that the latter’s mode of reverberating, his mode of making questions and problems matter, demands of those who seek to make such echoes resonate. Thus, it is by attending to the unique entanglement of Whitehead’s mathematical spirit, his demands for coherence and technical, conceptual invention, as well as the “obstinate tenderness” that made him alien to any form of polemics and impervious to any established consensus, that the very specific test of thinking with Whitehead makes itself felt. As she proposed, thinking with Whitehead today “means accepting an adventure from which none of the words that serve as our reference points should emerge unscathed, but from which none will be disqualified or denounced as a vector of illusion.” (*Thinking,* 15)

What does it mean, in turn, to think with Stengers? What kind of adventure may this be *today,* in this epoch marked by a generalized devastation of experience, by so many broken promises, by the always ongoing and impending emergencies, exceptions and catastrophes of a modern world without refuge? It is under the sign of this question that I attempt to develop the exploration that comprises this article– by becoming attuned to the peculiar sound of the echoes that begin to resonate when one embarks on the risky adventure of thinking in the profound company of Isabelle Stengers. And the key that I propose for undertaking this task may at first seem implausible, or even inadequate, in any case unworthy of a “serious” philosopher– learning to think with Stengers today, I propose, means learning to appreciate the echoes of her *laughter*. It means learning to laugh with her. Its test is that of experiencing the transformative effects of daring, in the face of the urgent problems that besiege the present, and especially in response to the corrosive and ruinous reasons and solutions that are both demanded and imposed by those for whom urgency authorizes the probable to shackle the possible, to cultivate a certain manner of laughing that is not the laughter of irony or derision but the laughter of another sense of humor– of what I here would like to call *the humor of the problematic*.

**Relearning How to Laugh: The Humor of the Problematic**

“Our sciences,” Stengers (Another Look, 41) regretted once, “no longer make us laugh.” Remembering a time when one would discuss science in literary salons, a time when “Diderot imagined the mathematician Jean Le Rond D’Alambert in the transports of a dream in which he existed as matter,” and when “Dr. Bordeu held forth to Mademoiselle de L’Espinasse about the ‘various and prolonged’ cross-breeding experiments which might eventually create a race of ‘goatmen’,” (41) Stengers expressed the need to “explore the problem of the loss of our sense of humour.” (42)

An odd problem, one may think, since it can hardly be said that making us laugh is part of scientists’ job description. But it is not of course a matter of whether making “publics” laugh –rather than “understand”, as the imperative now goes– was ever an official scientific aim. What has been lost, what we have learned to forget, is not the *capacity* to laugh, but the art of laughing *with* the sciences. To be sure, some still laugh *at* the sciences, and others certainly do wrap themselves in the flag of Science, with a capital S, so as to bitterly laugh at those whose purposes diverge from scientific purposes, those concerned with making something else matter. Not many laugh, however, with the sciences. Alas, since 1991 not only has scientific laughter itself become institutionalized, instantiating the paradox of creating its own authority of judgement, a body capable of awarding its own prizes to those who have asked whether a cat can be both a solid and a liquid, or investigating what happens in the brains of people who see the face of Jesus in a piece of toast. What’s more, the very name for this new authority, the Ig Noble Prize, itself seems to testify to our inability to conjoin laughter with the nobility that scientific inquiry would otherwise evoke. What we have learned to forget is thus not the possibility of laughing at the sometimes abstruse formulation of scientific problems or at their awkward findings, but the importance of constantly reminding Science that, as William James (*Principles,* 576) once wrote, “her purposes are not the only purposes,” and that her formulations always partake in problems that they can never hope to exhaust. What has been lost, then, is not laughter as such, but the art by which humor acquires its sense. How have we become so serious? Stengers’ response associates this loss with the modern professionalization of the sciences, that which not only imposed a “restraint of serious thought within a groove,” (Whitehead, *Science*, 197) but simultaneously identified the very ploughing of the groove with progress. In so doing, the making of a professional science turned the speculative dreams of scientists into the authoritative business of serious men and even more serious “committees” tasked with judging away any such dreams in the name of “objectivity.”

Her recalling of the literary salons is not, however, a lament about the disenchantment of the modern world. One will not find in her work the resentful craving for a return to a would-be glorious past when science would run wild and experimentation was given free rein, as if one could be freed from inheriting the often atrocious histories and stories by which science became a serious affair. Exploring the problem of the loss of our sense of humor is not a matter of freeing ourselves from that cultural memory which is now our own, but neither is it one of rehearsing *ad nauseam* the reasons and processes that would justify our resignation. The exploration is instead animated by a wager on the nature of our present, one that affirms the possibility of “living our present not as that which must be the end […] but as that which will pass.” (Stengers, The Humor*,* 26) What it signals, therefore, is a wager on an unfinished present (Savransky, The Wager) that, despite the general seriousness affecting our practices, may still provide vital resources for risking another form of laughter, for relearning how to laugh:

What is learning to laugh again? It is relearning a laugh which would not be the irony and derision which always avoids risk-taking, going beyond the differences to recognize the same. It is, instead, the laughter of humor. It is comprehending and appreciative without expecting to find a secure position**.** It is able to disagree without being awe-stricken or trying to be awe-inspiring. (Stengers, Another Look: 52)

Stengers’ remarks on the lost art of laughter and the possibility of relearning the laughter of humor might possibly go unnoticed or may be easily dismissed by anyone seeking to engage with her work as another case of “serious” philosophical thought. Surely there are more important things to consider! And yet, I wager that, whatever other secrets animate the school, it is this sense of humor that brings its members in. Indeed, I would suggest that not only is humor at the center of what Stengers understands as the task of philosophy, but that it is precisely this conflation of the serious and the important that thinking with Stengers requires us to resist today. Indeed, it seems to me that the throbbing insistence, across her work, of the art of humor and the need to create new modes of laughter should now be read as an urgent cry. It becomes urgent as the present is shaped not only by the global circulation of the serious, but equally by forms of laughter that incite death, and by problems that encounter no response if not the laughter of derision and humiliation.

To approach what I am calling “the humor of the problematic,” one must avoid confusing it with theorizations of the phenomenon of humor in social life that describe it as a mechanism for dispelling anxiety (Freud) or as a form of responding to the manifestations of mechanistic fixity in the flux of life (Bergson). Not because these be inadequate or ill-conceived, but rather because, as we shall see, neither what Stengers calls “humor”, nor what she names “irony”, refer to the question of what people find funny, or why they do so. The humor that pervades Stengers’ thought is not likely to provoke shrieks of laughter on those who encounter it either. Rather than a phenomenon to be thematized, or a reaction to be provoked, humor, irony and seriousness designate here different *modes of address–* different gestures by which the problem of taking care of *how* we think, of how we address ourselves to the problems that make us think, of how we address our questions and thoughts to others with whom we think, is cultivated.

Thus, Stengers articulates the specific mode of address that she associates with the art of humor as a political, speculative response to a double operation at the heart of modern thought. First, the operation of assigning nobility and importance to a certain seriousness, which is to say, to the seriousness of certainty, of general foundations and principled convictions. Coupled with this, the operation of an ironic mode of address, a corrosive laughter that, in attempting to inspire awe, laughs *at the expense* of those who, even today, dare take the risk of dreaming speculatively– that is, at the expense of those who *trust* that a different, less violent but also less humiliating world, is possible.

In this way, the humor of the problematic is an effort to resist the effects of the serious affecting our practices, as well as the proliferation of ironic and cynical forms of laughter that come with it. It concerns the art of cultivating another mode of addressing those with whom we think and hesitate, those from whom we learn. Like all arts, humor is an acquired taste, one whose appreciation must be nourished and developed in the profound company of those practices of knowing, thinking and feeling through which the present acquires its particular character. But it is also one whose cultivation may enable practices, those that still dare to dream, to respond to the *insistence* of the possible, to give the possible a chance even in the midst of an urgency (Stengers, ‘L’insistance’*)*. And what I want to suggest is that acquiring this sense of humor, cultivating a mode of addressing others that will not legitimize itself at their expense, simultaneously requires the establishment of a different relation to the *problems* that force them, and us, to think. Indeed, the art of humor, as Stengers articulates is, is a response to the thoroughly *problematic* character of the present, an art that requires taking the risk of entering into a generative play with the problems that animate it.

In this sense, one of the ways by which Stengers has enabled the echoes of the secret school to reverberate has been by reclaiming and developing the constructivist task of philosophy that Whitehead dramatized and Deleuze (*What is Philosophy, 2)* famously affirmed when he proposed that “philosophy is the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts.” By now this proposition has become something of a ‘Deleuzian’ motto that many scholars in the humanities and social sciences affected by the influence of his thought have been keen to take up. It seems to me, however, that Stengers is among the very few to make this call resonate in a way that is attuned to the constraints with which, for Deleuze, the task of inventing concepts was to be endowed. For Stengers’ particular mode of philosophical invention has been acutely sensitive to the fact that “all concepts are connected to problems without which they would have no meaning and which can themselves only be isolated or understood as their solution emerges.” (*What is Philosophy*, 16) Thus, in a recent essay titled “Speculative Philosophy and the Art of Dramatisation” (190), she has stressed that

*Doing* philosophy, in Deleuze’s sense, means creating concepts. And I would claim that the creation of concepts, as he characterizes it, is intrinsically speculative. Concepts answer problems, which are not defined in relation to a state of affairs, whose mode of existence is rather that of a task to be accomplished, an answer to be given, a work to be done.

If concepts are *responses* to problems, what is it that they respond to? What, in other words, is a problem? This is a challenging question because we are in the habit of treating problems merely as confused, subjective states that testify to the limits of our knowledge, to clashing viewpoints, or to the imperfections of our methods. Problems, it would seem, are those phantasmatic states we find ourselves in at those seemingly unhappy moments when we do not yet “know.” By the same token, they are also taken to be only ever provisional states, bound to disappear as the “progress” of Science yields serious solutions capable of containing them in its groove. Here, modern epistemology and modern pedagogy join hands. For insofar as teachers set up examination questions and epistemologists turn the events of scientific invention into “an illustration of the right and general obligation to subject all things to measurement,” (Stengers *Cosmopolitics I,* 11) the pedagogies by which we have been taught to become “serious thinkers” and the epistemologies and policies by which scientific practices have been turned into a serious affair presuppose that problems enjoy only a negative existence– they are shadows of thought and knowledge that manifest lack, error, or poor understanding.

Interestingly, it is this understanding of problems as enjoying only a sort of phantasmatic mode of existence that belies the gesture of seriousness, for it leads us “to believe that the activity of thinking, along with truth and falsehood in relation to that activity, begins only with the search for solutions, that both of these concern only solutions.” (Deleuze *Difference*, 158) In other words, as long as problems are but the shadow of knowledge, a broken state of affairs in need of repair, they are also deemed susceptible of capture by the hubris of objective knowledges and technological fixes. It is this very understanding which, at the same time, authorizes pedagogues and epistemologists to claim privileged access to problems in which others –children, students, practitioners, publics, and all those others who may otherwise be concerned with the problems at stake– cannot participate. At least not until they have been taught how to think seriously, until they have been persuaded to accept consensual purposes, until they can be made to “understand” that everything is lost once the true and tested measurements and methods for making nature speak are confused with the “subjective values” and situated perspectives of those who would otherwise, for other reasons, seek participation in the determination of problems themselves (see Savransky *The Adventure*).

It is not the *capacity* to laugh that has been lost, however, and not everyone is immediately ready to bow down to the seriousness of techno-scientific solutions. As Stengers has shown in her explorations of the seriously bitter affair known as the Science Wars, among the first ones to laugh at the seriousness with which the sciences have become endowed is the figure of the sociologist –especially of the relativist kind– who knows that values can never be excluded from the determination of problems because, unlike the scientist, she knows that those values from which Science draws its seriousness, those values of scientific reason, method, and objectivity, are nothing but a “’particular folklore,’ susceptible to the same type of analysis as the folklores of other human practices.” (*The Invention,* 58) For the sociologist who always knows better than to “believe” in the possibility of making nature speak, who knows that only passionate scientists and their institutions are capable participating in the order of discourse and has learned how to reveal the irony of a hot clash of human values behind any declaration of a cold matter of fact, no techno-scientific solution can claim to be “true,” because problems are always shadows of something else. They are shadows of the social, cultural and economic activities of claim-making and political contestation thanks to which anything, whatever it is, may end up being formulated as a “problem” to begin with. Indeed, for this sociologist, even the problem of drawing the border between what is scientific and what is not, that problem that has preoccupied serious philosophers for so long, turns out to be social (see Gieryn).

Such sociological operations do enable a certain laughter. In a world populated only by human values and social and economic conditions, in a world devoid of the objective, brute, and mute matters of fact that justified the seriousness of those who, in the name of objectivity, would claim privileged access to problems, the sciences not only cease to inspire awe– they become quite laughable. And so the sociologist laughs, but this laughter too is at the expense of those who would take the risk of dreaming speculatively. For the laughter does not just irritate the seriousness of epistemologists who, through their settled creeds, turn “objectivity” into an obligation of measurement and obsess about which anonymous reason may finally give Science its pride of place. As Stengers has shown, this ironic form of laughter is also at the expense of those scientific practitioners who, without denying that they are social beings too, are animated by the sense that scientific practices are not *just like* any othersocial practice (Stengers, Introductory notes). In this way, the sociological laughter of irony does not resonate without inflicting a “wound” (Stengers, *The Invention,* 13), for its sound corrodes the living trust that makes scientists capable of speculating and taking risks, that is, of trusting in the possibility of engaging problems in the profound company of those other-than-humans with whom they seek to establish a rapport.

These two modes of address, seriousness and irony, become thus two sides of the same coin– and indeed this common expression seems quite appropriate to describe what earlier I associated with an “economy,” with its own modes of distribution of value, judgement, and disqualification. Just as the establishment of seriousness requires a privileged access to the problem, the laughter of irony belongs to those who

will not let themselves count, who will bring to light the claims of the sciences. They know they will always encounter the same difference in point of view between themselves and scientists, which guarantees that they have conquered, once and for all, the means for listening to scientists without letting themselves be impressed by them. (Stengers, *The Invention,* 65).

The serious and the ironist disagree on what it is that problems *are shadows of*, but their corrosive antagonisms disclose a shared operation– an appeal to a transcendental position that, in being applicable everywhere, will transcend not just concrete problems but the very nature of the problematic itself by bringing its phantasmatic existence to light. By revealing, that is, that ghosts don’t exist.

In this sense, Steve Woolgar, a sociologist of science and technology who for over three decades has been championing irony as a critical strategy, has recently claimed in a talk at the University of California, Berkley, that “the joy of irony” stems from the fact that “you have to perform the possibility that some people won’t get it.” Of course, one cannot not expect everyone to find the same remarks funny. A comic trait may, at any time, fail to resonate. But what does “performing” this possibility mean if not *actualizing* it by default, sustaining one’s laughter, one’s mode of address, on the basis of a distinction between those who laugh, and those who are laughed at? This is precisely what the sociologist of science does when, in the course of a constructivist ethnography of a laboratory, she discloses how scientists, like children fascinated by magic tricks, marvel at discoveries which they themselves have socially constructed. In other words, the sociologist actualizes a demarcation, not between Science and non-science, but between those who are “caught up” in the problematic of making nature speak, animated by problems that demand responses and development, and those who situate themselves *beyond* it, revealing that in fact the problematic has no existence of its own but is merely the shadow of a process of social construction that those who are caught up in the problem “don’t get,” to which they have no access.

Thus, the sociologists, who are all too familiar with the social construction of everything, may laugh among themselves, while the scientists, busy trying to establish a reliable rapport with their subatomic particles, remain at best baffled, and at worst, insulted. Irony and seriousness cannot therefore laugh, if they do so at all, without gaining recourse to “a more lucid and more universal power to judge that assures [their] difference from those being studied.” (Stengers, *The Invention,* 65). The dispute between the epistemologist and the sociologist of science, then, is not one between two different relationships to the problematic but between the truth and falsehood of their respective solutions. In other words, the distinction between seriousness and irony is not a matter of *how* one laughs, but a matter of *who* or *what* one should be laughing *at.*

What is remarkable about Deleuze’s characterization of philosophy as an art of inventing concepts *in response to* problems is that it situates the task of philosophy in direct contrast to such transcendental operations of judgement[[1]](#footnote-2). If concepts are responses to problems, the problematic cannot designate a *negative* mode of existence, and problems cannot be reduced to *mere* phantasms that a more lucid stance will dispel. Nothing comes out of nowhere. If concepts can *respond* to problems it is indeed because the problematic corresponds to something other than non-being. Not without humor, Deleuze (*Difference,* 64) inscribes the being of the problematic with an appropriately enigmatic, if telling, sign: not “non-being”, but “?-being.” In other words, ghosts do exist. Rather than a mere shadow of knowledge, the problematic has its own mode of existence. Or better, the problematic *is* a mode of existence of its own: the mode of existence of a question to be answered, a problem to be solved, of a tension to be resolved, an enigma to be deciphered, a work to be done. The mode of existence of difference itself.

Giving to the problematic its own mode of existence opens the possible once again. For it creates what James (*The Will)* would call a *genuine option*, a forking path that confronts one with a vital choice. What it makes possible, and what it subsequently requires, is to cultivate a different feel for problems, one that may enable an alternative relationship between problems and solutions to be forged, and engender, in turn, the possibility of a different mode of address. The serious and the ironist reduce problems to manifestations of ignorance, and therefore those caught up in the problematic, the laughing stock, are those with incomplete information, those in (momentary or permanent) error, those who are duped by false assumptions, fooled by appearances, unaware of the effects of their own actions, and so forth. They, on the other hand, as ultimate judges, are always *beyond it*, having access to principles that can solve a problem by transcending the problematic as such. If ghosts do exist, however, if the problematic is not a mere shadow of knowledge but “a state of the world, a dimension of the system and even its horizon or its home,” (Deleuze, *Difference* 280) the alleged lucidity of the judgment that would claim to transcend the field of the problematic begins to appear rather somber.

When the problematic is not a mistake but a dimension of the world, one may admit to what is perhaps a more humble but also more fecund position, that it is the problematic itself which not only transcends, but subsists and persists in the solutions that are offered in response to it– there is no stepping beyond it to bring to light the shadows that are cast upon those who attempt to respond to it. “The oracle is questioned, but the oracle’s response is itself a problem.” (Deleuze, *Difference* 63). Insisting and persisting in its solutions, the problematic doesn’t care for all those final solutions and promises of salvation offered by transcendent judgements– it resurfaces once again, through novel events, with different shapes, under different names, pressing on the present like the imperative of a future to be felt. And all solutions, for their part, depend on the problems that call for and insist in them. This is why, as Mariam Motamedi-Fraser suggests, “the best that a solution can do therefore is to develop a problem.” (Motamedi-Fraser, 76). But how to develop it? In what *sense?*

It is here that this other mode of address that Stengers associates with the art of humor makes itself felt, in that it is indeed a question not of bursting in laughter or in tears but of patiently cultivating another mode of addressing our questions and thoughts to others, a *sense* of humor that may in turn open problems to a new sense. Unlike seriousness or irony, Stengers’ art of humor has no recourse to a transcendent plane capable of making the problematic give up its ghosts. By contrast, humor “is an art of immanence. The distinction between science and non-science,” Stengers (*The Invention, 66)* writes, “cannot be judged in the name of a transcendence, in relation to which we would designate ourselves as free, and where only those who remain indifferent to it are free. For our dependence on this transcendence in no way reduces our degrees of liberty, our choice as to the way we will attend to the problems created by this difference.” There is no avoiding the necessity to respond that the problematic creates, but this necessity does not determine *how we might respond*. It does not replace laughter for the terrorized defeat of the one who suddenly finds herself inescapably haunted by ghosts. Learning the humor of the problematic is indeed a matter of paying attention, finally, to the *quality* of our laughter, a question of *how* to laugh, rather than who to laugh at. For the wager of addressing others with humor is a wager on the possibility of learning to laugh collectively *with* the problematic ghosts, simultaneously accepting that they demand a response, and affirming that this demand in no way settles the question of how to respond. This is why, ultimately, what is at stake is the possibility of nourishing a laughter that “comprehends and appreciates without waiting for salvation, and can refuse without letting itself terrorize [,] a laughter that does not exist at the expense of scientists, but one that could, ideally, be shared with them.” (Stengers *The Invention,* 17).

If the humor of the problematic can be associated with an *art*, it is first and foremost because it is a patient endeavor that finds no amusement in the speedy operations by which modern thought turns abstractions into overarching generalizations. Only their acolytes find general theories entertaining. Generalizations may and do silence those with divergent purposes, but they will not keep the problematic at bay. Indeed, the risk the laughter of humor takes is that of seeking to learn, in the complexity of each individual occasion, how to disentangle the problematic exercise of thought from the operations of censorship and disqualification that are supposed to protect it (Stengers, *Civiliser)*. In order to laugh, which is to say, to address itself to others in its singular way, the humor of the problematic has to invent a manner of engaging the problems and speculative dreams that animate a practice without denouncing these problems as nothing but the product of their own fabrications, and without incurring in the quick but serious judgement that, after all, these are “just dreams.”

This slow, immanent dimension of the art of humor allows us perhaps to attend to Stengers’ wandering curiosity from a slightly different angle. Indeed, its cultivation has been long in the making. Traces of a burgeoning humor of the problematic are already perceptible, for instance, in Stengers’ earlier writings after her collaboration with Ilya Prigogine and his collaborators on “dissipative structures” (e.g. *Power and Invention*), and the ways in which the invention of this very concept surfaced in response to the particular character that the problem of life takes when considered from the perspective of far-from-equilibrium systems. Even more to the point, Stengers’ own characterization of the concept of “complexity” precisely signals that what makes a situation complex cannot be reduced to an incomplete formulation of the problem, or to the enormous complication that the behavior of the many components of the situation may pose to our models of explanation. This is because complexity “sets out *problems–* we don’t know a priori what ‘*sum* of parts’ means– and this problem implies that we cannot treat, under the pretext that they have the same ‘*parts,’* all the *‘sums’* according to the same general model.” (Stengers, *Power and Invention,* 12-13)

It is in *The Invention of Modern Science,* however, that the humor of the problematic becomes ever more present. It becomes present precisely when, by situating science under the sign of the event, Stengers seeks to elaborate a “politics of reason” that be “not reducible to the games of power we today associate with ‘political politics’.” (*The Invention,* 63) It is no coincidence that it is the concept of the *event* that confers on the problematic the power to situate the sciences, and creates an opening for an art of humor. For indeed, “the mode of the event is the problematic. One must not say that there are problematic events, but that events bear exclusively upon problems and define their conditions […] The event by itself is problematic and problematizing.” (Deleuze, *The Logic,* 197). The echoes of the secret school keep reverberating. As Stengers has remarked, the event marks a difference, but it does not say what or whom that difference will bear upon:

The event creates a difference between before and after. But what is this difference? On what, where, and how does this distinction bear? The event does not tell us. A great many actors who have all, in one way or another, been produced by the event will undertake to deduce lessons from it; they will produce new stories, some of which will be beautiful, others much less so. (Stengers, ‘The Humour’ 33)

What the event generates, therefore, is a rupture of time, a transformation of the possible. And it is through this transformation that the force of the problematic resurfaces, situating all those who have in one way or another been affected by it as they produce and contest each other’s stories, that is, each other’s solutions to the problems the event poses. But like the oracle, the event offers no solutions– it does not determine how they will be situated. It gives no one the right to the definition of a problem, and it gives no invented solution the power to make the problematic give up its ghosts. Instead, all of those who, in inventing their own solutions, and in engaging with the stories that others have risked, inhabit the problematic opened by an event, become actors in the task of developing the sense of a problem.

Situated in the problematic folding of an event, no actor can claim a transcendent position that would allow them privileged access to problems, either to enforce their own sense, or to declare them as nonsense. Thus, when one is plunged into the problematic by a fecund event that no one could anticipate, “irony is replaced by the humor of a shared problem [and] what is produced is no longer a confusion of roles but a singularization of interests.” (Stengers *Cosmopolitics II,* 434). Tickled by the ghosts of the problematic, the laughter of humor is that of the one who risks participating in the development of problems themselves. It constitutes a form of laughter that, while it recognizes that the function of solutions is not to make problems disappear but to invent forms of developing them, it does not for that reason denounce solutions as false or hopeless. The humor of the problematic affirms the ways in which we are traversed by problems over which we have no authorship, and in so doing encounters solutions as singular adventures whose only truth belongs to the interest of the problem that has provoked them, and whose efficacy is none other than the degree and manner in which they become capable of developing the problem such that new dimensions may be added to it.

For this reason, Stengers characterizes humor as that mode of laughter which takes shape and makes itself felt at those moments when one “recognizes oneself as a product of the history whose construction one is trying to follow.” As she puts it:

Just as the event, in itself, does not have the power to dictate how it will be narrated or the consequences that will be authorized on its behalf, neither does it have the power to select among its narrators. […]. Whoever undertakes this work will have, as his sole constraint, the recognition that he himself is the heir of what has taken place, that the event situates him, whether he likes it or not […] that is, the recognition that he himself is a constructor of the history that follows the event, one constructor of signification among others. (Stengers *The Invention,* 67)

My sense is that to recognize oneself as a constructor of signification among others, to recognize oneself an heir to the problems that animate one’s present, does not, despite appearances, turn humor into a nihilistic laughter. For while humor involves laughing in the midst of the contingencies of what has situated us, it is from this experience of being situated by a problem, of becoming a tool for development of problems, that humor becomes an ethical and political task without thereby reducing every problem either to a question of morals or to a matter of “politics.” Something more than “political politics” hangs in the balance here. It is a question, first and foremost, of enabling the problematic to effectively matter, to give to the problems that animate us the power to connect those that are affected by them. And it is this power that may transform the stakes, from the search for objective knowledge and true solutions, to the question of whether or not with our solutions, no matter how modest, one enables the present and its problems to trust the possible alternatives that emanate from and insist in it.

This is why when it comes to addressing experimental physicists and their vocation, for instance, to address their practices with humor is not to denounce their passionate detection of neutrinos, those genuinely phantom particles that ignore barriers and limits, as nothing but a product of their own fabrication, owing everything to the enormous number of instruments, interpretations, references to other known particles, and to the entire array of social, cultural and technical practices that have gone into their making. But neither is it to reassert the epistemologist general assumption, that the physicist’s proofs upon which the autonomous existence of the neutrino is established also reveal the more general existence of “an autonomous *world* that would ensure the unique authority of physics”. It is instead to reject the “either/or” form of this polemic, and to *pay attention to the problem* *posed* by the paradoxical mode of existence of this singular being which is, at one and the same time, an achievement in human history and an ingredient in the history of the universe. Indeed, the humor that this problem elicits relates to the possibility that, “far from being at odds, as is the case in traditional philosophy,” when the neutrino is at stake “the ‘in itself’ and the ‘for us’ are correlatively produced”, such that “the neutrino exists simultaneously and inseparably ‘in itself’ and ‘for us’, becoming even more ‘in itself,’ a participant in countless events in which we seek the principles of matter, as it comes into existence ‘for us,’ an ingredient of increasingly numerous practices, devices, and possibles.” (Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I,* 22)

If Stengers on occasion refers to this as a “humor of truth” (e.g. *Cosmopolitics I*), and associates it with the invention of a possible peace, it is not because it constitutes a realization that the proper *object* of laughter is not science but “truth” as such. It is not because anything goes, or because truth has stopped mattering. Truth matters a great deal, but a “solution always has the truth it deserves according to the problem to which it is a response, and the problem always has the solution it deserves according to its own truth or falsity– in other words, in proportion to its sense.” (Deleuze, *Difference,* 159) This is a pluralism, and not a relativism– not “anything goes,” but *many things matter*. By caring for the manifold connections that bind a solution to the problem that has called for it, the art of humor is able to dissociate the scientists’ speculative dreams of truth, their passion for truth, from the exclusive seriousness with which their solutions are otherwise endowed. Through what is ultimately a slow art of singularization and discernment, the laughter of humor consists in in allowing the problematic to be inhabited, such that one may be able to accompany the construction of differences that diverging practices articulate in developing a sense of the problems that animate them.

The possible peace to be achieved by such a humor is never, however, an ecumenical, perpetual peace. Neither is it another method for mapping the many versions of problems in order to find that these are everywhere and always the same– distributed and multiple. By contrast, it is a situated and partial achievement, full of friction, whose only efficacy is that of provoking, of *convoking*, a shared feeling, which is the feeling of the possibility of caring for something that matters without for that reason declaring that it *must* matter. One pays attention and trusts that, by enabling the problematic itself to matter, one might become capable of inventing concepts that allow one to *understand.* That is, in Whitehead’s (*Modes*) sense of the term, to induce an experience of transformative disclosure– one that may trust in the possibility of adding new dimensions to a problem that may enable a situation to find new means of expression, and new ways of being felt.

**The Laughter of The Pluriverse**

To propose, as I have done here, that thinking with Stengers involves learning to laugh with her, learning to appreciate the importance of cultivating another sense of humor, is to suggest that Stengers’ philosophy cannot be approached as one would approach a theory– becoming familiar with its “keywords,” imitating the appropriate gestures, or following the continuity of its premises as if it was a self-answering problem with its “ifs” and its “thens.” Situating myself in the company of Stengers’ thought, I have sought to appreciate the way in which, by making the problematic matter, the art of humor operates as a means of *creation*, “creating the philosopher [herself] as a ‘means’” for the development of the problems that turned her into a philosopher in the first place (Stengers ‘Speculative Philosophy’, 189). It is this sense of a developing affinity with the problems that has animated such secret school, and with the peculiar sound of the echoes that Stengers makes resonate, that for me has become central in thinking with Stengers as she herself thinks and laughs in the profound company not only of other philosophers but also of a plethora of practitioners –scientists, witches, ethnopsychoanalysts, and a few lucky social scientists– for whom problems may not necessarily be expressed *philosophically*, but whose practices nevertheless have been situated by a similar effort to inhabit the problematic, to make it matter.

But like the paradoxical mode of existence of the neutrino insinuates, problems are more-than-philosophical, and as James (*A Pluralistic,* 317) put it, *“*philosophies are intimate parts of the universe, and they express something of its own thought of itself*.*”They also express something of its own modes of laughter, of the ways in which it appreciates and depreciates itself, the ways in which, with our ways of laughing, this pluriverse increases or decreases in value. This is, at the end of the day, the political function of the humor of the problematic– that when cultivated collectively in the midst of our present with its seriousness and its corrosive forms of laughter, it may allow us to nourish a sense of humor that does not come at the expense of those who risk dreaming speculatively, but one that may laugh with them in order to open the universe up to another sense. It is indeed an art which offers no guarantees. What it does is to wager, which is to say, to trust, that another way of laughing may enable us to add, thanks to and not despite our plural, diverging activities, novel dimensions to problems such that they may in turn transform, and make perceptible, the possible that insists in the interstices of our present.

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1. Although it can give rise to an altogether different form of irony, an *art of irony* as an operation of grounding that ‘consist in treating things and beings as so many responses to hidden questions, so many cases for problems yet to be resolved.’ (Deleuze, *Difference 63).* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)