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RUTH NEVO

Toward a Theory of Comedy

I

THE GREEK GENIUS for form produced two major orders of dramatic experience: Tragedy and Comedy. Of the two, comedy, as the cultures of Europe have risen and fallen and yet not ceased to provide occasions for people to gather together and laugh at what goes on on a stage, has proved the more complex, various, and difficult to understand as a single category. So many are the manifestations of the laughing Muse that one is tempted to speak not of Comedy but of comedies, and to abandon the attempt to discover a rationale of the form of comic drama. And while the theory of comedy is separate from the theory of laughter, the two cannot but touch at many points, giving rise to a further series of difficulties, since laughter, man's characteristic possession, is also one of his most protean.

What formal principles can provide a valid approach to works as rich, as complex, as marvellously different from one another as, for random example, *Lysistrata, As You Like It, The Tempest, Volpone, Bartholomew Fair, Tartuffe, The Way of the World, The Country Wife, The School for Scandal, The Barber of Seville, Cyrano de Bergerac, Pygmalion, The Playboy of the Western World, The Good Soldier Schweik* (in its dramatised version), *The Good Woman of Szechuan, The Italian Straw Hat,* and *City Lights*? And this excludes works which are not indeed dramas, but to which a theory of comedy can hardly fail to apply, such as *Don Quixote, Gargantua,* and *Tristram Shandy*. The list could be extended almost indefinitely and once candidates are to be drawn from beyond the doors of the theater, many indeed are the comic characters, from Till Eulenspeigel to Mr. Micawber, who will rightly clamor for entrance. A general theory can be no substitute for exact and detailed evaluation of each work in its own individual right, but it can assist in the placing of each work in relation to its fellows, and suggest a groundplan of the structure of even the most subtle and complex comic creations.

This essay starts from premises, historical and anthropological, somewhat similar to those of Northrop Frye in *The Argument of Comedy*,[1] but it will attempt to reveal another related continuity, to provide for the filling in of gaps and for the inclusion of newer variations. Another study to which I have been indebted is C. L. Barber's *Saturnalia in the Henriad*[2] for its careful treatment of the way "in which our time has been seeing the universal in literature by finding in complex literary works patterns which are analogous to myths and rituals and which can be regarded as archetypes, in some sense primitive or fundamental."

A good beginning, then, is in what appears to be an archetypal comic situation, archetypal at least in the European culture best known to us. A sawdust arena, a clown grotesquely painted or masked, an obstacle of some sort—say, a pail of whitewash if we are thinking of the contemporary circus, over which or into which the clown will tumble: these are the first ingredients of primitive comedy.

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What is it that is essentially laughter-provoking in this elemental situation? Analysis will show that what lies at the heart of it lies also at the heart of mature comedy—and for that matter of mature tragedy, too. For both these formalizations of experience dramatize—that is, "act out" or "imitate"—the mischances, mishaps, setbacks, and accidents of human life. In tragedy, however, these have serious, even fatal consequences, and spiritual triumphs are wrested painfully from them; in comedy they have no serious results, no real danger is involved in them, and the triumph may be in the mere fact of survival, brute survival, here and now and in the conditions of this world.

The hero of this elemental situation is the clown. Now the clown as a character type is man in a certain specialized aspect of his nature: as is the king, or the peasant, the poet or the prophet. If we watch him in action we will see what precisely is the specialization of human nature he represents. He represents, first of all, a distortion or aberration or deformity of the normal human. With his grotesque grease-paint and his clumsy movements he is in the last degree undignified; and he is also unfortunate in that circumstances are constantly getting the better of him. But unlike animals who are funny when they ape humanity because they are really helpless, limited by the fixed nature of their responses, he is ultimately and recognizably a man, with at least some of a man's freedom of choice and spontaneity of action. He enters the ring cock-a-hoop; he fancies himself, with his jokes and his antics, king of his little sawdust universe. Suddenly, there is an oversight, a blunder; he does not notice the bucket of whitewash fatefully in ambush for him as he tumbles and gesticulates; into it he falls to emerge a moment later a dripping whitened apparition. But—and this is important—he does emerge. No real harm has come to him, nor, of course, if he involves others in his antics, does he cause them any real harm. We have witnessed a comic plot in miniature: initial confidence, a chapter of accidents, and a happy end. The hero of this plot is perfectly adapted to it; he is at once victim and victor. Our attachment to him, the attention we pay him, is determined by this duality of his nature.

Why our response to such a situation should take the form of physical laughter is a separate and difficult question. It has to do with matters of psychological tension and release, with reversals of expectation, and with the inflation and deflation of values. In the present argument it is perhaps enough to say that laughter is often the result of such a pattern of experience, and that in any case we may agree to call the pattern comic whether in fact laughter results or not. But we may well agree about the nature of such elemental comic situations without by any means being able to perceive their relevance to involved and complex comedies. The first task of a theory of comedy is accordingly to disclose a continuity between the character and action of the simple clown and those of the great comic figures. A further and more complex task is to indicate also the continuity between the clown's routine and the structure of those double-action comedies in which comic hero and clown proper are separate figures: for instance, Rosalind, frustrated yet triumphant in boy's attire, and Touchstone, undaunted philosopher of life's most minimal satisfactions. To this end, it will be necessary first to examine very briefly some of the chief hypotheses of the past, on the assumption that if we can discover some significant common ground among the theorists it may be the easier to discover it among the practitioners of the art.

II

Aristotle generalized about the nature of comedy in words which have been a stumbling block to romantically minded theorists ever since.

> As for Comedy, it is an imitation of man worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards one particular sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask, for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain.
>
> (*Poetics*, trans. Bywater [Oxford, 1920])

"A species of the Ugly"? We do not like, at all events today, to think of our comic heroes as ugly. But we will be more likely to accept Aristotle's formulation and to see the truth it reveals if we remind ourselves of its context in the Greek scheme of values. The Greek ideal of human perfection was the harmonious and proportionate beauty of the free or noble man. The comic figure, then, was defective in terms of that primarily aesthetic norm. He represented a falling away from it, a deviation from it; he was a creature clumsy, foolish, menial, malproportioned, or generally undeveloped; a "Paphlagonian" boastful, or cowardly, or drunk, or lecherous. Tragedy, it will be remembered, was an "imitation of personages better than the ordinary man"—personages, that is to say, potentially capable of realising a free and ordered beauty in the highest degree. The Renaissance inherited the classical tradition of the separation of the styles for the comic and the tragic and pursued it with remarkable consistency. Even in the great drama of the Elizabethans, where the traditionally "ridiculous" and the traditionally "sublime" tend to merge, possibly under the influence of Christianity to which all men are ultimately as the grass of the field, comedy nevertheless for the most part is localized in socially inferior figures, and pervaded by topical satire, in contrast to the grand scale, the nobility and the universality of the historical or legendary figures. "Clown" meant "rustic labourer" in literary English for at least a century after the Renaissance. It is indeed this very distance between the "high" tragic and the "low" comic modes which is so subtly interrelated and counterpointed by Shakespeare; and one of the reasons for his ability to do this was no doubt the broadened and spiritualized conception of human perfection current in his time. The primarily aristocratic and aesthetic ideal of the Greeks, imperfectly absorbed from the classics, had by then been largely replaced by the humanistic ideal of reasonable moral virtue, shot through, as it were, by the great Christian spiritualities of humility and simplicity, according to which the lowly and the despised acquired a new value. Aristophanes had explored the comic possibilities of the grotesquely ignoble or irrational or fantastic as far as the conceptions of the ancient world allowed; New Comedy, which Aristotle described, and which chiefly influenced the Renaissance classicists, focussed its laughter upon the characteristic imperfections of an urban or civic society. The Middle Ages introduced two new creations to the comic consciousness: the mischievous, cunning vice or devil of the morality plays, and the natural fool of folk-lore whose very humiliation is felt to be nearer God's grace than all the just pride of the rich, wise, and powerful. Thus the range of Elizabethan comedy was greatly extended as it searched new, deep sources of aberration in the unreasonable, the "natural," the disreputable, and the perverse. The slave of Roman comedy becomes the fool of Shakespeare's. The difference is very great; yet both have their origin in a view of that which is defective according to some aspect of the prevailing human ideal. The possessor of the defect is unfortunate, but undefeated, in accordance with the dual nature of the clown. It is perhaps not irrelevant to note that the great age of English comedy still possessed the institution of the court jester as a constant object lesson in the implication of the comic.

What lends support to the contention that the comic is the antithesis to the ideally perfect, as that is variously conceived, is the fact that theories of laughter, however different they may seem, all appear to be reducible to just such a formula if the terms "ugly" and "worse than average" or their equivalents are interpreted not as constants but as variables. Hobbes, for instance, saw the origin of laughter in the "sudden glory" which flushes the mind with the conviction of its own superiority in the presence of another's degradation, failure, or mishap. Hobbes, it will be remembered, was the author of a philosophy of mankind according to which the best man must necessarily be the most competent and capable wolf among wolves. His human ideal is therefore a rational and successful efficiency in a competitive society, and the unsuccess

which gives rise to his "sudden glory" is clearly its obverse, and therefore, the ridiculous. His consciously neo-classical contemporary, Dryden, contrasts the ideal nature—the "nature beautified"—of heroic poetry, with the "distorted face and antic gestures" of the lazar or fool "at which we cannot forbear to laugh, because it is a deviation from nature."[3] In a later age, Bergson finds the ludicrous to reside in anything which is mechanical or rigid, obstructing the flow of life with inappropriate habitual responses. A ruling passion, for example, an *idee fixe*, a foible or mannerism, all so often the source of the ridiculous in a character, are examples of responses which have become inflexible, and so incongruous to the variety of situations in life. Bergson belonged to an age whose chief human ideal was beginning to be social adjustment, for the achievement of which an intelligent flexibility is of the first importance. To Freud, who (like Hobbes), saw the primary source of laughter in the subject rather than the object, laughter releases repressed libidinous impulses in a socially acceptable form. The child learns under pressure from society to inhibit infantile aggression and sexuality. This primitive egoism, if a way is not found for its smooth functioning in the adult personality, especially through occasional "comic" release, will prevent the achievement of the complete maturity which is the human ideal of a psychoanalytic age.

To return to our archetypal comic situation. Each of the theories of the comic sketched above provides an explanation (in principle, the same explanation) of the laughter-provoking qualities in the clown's antics. There is, or appears to be, only one important gap: no sexual interest or impulse, so far as one can see, is aroused or released by the modern circus clown. Since that element has never in fact been absent from the comedies of the world, it would seem that our archetypal situation is not quite archetypal enough. Aristotle noted that Comedy began in the improvisations of the "phallic songs." While only Freud, among the modern theorists, explicitly bases his explanation of comedy upon the release of sexual impulses, such release has in practice characterized comedy from the earliest times, and does today, both in sophisticated theater or cinema (one is hard put to it to think of a comedy which does not involve love-making) and in the ritualistic comic festivals of the folk, in so far as they have survived. Freud, indeed, has pointed to this as the primary factor marking the continuity from Greek Saturnalia to French Mardi gras, and from ancient Greek satyr plays to contemporary comedies of courtship or flirtation. Historically, before it was censored for the audiences of children, the archetypal comic situation consisted of the humiliating or ridiculing, through some ludicrous mishap, of a phallic clown—a clown whose sexuality was in some way emphasized or exaggerated. The plight of the men in *Lysistrata* would be a sophisticated development. In the children's Punch and Judy shows of today, Punch's remarkable nose has been interpreted as a faint reminiscence of such phallicism, through a transference familiar in the history of sexual symbolism. A vastly more complex instance is Falstaff, whose easy morals and immense belly make him a very Prince of Libido: having more flesh than another man he has therefore more frailty. It is indeed in the frailties of the flesh, however interpreted—narrowly, widely, subjectively, objectively—that comedy invariably deals.

But, for that matter, so does tragedy. What then is the truly distinguishing operation of comedy upon the mind? The noble hero of tragedy is possessed of a fatal flaw which brings him to disaster. The hero of comedy is, as it were, all flaw, yet no villain, and with a saving grace the nature of which it may now be possible to explain more fully.

As we have seen, a theory of the comic will find the source of the ridiculous or the ludicrous in that aspect of man's nature which prevents him from attaining the ideal perfection of which he or his society or both conceive him capable: in that aspect of his nature which belongs to the animal rather than the angel in him; in his unfortunate limiting circumstances, or in those depths of his being in which is hidden the dynamite which is ever liable to explode and shatter the calm surface of his ideal person-

ality. Freud analyzed this dynamite and found it to consist of sex and aggression. These, of course, are general words covering a variety of phenomena and, though they used a different terminology, had a different vision of man's perfection, this view of the dynamite of his nature would not have been strange to the Roman dramatists, nor to the mummers of the medieval Feast of Fools, nor to the Elizabethans, nor to Molière, nor to the comedians of the *commedia dell'arte*, nor to the writers of French farce. Above all, perhaps, it would not have been strange to the Greeks.

For the Greeks, who invented it, recognized the therapeutic value of the drama. Greek drama was an integral part of the festivals of Dionysus, god of fertility and civilization, for which his wine was a dual symbol. Symbolic figures imitating certain actions upon a stage; an audience; a formal occasion, part of the nature of which was its licensed sexuality, its temporary suspension of normal inhibitions, on the safety valve principle—such is the original locus of comic drama. All have gathered together to watch an action played out upon the stage. That action (the comic plot) is, as we have seen, essentially a series of mischances, deflations, frustrations of one kind or another. These things happen to a figure whose appetites, whose malice, or whose sex is in some way grotesquely caricatured or exaggerated. The figure is, then, a scapegoat, carrying away the audiences' own appetite, malice, or sex. Profound interest has been aroused in the audience; the elemental drives of human nature (the dynamite) have been appealed to. These have been strongly aroused, but are chastened, belittled, purged, by the mockery accorded them by their incongruity or un-success in the circumstances of the plot. Something which was of importance to the audience has been destroyed, got rid of. And yet, and this is perhaps the root of that delicate balance of impulses we express in laughter, much remains. The clown is not destroyed: he does not die, he survives; and he is moreover often, in some subtle way, triumphant. It has been said of the clown that he is "at once a safety valve for the suppressed instincts of the bully, and a subtle balm for the fears and wounds of the oppressed."[4] His inner self is triumphant, superior to circumstances. It is only his phallic self, his fleshly self, his sins, and his frailties which come to grief. Falstaff's inexhaustible wit survives the stumbling block of his belly. What has been enacted simultaneously in the minds of the audience by means of the imitation on the stage, is the fantasy of the unconscious and its reduction to proper proportions—the proportions necessary for the functioning of society where the dangerous, explosive wishes must be controlled.

Comic character, then, is the natural disposition of man to be less than perfect. Comic plot is the chapter of accidents and setbacks resulting from this comic disposition set in motion in a world of capricious fortune. The happy ending of all comedies, the comic catharsis, is the restoration of psychic balance disturbed during the course of the drama by the audience's mingled reservation from, and identification with, the comic figure. And this balance restores the perennial hope of humane survival here and now and in the conditions of this world.

The formalistic classifications of comedy that are often made—farce, comedy of manners, comedy of intrigue, etc.—are unsatisfactory because so many comedies escape such a mesh by pertaining to more than one formal kind. An analysis in terms of the principles or sources of comedy just outlined reveals the real *raison d'être* of the various forms as they arise in response to the outlook of their age. For example, typical French farce will involve simplified characters in a sexual triangle. Their motivations are earthy and materialistic. At least one of the three, lover, wife, or husband, probably more than one, will come to grief in the course of the plot in some ludicrous fashion—the husband outwitted and horned, or the lover packed in a great hurry into the linen-closet. There may be infinite variations on the theme, of course. But when it is remembered that such farce has its origin in the fabliau of the middle ages, the great period of courtly love, with its idealized *frauendienst* and its reverence for the ennobling power of love, it will be readily seen as the comic counterpart of the chivalric ideal. We can survive the high de-

mands of chivalry when we have laughed at love in its common and ignoble manifestations.

Now, if the dynamite of human nature—the irrational, the libidinous, the egoistic, the "ugly," which is comedy's subject matter—is regarded with tolerance, even with the respect accorded to a vital energy, a life force, the result is Aristophanic or Rabelaisian comedy, the comedy of licence from inhibition, and the restoration of balance or order. If, however, this original human stuff is regarded with anger or contempt, if it is called folly or vice, and so chastised, with greater or less severity, then the comedy has become satire, and a great proportion of the world's comic drama is accounted for. If, again (and this is a development dating historically from the middle ages and concerning chiefly the dynamite of sex), the instinctive and emotional life of man is regarded as itself (when properly sublimated and civilized) a great source of potential human happiness, the result is romantic comedy, in which, though the course of true love never does run smooth, it ends nevertheless in triumphant wedding bells—with "mirth in heaven, when earthly things made even atone together."

In this latter category, so well established in the theater (and today also in the cinema) from the time of Shakespeare, the character of the hero is valued on account of his capacity for human happiness despite his comic behavior or his comic setbacks or reversals of fortune. This value springs from the complex or serious motivation such as occurs in real life, which is strongly developed in this kind of comedy (as it is not, for example, in the characters of farce) and arouses sympathy, that is to say, identification at a mature and conscious level, in the audience. If the ultimate success of this potentially happy man is ascribed, in the implicit philosophy of the dramatists, to moral goodness, the work will be what has been called sentimental comedy. If his success is ascribed rather to his witty competence in society, then we have the urbane, witty comedy which has been called the comedy of manners. When the character of the comic hero is a sovereign combination of wit with moral goodness, as in the comedies of Shakespeare, then we have a vision of human happiness which outlasts changes in fashion and philosophy. When the character of the comic hero is an essence of all that is absurd, maladroit, undignified, or unfortunate combined with a natural moral goodness, as in the comedies of Chaplin, then we have a vision of human unhappiness which is its own mysterious compensation.

But with Chaplin and Schweik and the other great clowns of the present day we enter a realm where the original balance between anarchic impulse and ordered society is disturbed. The older comedians respected impulse, but they also respected society. Modern society, however, appears to have become too inimical, too oppressive, too stifling of individual life to command the respect of the comic dramatist. And so the clown in his ridiculous and pathetic failure to adjust, conform, or succeed is more than ever the secret hero of the audience's heart; and the shafts of ridicule and satire glance off the surface of his integrity, as it were, to strike at the absurdities and tyrannies of society itself. It is the comedy of a helpless and unhappy age, but it is nevertheless a true heir to the great comic tradition.

[1] *English Institute Essays.* 1948. Reprinted in *Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism,* ed. Leonard F. Dean. O.U.P. (New York, 1957) and incorporated by the author in *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957).

[2] *English Stage Comedy: English Institute Essays* (1954). Reprinted by Dean *op. cit.* and incorporated by the author in *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton, 1959).

[3] *An Account of the Ensuing Poem,* Preface to *Annus Mirabilis,* 1956.

[4] Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London, 1935).