The Meanings of Comedy*

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I. Our New Sense of the Comic

Doubtless Meredith and Bergson were alike wearied by the "heavy moralizings" of the nineteenth century, with its "terrific tonnage," and thus sought relief in comedy of manners. For both really confine their idea of comedy within the range of comedy of manners; and they have given us our finest, most sensitive theory of that form. Comedy, says Bergson, is a game—a game that imitates life. And in writing the introduction to *The Egoist,* Meredith thinks of this game as dealing with human nature in the drawing room "where we have no dust of the struggling outer world, no mire, no violent crashes." The aftertaste of laughter may be bitter, Bergson grants, but comedy is itself only "a slight revolt on the surface of social life." Its gaiety happens like froth along a beach, for comedy looks at man from the outside: "It will go no farther."

For us, today, comedy goes a great deal farther—as it did for the ancients with their cruel sense of the comic. Indeed, to appreciate Bergson and Meredith we must see them both in a new perspective, now that we have lived amid the "dust and crashes" of the twentieth century and have learned how the direst calamities that befall man seem to prove that human life at its depths is inherently absurd. The comic and the tragic views of life no longer exclude each other. Perhaps the most important discovery in modern criticism is the perception that comedy and tragedy are somehow akin, or that comedy can tell us many things about our situation even tragedy cannot. At the heart of the nineteenth century Dostoevsky discovered this, and Søren Kierkegaard spoke as a modern man when he wrote that the comic

* Wylie Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy," in *Comedy,* Wylie Sypher, ed. (Doubleday & Company, 1956), pp. 193–258.

and the tragic touch one another at the absolute point of infinity—at the extremes of human experience, that is. Certainly they touch one another in the naïve art of Paul Klee, whose "little scrawls" tell the ridiculous suffering of modern man. Klee adopts the child's drawing because there is a painful wisdom in the hobgoblin laughter of children: "The more helpless they are, the more instructive are the examples they offer us." The features of modern man, whose soul is torn with alarm, are to be seen in Klee's daemonic etchings, Perseus, The Triumph of Wit Over Suffering, of which the artist himself said: "A laugh is mingled with the deep lines of pain and finally gains the upper hand. It reduces to absurdity the unmixed suffering of the Gorgon's head, added at the side. The face is without nobility—the skull shorn of its serpentine adornment except for one ludicrous remnant." In our sculpture, too, the image of modern man is reduced to absurdity—in, for example, Giacometti's figures, worn thin to naked nerve patterns and racked by loneliness.

Our comedy of manners is a sign of desperation. Kafka's novels are a ghastly comedy of manners showing how the awkward and hopelessly maladroit hero, K, is inexorably an "outsider" struggling vainly somehow to "belong" to an order that is impregnably closed by some inscrutable authority. Kafka transforms comedy of manners to pathos by looking, or feeling, from the angle of the alien soul. He treats comedy of manners from the point of view of Dostoevsky's "underground man," and his heroes are absurd because their efforts are all seen from below, and from within. In his notebooks Kafka described the anxiety with which his characters try to bear up under a perpetual judgment life passes upon them: "Watching, fearing, hoping, the answer steals round the question, peers despairingly in her enigmatic face, follows her through the maddest paths, that is, the paths leading farthest away from the answer." Kafka is a modern Jeremiah laughing in feverish merriment, prophetically writing the incredible—the depraved—comedy of our concentration camps, which are courts where the soul of contemporary man undergoes an absurd Trial by Ordeal. His comedy reaches the stage of the inarticulate, as tragedy does when Lear frets about the button.

Our new appreciation of the comic grows from the confusion in modern consciousness, which has been sadly wounded by the politics of power, bringing with it the ravage of explosion, the atrocious pain of inquisitions, the squalor of labor camps, and the efficiency of big lies. Wherever man has been able to think about his present plight he has felt "the suction of the absurd." He has been forced to see himself in unheroic positions. In his sanest moments the modern hero

is aware that he is J. Alfred Prufrock, or Osric, an attendant lord—"Almost, at times, the Fool." Or else Sweeney, the apeneck, seeking low pleasures while death and the raven drift above.

We have, in short, been forced to admit that the absurd is more than ever inherent in human existence: that is, the irrational, the inexplicable, the surprising, the nonsensical—in other words, the comic. One of the evidences of the absurd is our "dissociation of sensibility," with the ironic lack of relation between one feeling and another; and the artist now must, as Eliot once said, accept the chaos which serves for our life, span the unstable consciousness of the ordinary man: "The latter falls in love or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking." The fragmentary lives we live are an existential comedy, like the intense schizoid lives of Dostoevsky's characters. In *The Brothers Karamazov,* Ivan says, "Let me tell you that the absurd is only too necessary on earth. The world stands on absurdities, and perhaps nothing would have come to pass without them." In our modern experiences the ethical "golden mean" seems to have broken down, and man is left face to face with the preposterous, the trivial, the monstrous, the inconceivable. The modern hero lives amid irreconcilables which, as Dostoevsky suggests, can be encompassed only by religious faith—or comedy.

The sense of the absurd is at the root of our characteristic philosophy—existentialism. The existential religious hero is Kierkegaard, who wrote "In truth, no age has so fallen victim to the comic as this." Kierkegaard, like Kafka, finds that "the comical is present in every stage of life, for wherever there is life there is contradiction, and wherever there is contradiction the comical is present." Kierkegaard's highest comedy is the comedy of faith; since the religious man is the one who knows by his very existence that there is an endless, yawning difference between God and man, and yet he has the infinite, obsessive passion to devote himself to God, who is all, whereas man is nothing. Without God man does not exist; thus "the more thoroughly and substantially a human being exists, the more he will discover the comical." Finite man must take the full risk of encountering an infinite God: "Existence itself, the act of existing, is a striving, and is both pathetic and comic in the same degree." Faith begins with a sense of "the discrepancy, the contradiction, between the infinite and the finite, the eternal and that which becomes." So the highest form of comedy is that "the infinite may move within a man, and no one, no one be able to discover it through anything appearing outwardly." The earnestness of one's faith is tested by one's "sensitiveness to the comical,"

for God is all and man is nothing, and man must come to terms with God. If one exists *as* a human being, he must be hypersensitive to the absurd; and the most absurd contradiction of all is that man must risk everything without insurance against losing everything. This is precisely what ordinary "Christians" refuse to do, Kierkegaard finds; they wish to find a "safe" way to salvation, to find God without being tormented, and to base their faith on what is probable, reasonable, assured. This is itself ludicrous—the despicable comedy of "Christendom," which requires religion to be comforting and "tranquilizing." Even in his religious life man is always being confronted with the extreme hazard in the guise of the absurd.

This sense of having to live amid the irrational, the ludicrous, the disgusting, or the perilous has been dramatized by the existentialists; and it has also been boldly exploited by propagandists and those who seize power by using "the big lie," that most cynical form of modern political comedy. For all our science, we have been living through an age of Un-reason, and have learned to submit to the Improbable, if not to the Absurd. And comedy is, in Gautier's words, a logic of the absurd.

In his notebooks Kafka explained that he wanted to exaggerate situations until everything becomes clear. Dostoevsky has this sort of comic clarity—a frightening clarity of the grotesque, reducing life, as totally as tragedy, by means of a perspective that foreshortens everything, to absurdity. From this perspective, which is often Goya's or Picasso's, man looks puppetlike, and his struggles diminish to pathos. For example, in the closing pages of *The Brothers Karamazov* when Ilusha is buried, Snegiryov runs distracted about the corpse of his boy, strewing flowers on the coffin, scattering morsels of bread for sparrows on the little grave. These scenes cause a laughter so raw that it brings grimaces hardly to be distinguished from tragic response. The force of this comic "shock" is like the "qualm" stirred by tragedy; it can disorient us, "disturb" us as confusingly as tragic calamity. Melville's tormented Captain Ahab sets his course headlong "outward," driven on by the modern "delight in foundering." Like Conrad's character Kurtz, he is a madman in the grip of "merciless logic for a futile purpose." We are now more sensitive to these absurd calamities than to tragic recognitions. We appreciate Rouault, who sees man as a Clown. In its style Picasso's giant Guernica, that premonition of total war, is a shocking comic strip in black and white, showing how the ridiculous journalese of painting can be an idiom for modern art.

Guernica is like a bad dream and Kafka's novels are nightmares. The dream is nonsensical and free, having none of the logic and

sobriety of our waking selves; the very incongruity of the dream world is comic. Freud interprets the dream and the jest as a discharge of powerful psychic energies, a glimpse into the abyss of the self. We have learned to read our dreams to tell us what we really are, for we now find that the patterns of our conscious life have meanings that can be explained only by looking below them into the chaos of the unconscious life always there, old, irrational, and inarticulate except in the language of the sleeping self when, as Banquo warned Macbeth, the instruments of darkness tell us truths. By exploiting the dream, surrealism plays the comedy of modern art, and psychoanalysis plays the comedy of modern medical practice.

Freud is not the only one to suggest that the joke, like the dream, is an upsurge from the unconscious, a mechanism for releasing powerful archaic impulses always there below the level of reason.[1] The caricaturist and the masters of grotesque art have long employed a kind of dreamwork, charged with the spell of mania, like medieval gargoyles or paintings by Bosch and Gruenewald, where there is fiendish zest in wracking man's body. Expressionist art has always been one of the most potent forms of caricature, whether it be paintings by Van Gogh and Kokoschka or Michelangelo's unfinished sculptures. The caricaturist and expressionist use comic distortions that often are the overstatements of a soul shaken by neurosis. Long before Di Chirico and Yves Tanguy painted their dream-fantasies, Bergson guessed that comic automatism resembles the automatism of the dream: *"L'absurdité comique est de même nature que celle des rêves."* Bergson adds: "Whenever the comic personage mechanically holds his idea, he ends by thinking, speaking, acting as if he dreamed." Surrealism is "dream play" (*les jeux du rêve*) since the surrealist painter represents the involuntary "free" associations of the hidden life, which have their own "absurdity" and "improbability." As Bergson remarked, psychological automatism is as comic as the physical automatism of gesture. Dickens is the great artist of physical automatism with his Uriah Heeps and his Mrs. Gamps. Molière is not the only great artist of psychological automatism, for Dostoevsky's "split" characters have the mechanism of surrealist art. His people move, as we do in dreams, by

[1] Most of what I say about Freud's interpretation of comedy derives from *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious.* But I have also drawn upon Ernst Kris: *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (1952) to describe what the unconscious contributes to comic art, especially the grotesque; and also on A. P. Rossiter: *English Drama from Early Times to the Elizabethans* (1950), which has some useful passages on caricature. The remarks upon art as an "interruption" in normal consciousness are based on Anton Ehrenzweig: *Psycho-Analysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing,* 1953.

involuntary impulses; they make "psychological gestures." Surrealism surprises us with the *imprévu,* the unexpected psychic gesture controlled by the Id.

Thus the comic gesture reaches down toward the Unconscious, that dim world usually assigned to tragedy, the midnight terrain where Macbeth met the witches. The joke and the dream incongruously distort the logic of our rational life. The joke and the dream are "interruptions" in the pattern of our consciousness. So also, possibly, is any truly creative work of art a form of "interruption" of our normal patterns or designs of seeing and speaking, which are mere formulas written on the surface layer of the mind. Underneath this surface layer is the pattern-free (non-Gestalt) activity of the unconscious, undisciplined self, which cannot be expressed by the forms consciousness imposes on our vision and thought. The deepest "meanings" of art therefore arise wherever there is an interplay between the patterns of surface-perception and the pressures of depth-perception. Then the stated meanings will fringe off into unstated and unstatable meanings of great power, felt dimly but compellingly. Behind the trim scaffolding of artistic "form" and logic there whispers, for a moment, the wild voice of the unconscious self—using the disturbed language of the dream and the jest, as well as the language of tragedy. This uncivilized but knowing self Nietzsche once called Dionysian, the self that feels archaic pleasure and archaic pain. The substratum of the world of art, Nietzsche says, is "the terrible wisdom of Silenus," and Silenus is the satyr-god of comedy leading the ecstatic "chorus of natural beings who as it were live ineradicably behind every civilization." The confused statements of the dream and the joke are intolerable to the daylight, sane, Apollonian self.

No doubt the tragic experience reaches deeply down into the "interruptions" of conscious life, conjuring up our grim disinherited selves and expressing the "formless" intimations of archaic fear and archaic struggle. But in an artist like Dostoevsky the comic experience can reach as deeply down, perhaps because the comic artist begins by accepting the absurd, "the improbable," in human existence. Therefore he has less resistance than the tragic artist to representing what seems incoherent and inexplicable, and thus lowers the threshold of artistic perception. After all, comedy, not tragedy, admits the disorderly into the realm of art; the grotesque depends upon an irrational focus. Ours is a century of disorder and irrationalism.

Is it any wonder that along with our wars, our machines, and our neuroses we should find new meanings in comedy, or that comedy should represent our plight better than tragedy? For tragedy needs

the "noble," and nowadays we seldom can assign any usable meaning to "nobility." The comic now is more relevant, or at least more accessible, than the tragic. As Mephisto explains to God, one cannot understand man unless one is able to laugh: "For man must strive, and striving, he must err."

Man has been defined as a social animal, a tool-making animal, a speaking animal, a thinking animal, a religious animal. He is also a laughing animal (Malraux takes the "archaic smile" in sculpture as a sign man has become aware of his soul). Yet this definition of man is the obscurest of all, for we do not really know what laughter is, or what causes it. Though he calls his essay "Laughter," Bergson never plumbs this problem. We have never agreed about the motives, mechanism, or even the temper of laughter. Usually the Greeks laughed to express a disdain roused by seeing someone's mischance, deformity, or ugliness. One of the least agreeable scenes in classical literature is the cruel, casual slaying of wretched Dolon, a Trojan spy caught skulking one night by Diomedes and Ulysses near the Greek camp; after tormenting Dolon with a hint he can save his life, the gleeful Ulysses, smiling no doubt an archaic smile, watches Diomedes strike off the head of their captive, "green with fear." There is also scandalous Homeric mirth among the Olympians themselves when lame Hephaistos calls the gods together to ridicule his wife Aphrodite, lying trapped with brazen Ares, god of war. To be laughed at by the ancients was to be defiled.

Malice, however, is only one of the many obscure motives for laughing, which has been explained as a release from restraint, a response to what is incongruous or improper, or a sign of ambivalence—our hysteric effort to adjust our repulsion from, and our attraction to, a situation. Certainly laughter is a symptom of bewilderment or surprise. Sometimes it is said that a laugh detonates whenever there is a sudden rupture between thinking and feeling.[2] The rupture occurs the instant a situation is seen in another light. The shock of taking another point of view causes, in Bergson's words, a momentary "anesthesia of the heart."

During the Middle Ages people seem to have laughed at the grotesque as when, for instance, Chrétien de Troyes brings among the dainty knights and ladies of his romance *Yvain* a rustic lout whose "ears were big and mossy, just like an elephant's," or when Dante's gargoylelike demons caper through the lower circles of hell making obscene noises. In pious legends like "The Tumbler of Our Lady"

[2] This theory of laughter as being due to a "bisociation" of sensibility is discussed at length in Arthur Koestler: *Insight and Outlook,* 1949.

medieval laughter is charitable, becoming almost tender in anecdotes about Friar Juniper, that tattered soul who in meekness and humility played seesaw with children.

Renaissance laughter was complex. Sometimes it was like Cellini's, swaggering with contempt—*sprezzatura.* When Machiavelli laughs he almost sneers, notably in his play *Mandragola,* showing how a stupid old husband is cuckolded. We can fancy that his Prince would laugh somewhat like a Borgia. Then there is Erasmus' satire, quiet and blighting; less boisterous than Rabelais' monstrous glee. Ben Jonson's plays ridicule the classic-bourgeois "types" (as Bergson would call them) who, like Rabelais' mammoths, are laughable because they have an excess of one "humor" in their disposition or "complexion." Shakespeare's theatre is filled with medically "humorous" persons like Falstaff, who raise a laugh at once brutal, loving, and wise. The laughter in Cervantes' *Quixote* is gentler and more thoughtful, and not so corrosive as Hamlet's wit, which is tinged with Robert Burton's melancholy.

Hamlet's "disturbed" laughter was very "modern," as was also the strained, joyless grimace of Thomas Hobbes, who explained laughter as a sense of "sudden glory" arising from our feeling of superiority whenever we see ourselves triumphantly secure while others stumble. Hobbes brings in the note of "biological" laughter, for he takes life to be a struggle for power waged naturally in a brutish combat "where every man is enemy to every man." Some three hundred years later Anthony M. Ludovici rephrased Hobbes's theory in Darwinian form by supposing that a laugh is man's way of showing his fangs.[3] And man needs, like any animal, to show his fangs only when he is threatened; we laugh in self-defense and bare our teeth to recruit our sinking spirits or to ease our aching sense of inferiority or danger. Laughter is a tactic for survival, a mark of "superior adaptation" among gregarious animals. The weak and the savage both laugh. Ludovici agrees with Nietzsche that man laughs only because he can suffer excruciatingly; and his direst, most inward sickness is the thwarting of his will.

On this latter theme we can play every variation of modern comedy with all its satanic ironies and romantic dreamwork. The "genial" romantics of the early nineteenth century assumed, with Charles Lamb, that laughter is an overflow of sympathy, an amiable feeling of identity with what is disreputably human, a relish for the whimsical, the odd, the private blunder. Carlyle (of all people!) cheerfully supposed that the man who smiles is affectionate. But there were the diabolic

[3] Anthony M. Ludovici: *The Secret of Laughter,* 1932.

romantics, too, driven by the Will to Power or consumed by their own poisons, and they laughed menacingly, frantically. Baudelaire's laugh, heard in the dark bohemian world of Paris—the Paris which drove men desperate and betrayed their ideals—is "a nervous convulsion, and involuntary spasm," a proof of man's fallen state.[4] The feverish laugh of Baudelaire's hero sears his lips and twists his vitals; it is a sign of infinite nobility and infinite pain. Man laughed only after the Exile, when he knew sin and suffering; the comical is a mark of man's revolt, boredom, and aspiration. "The laugh is satanic; it is likewise deeply human." It is the bitter voice of nineteenth-century disillusion. Schopenhauer was the first to define the romantic irony in this desolate laugh of the "underground man": laughter "is simply the sudden perception of incongruity" between our ideals and the actualities before us. Byron jested "And if I laugh at any mortal thing/'Tis that I may not weep."

The mirth of the disenchanted and frustrated idealist, frenzied by his sense of the impassable distance between what might be and what is, reaches its shrillest pitch in Nietzsche, the scorpion-philosopher, exempt from every middle-class code, whose revolt is, unlike Bergson's comedy of "slight revolt on the surface of social life," savage. Nietzsche is able to transvalue all social values by pain, disgust, fury. This sickly laughter of the last romantics is the most confused and destructive mirth Western man has ever allowed himself. It has all the pessimism which Bergson chose not to consider. Rimbaud's laugh is a symptom of anguish and a glimpse into the abyss of the self. It is a terrifying scorn, a shameless expense of lust, an eruption of the pleasure-principle in a world where pleasure is denied. Nietzsche's laughter is a discharge far more "possessed" than the Freudian sexual release.

So Bergson's analysis of laughter is incomplete, which may explain why he thinks comedy works only from "the outside." Comedy may, in fact, not bring laughter at all; and certain tragedies may make us laugh hysterically. It was Shelley who found the comedy in *King Lear* to be "universal, ideal, and sublime." Ben Jonson himself noted "Nor is the moving of laughter always the end of comedy." When Coleridge lectured on *Hamlet* and *Lear* he pointed out that terror is closely joined with what is ludicrous, since "The laugh is rendered by nature itself the language of extremes, even as tears are." Thus

[4] Probably the most important discussion of "satanic" laughter is Baudelaire's brief essay "On the Essence of Laughter, and In General, On the Comic in the Plastic Arts," which appeared as early as 1855 and was reprinted in *Aesthetic Curiosities*. [See in this volume p. 448.]

Hamlet "will be found to touch on the verge of the ludicrous," because "laughter is equally the expression of extreme anguish and horror as of joy." The grimace of mirth resembles the grimace of suffering; comic and tragic masks have the same distortion. Today we know that a comic action sometimes yields tragic values.[5] In Balzac's *human* comedy (*Comédie humaine*) we meet Old Goriot and Cousin Pons, those heroes of misery.

If we have no satisfactory definition of laughter, neither do we have any satisfactory definition of comedy. Indeed, most of the theories of laughter and comedy fail precisely because they oversimplify a situation and an art more complicated than the tragic situation and art. Comedy seems to be a more pervasive human condition than tragedy. Often we are, or have been, or could be, Quixotes or Micawbers or Malvolios, Benedicks or Tartuffes. Seldom are we Macbeths or Othellos. Tragedy, not comedy, limits its field of operation and is a more closely regulated form of response to the ambiguities and dilemmas of humanity. The comic action touches experience at more points than tragic action. We can hardly hope that our various definitions of comedy will be more compatible than our definitions of laughter; yet each of the many definitions has its use in revealing the meanings of comedy. Bergson's alone will not suffice, or Meredith's either; and they both will mean more when seen against the full spectrum of comic values.

Ordinarily we refer to "high" and "low" comedy; but we cannot speak of "low" tragedy. All tragedy ought to be "high." There are, of course, various orders of tragic action, such as *drame* and "heroic tragedy"; however, as tragedy falls away from its "high" plane it tends to become something else than tragedy. Tragedy is indeed "an achievement peculiarly Greek"—and needs a special view of man's relation to the world.[6] But comedy thrives everywhere and fearlessly runs the gamut of effects from "high" to "low" without diminishing its force or surrendering its values or even jeopardizing them. Once Mme. de Staël said: "Tragedies (if we set aside some of the masterpieces) require less knowledge of the human heart than comedies." What a strange opinion! Yet which of Shakespeare's plays really shows a more profound knowledge of the hearts of fathers and children: *Lear,* or *Henry IV,* 1 and 2, and *Henry V?* Is not the crisis luridly overstated in *Lear* and met with greater insight in the figures of Henry

[5] According to L. C. Knights "comedy is essentially a serious activity" ("Notes on Comedy" in *Determinations,* ed. F. R. Leavis, 1934). [See in this volume p. 181.]

[6] As Edith Hamilton says in *The Greek Way.*

IV, Hal, Hotspur, and Falstaff? Can we honestly claim that Shakespeare reveals more about life in the tragedy of Lear than in the conflicts between Henry and his wild son? Are not many of the problems raised in the great tragedies solved in the great comedies?

Mme. de Staël continues: "The imagination without much difficulty can represent what often appears—the features of sorrow. Tragic characters take on a certain similarity that blurs the finer distinctions between them, and the design of a heroic action determines in advance the course they must take." (Whereas Bergson claims it is comedy that deals with types.) Surely the comic action is more unpredictable, and delight is an emotion quite as individual as grief, remorse, or guilt.

Further, and illogically, "low" comedy is as legitimate as "high." In fact, the lower the range, the more authentic the comedy may be, as we know when we behold the Wife of Bath, that slack daughter of Eve, or Falstaff, that ruffian always on the point of untrussing. At the bottom of the comic scale—where the human becomes nearly indistinguishable from the animal and where the vibration of laughter is longest and loudest—is the "dirty" joke or the "dirty" gesture. At this depth comedy unerringly finds the lowest common denominator of human response, the reducing-agent that sends us reeling back from our proprieties to the realm of old Pan. The unquenchable vitality of man gushes up from the lower strata of Rabelais' comedy, inhabited by potbellied monsters who tumultuously do as they wish in a world built entirely with the apparatus of a gargantuan pedagogy. There we drop the mask which we have composed into the features of our decent, cautious selves. Rabelais strips man of his breeches; he is the moral *sans-culotte*. Psychologists tell us that any group of men and women, no matter how "refined," will, sooner or later, laugh at a "dirty" joke, the question being not whether they will laugh but when, or at precisely what "dirty" joke; that is, under exactly what co-efficient of stress a code of "decency" breaks apart and allows the human being to fall steeply down to the recognition of his inalienable flesh.

Yet laughter at the obscenest jest forever divides man from animal, because the animal is never self-conscious about any fleshly act whatever; whereas man is not man without being somehow uneasy about the "nastiness" of his body. One of the deepest paradoxes in comedy thus reveals itself in obscenity, which is a threshold over which man enters into the human condition; it is a comic equivalent to the religious state of original sin or of tragic "error," and man may as justly be thought human because of his sense of what is "dirty" as because

of his sense of what is "evil," "sinful," or fearful. This elemental self-awareness—this consciousness of shame at one's flesh—sets one of the lowest margins for civilization; and, conversely, a hypersensitivity to what is "obscene" is a mark of a decadent society. The paradox in comic filth was madly intensified in the satire of Jonathan Swift, that puritan pornographer, who wrote in his notebook that "A nice man is a man of nasty ideas." Swift forces comic obscenity to its extremes in Gulliver's disgust at the Yahoos; his fastidiousness is insane when Gulliver is frightened by the red-haried female Yahoo who stands gazing and howling on the bank, inflamed with desire to embrace his naked body.

As we move "up" the scale of comic action, the mechanisms become more complex but no more "comic." [7] Physical mishaps, pratfalls, and loud collisions are the crudest products of Bergson's comic "automatism." It is hard to distinguish these pleasures from our glee at physical deformity; and here we detect the cruelty inherent in comedy, which may perhaps be another form of the cruelty inherent in tragic disaster. Essentially our enjoyment of physical mishap or deformity springs from our surprise and delight that man's motions are often absurd, his energies often misdirected. This is the coarsest, most naïve, comedy of manners. Another sort of mechanical comedy is the farce—mistaken identities, coincidences, mistimings—which can be a very complicated engine of plot devices. In this range of comedy the characters need only be puppets moved from the outside, as events require. There is the right key to the wrong door, or the wrong key to the right door; and it does not matter very much who is inside, provided it is the unexpected figure. In these comic vehicles fate takes the guise of happy or unhappy chance, which is, of course, only a tidy arrangement of improbable possibilities. On this sort of artificial framework comedy displays some of its most glittering designs.

Or comedy can be a mechanism of language, the repartee that sharply levels drama and life to a sheen of verbal wit. Congreve's cool, negligent persons like Fainall are beings who have a *verbal* existence, of extremely delicate taste, and able to refine all their pleasures to raillery: "I'd no more play with a man that slighted his ill fortune than I'd make love to a woman who undervalued the loss of her reputation." The transparent Mrs. Fainall lives and moves in the same dry atmosphere and speaks with the same brittle tongue: "While I only hated my husband, I could bear to see him; but since I have

[7] The "scale" of comic effects is arranged in Alan Reynolds Thompson: *The Anatomy of Drama,* 1942, Chapter VI. I have modified Thompson's scale in certain ways.

despised him, he's too offensive." Such comedy of manners does not hesitate to sacrifice humanity to dialogue. Or rather, the dialogue itself may be a fragile mechanism of wit to elevate the comedy to "intellectual" heights. Shakespeare's intricate wit in *Love's Labour's Lost,* with its "flowers of fancy, the jerks of invention," demands of us an agility that makes the brain spin. The play is a thin fabric of banter dazzling us with preciosity, its quick venue of phrase—"snip, snap, and home." At its gilded moments this comedy feeds upon dainties, delights to drink ink, to eat paper, to replenish the spirit with joy, to come to honorable terms with a code of manners, and to leave trudging far behind those who are sensible only in the duller parts.

But it is more than a parterre of devices: it is a drama played by those odd, lovable Shakespearean creatures for whom Bergson seems to have so little feeling—they are "characters" in the British sense of the word. Berowne and Don Armado are among them, and they inhabit the higher domain of comedy where we meet Fielding's Squire Western, Chaucer's Monk, Cervantes' Quixote, Sterne's Uncle Toby, and Dickens' Sam Weller. Such persons cannot exist in the dry seclusion of farce. They require the mellow neighborhood of a comedy of humors which gathers into its action spirits of strong and perverse disposition and convincing weight. These characters thrive at more genial latitudes than Ben Jonson allowed them in his comedy of humors, which was too harshly satiric. English literature is, as Taine said, the native province of these unruly creatures whose life blood pulses richly, whose features are odd, and whose opinions, gestures, vices, and habits control the mechanism of the plot in which they happen to be cast. Indeed, such dispositions may temper the whole climate in which events happen and constantly threaten to wreck the tight logic of a fiction. Mercutio and Benedick are incorrigible fellows of this sort. We never take seriously the action in which they have a role; but we take them seriously. They live for us as Falstaff lives; for Falstaff is more than a sack of guts. He moves the whole play from within; he is a temperamental as well as an anatomical grotesque.

These "characters" realized in depth stand at the threshold of "high" comedy, which is really a transformation of comedy of manners. Whenever a society becomes self-conscious about its opinions, codes, or etiquette, comedy of manners may serve as a sort of philosophic engine called "comedy of ideas." Frail as they are, and known best in their moments of raillery, Millamant and Mirabell raise Congreve's *Way of the World* to a bolder order of comedy of manners:

"Let us," says Millamant to Mirabell, "be as strange as if we had been married a great while, and as well bred as if we were not married at all." The edge of this comedy is sharpened by sanity as well as verbal wit, and, as Meredith clearly saw, Molière magnified comedy of manners to the dimensions of a criticism of life. Our most provoking social critic is Shaw, although Pirandello soars farther into a crystalline sphere of ideas. The world of Aristophanes could have been shaped only in the sophisticated theatre of an Athens that had begun to examine its own conventions. Aristophanes is like Erasmus or Gide, who serve as the intellectual conscience of a nervous and self-scrutinizing society where all is not now so well as it might be or has been or seems to be.

At the radiant peak of "high" comedy—a peak we can easily sight from Meredith's essay—laughter is qualified by tolerance, and criticism is modulated by a sympathy that comes only from wisdom. Just a few writers of comedy have gained this unflinching but generous perspective on life, which is a victory over our absurdities but a victory won at a cost of humility, and won in a spirit of charity and enlightenment. Besides Shakespeare in, perhaps, *The Tempest,* one might name Cervantes and Henry James and Jane Austen, or Thomas Mann in his *Magic Mountain,* when pliable, diseased Clavdia yields carelessly to the stricken Hans Castorp in a scene where the grimness of human life, its folly and its error, are seen clearly and with a perverse tenderness: *"Petit bourgeois!"* she says to him—*"Joli bourgeois à la petite tache humide."* For they both know that the body, love, and death are all three the same thing, and that the flesh is sickness and desire, and life only a fever in matter. This is how "high" comedy chastens men without despair, without rancor, as if human blunders were seen from a godlike distance, and also from within the blundering self. The deep humiliation and reassurance in Don Quixote's madness and recovery, with his resignation, detachment, and self-awareness, are all confirmed by the experience of Shakespeare's Benedick—to whom Meredith appealed. After proving himself as foolish as the rest of the world, Benedick comes to a vision of the human condition: "For man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion." Benedick speaks without bitterness, bias, or pride; and has learned, like Hans Castorp, to accept the insufficiency of man without being damaged.

So the range of comedy is more embracing than the range of tragedy; and if tragedy occurs at some middle point in ethical life where failure is weighed against man's nobility of spirit, comedy ventures out into the farther extremes of experience in both directions, toward

the bestial or "obscene," and at the other end of the spectrum toward the insane heroics of Nietzsche or the vision of Prospero, who sees sin as the last mistake of all our many mistakes, dispelled before our clearer reason whenever hate seems more absurd than charity.

We may prefer one theory of comedy to another; but we shall find it hard to get along without the other. In *Winter's Tale,* Autolycus meditates on his lot: "I am courted now with a *double occasion.*" The phrase is useful, for comedy is built upon double occasions, double premises, double values. "Nothing human is alien to me," says the character in Terence. Nothing human is alien to comedy. It is an equivocal art. If we now have trouble isolating comedy from tragedy, this is not because comedy and tragedy are identical, but rather because comedy often intersects the orbit of tragic action without losing its autonomy. Instead, comedy in its own right, boldly and illogically, lays claim to some of the values that traditionally are assigned to tragedy alone. Think, for example, of Henry James's "Beast In the Jungle," which really is comedy of manners suddenly consumed in the flame of Marcher's grief that he has lost May forever through his own selfishness. Here is comedy seen ruthlessly "from within" as Bergson did not allow. Marcher is a fool—but a sinister fool, an egoist far more barbaric than Meredith's sleek Sir Willoughby Patterne. And James's London, a society of genteel manners and frail nerves, is a scene where savage eyes glare behind the social simper.

II. The Ancient Rites of Comedy

In fact, to interpret the complications and contradictions in comedy, we must look far backward toward Aristotle and the Greeks; for the meanings in comedy are tribally old, and Bergson and Meredith refine almost beyond recognition the primitive violence of comedy, which, curiously, reappears again in James, Kafka, and "us moderns."

The notion of an affinity between tragedy and comedy would not be strange to the Greeks: not to Socrates, we know, because of what happens in *The Symposium,* a very dramatic dialogue where Plato brings together in debate the comedian Aristophanes, the tragedian Agathon, and along with them the goat-faced Socrates, the philosophic clown, a figure who stands near the center of all the larger problems of comedy. In the course of this night-long dialogue Socrates is described by Alcibiades as looking "exactly like the masks of Silenus." He turns to Socrates and asks: "You will not deny that your face is like that of a satyr? And there is a resemblance in other points too. For example, you are a bully." Yet Socrates makes the notorious Alcibiades ashamed of his misdeeds. Alcibiades complains,

"Mankind are nothing to him; all his life is spent in mocking and flouting at them." This Socrates, resembling a caricature of a man, is the person who alone is able to make the dissolute Athenians care for their souls; his words "amaze and possess the soul of every man." Plato reports that by daybreak only Aristophanes and Agathon are still awake to hear Socrates insisting that anyone who can write tragedy can also write comedy because the craft (*techne*) of writing comedy is the same as the craft of writing tragedy.

Surely Socrates, comedian and martyr, mocker and moralist, was the proper one to hold this notion, which has gained new implication now that the social anthropologists have discovered what Aristotle already knew—namely, that comedy is a primal rite; a rite transformed to art. As F. M. Cornford puts it, comedy is "a scene of sacrifice and a feast." [8] Aristotle intimated as much in the *Poetics* by stating that at first both tragedy and comedy were improvisations, the one rising from the Dithyramb, the other from phallic songs "still used as ritual in many of our cities." These improvisations having evolved in different ways, each found its "natural form," the comic writer presenting men as "worse than they are," the tragic writer as "better," and the comic being a version of the Ludicrous—which in turn is a variety of the Ugly without being painful or destructive. Comedy, he adds, has no history—that is, it passed unnoticed for a long time, although it had definite "forms" (*schemata*) even in the early poets. Aristotle thinks that tragedy gained its "magnitude" after it passed its "satyric" phase and took on a "stately manner" at a "late phase" of its history. Thereafter tragedy imitated "noble actions" of "noble personages," whereas comedy dealt with the "meaner sorts of actions among the ignoble." He also says that comedy turned from an early use of "invective" to a "dramatizing of the ridiculous." In early satyric dramas, poetry was adapted to dancing.

However cryptic Aristotle's comment may be, it is clear that he traces the origins of drama to some sort of fertility rite—Dionysiac or phallic—the primitive "sacrifice and feast" mentioned by Cornford. It is now accepted that art is born of rites and that the comic and tragic masks are themselves archetypal symbols for characters in a

[8] Behind my whole discussion of this rite and my whole account of the inconsistent theories necessary to explain comedy is Francis M. Cornford: *The Origin of Attic Comedy,* 1914. Cornford's interpretation seems to me to offer our only means of understanding the incompatibles in comedy without laying ourselves open to a charge of willful illogicality. These incompatibles in comedy are also dealt with effectively in Johan Huizinga: *Homo Ludens* and in Élie Aubouin: *Technique et psychologie du comique.* See also Northrop Frye: "The Argument of Comedy" in *English Institute Essays, 1948.*

tribal "semantics of ritual." Behind tragedy and comedy is a prehistoric death-and-resurrection ceremonial, the rite of killing the old year (the aged king) and bringing in the new season (the resurrection or initiation of the adolescent king). Associated with killing the old king and devouring his sacrificial body was the ancient rite of purging the tribe by expelling a scapegoat on whose head were heaped the sins of the past year. Frazer describes what happened during this "public expulsion of evils" at a season when there was an "oblation of first fruits":

> . . . the time of year when the ceremony takes place usually coincides with some well-marked change of season. . . . this public and periodic expulsion of devils is commonly preceded or followed by a period of general license, during which the ordinary restraints of society are thrown aside, and all offences, short of the gravest, are allowed to pass unpunished. (*Golden Bough*)

At this public purging or catharsis the scapegoat was often the divine man or animal, in the guise of victim, to whom were transferred the sins and misfortunes of the worshipers. Eventually the divine character of the scapegoat was forgotten; as Frazer notes, he became an ordinary victim, a wretch who was a condemned criminal perhaps, actually as well as ritually guilty. This ancient death-and-resurrection rite, then, seems to have had a double meaning: the killing of the god or king to save him and the tribe from the sterility of age, and the expulsion of evils (or devils) amid rejoicing of a people who were redeemed by the sacrifice of a hero-victim.

From this rudimentary sacrifice-and-feast evolved comic and tragic poetry, using a "canonical" plot formula older than either art, an elemental folk drama from which derived in obscure ways the "action" (myth) of the Athenian theatre. In its typical form the archaic fertility ceremony—involving the death or sacrifice of a hero-god (the old year), the rebirth of a hero-god (the new year), and a purging of evil by driving out a scapegoat (who may be either god or devil, hero or villain)—requires a contest or *agon* between the old and new kings, a slaying of a god or king, a feast and a marriage to commemorate the initiation, reincarnation, or resurrection of the slain god, and a final triumphal procession or *komos,* with songs of joy. Behind the marriage ceremonial probably lies the myth of the primal union between the earth-mother and the heaven-father. Following this revelation of the mysteries of life, the new hero-king is proclaimed and elevated: there is an "apotheosis," epiphany, or manifestation of the young hero-god (a theophany).

The rites may take the guise of an initiation or testing of the

strength of the hero or his fertility, perhaps in the form of a "questioning" or catechism, after which there comes to him a "discovery" or "recognition"—an *anagnorisis* or new knowledge. Or else the sacrifice may be interrupted by an unwelcome intruder (an *alazon*) who views the secret rites; he is a profaner of the mysteries, an alien. This character must be put to flight or else confounded in a "struggle" that may also occur in the form of a catechism, to which he does not know the proper answers. In either case there is a debate, a dialectic contest, which is preserved in Aristophanes' *Clouds,* for instance, as an argument between "Right Logic" and "Wrong Logic." Thus again the comic action is double, since it is both a rational debate and a phallic orgy. Logic and passion appear together in the primal comic formula.

In Cornford's opinion the dramatic form known as tragedy eventually suppressed the sexual magic in this canonical plot, leaving only the portrayal of the suffering and death of the hero, king, or god. Comedy, however, kept in the foreground the erotic action, together with the disorderly rejoicing at the rebirth or resurrection of the god-hero who survives his *agon.* In this sense comedy preserves the archaic "double occasion" of the plot formula, the dual and wholly incompatible meanings of sacrifice and feast, cruelty and festival, logic and license. So much we may read into Aristotle's remark that comedy was, like tragedy, originally an improvisation, its "action" being a procession of the devotees of Phales carrying the emblem of the god, that profane and sacred symbol, the ithyphallus, the *penis erectus.* After pausing at the place of sacrifice to pray to Dionysus they continued their procession to the burden of phallic songs.

If this indeed be the origin of comedy we can guess why Aristotle said that "tragedy advanced by slow degrees, and having passed through many changes, found its natural form and then stopped evolving." Unlike comedy, tragedy is a "closed" form of art, with a single, fixed, and contained meaning (by contrast to the disorderly relaxed meanings in comedy). Tragedy demands a law of necessity or destiny, and a finality that can be gained only by stressing a logic of "plot" or "unified action" with a beginning, middle, and end. Within the confines of this action the hero is given to sacrifice or death. That is, tragedy performs the sacrificial rite without the festival—which means that it is a less complex, less ambiguous form of drama than comedy. Retaining its double action of penance and revel, comedy remains an "improvisation" with a loose structure and a precarious logic that can tolerate every kind of "improbability."

The coherent plot is vital to tragic theatre (Aristotle says that plot

is the very soul of tragedy); and a tragic action needs to convey a sense of destiny, inevitability, and foreordination. The tragic poet often implies there are unchanging moral laws behind the falling thunderbolt. The fate of a tragic hero needs to be made "intelligible" as the comic hero's fate does not; or at least tragic fate has the force of "necessity" even if it is not "intelligible." Somehow tragedy shows what "must" happen, even while there comes a shock of unsurmised disaster. As Aristotle said, in tragedy, coincidence must have an air of probability. Then too, tragedy subordinates "character" to the design of the plot; for the purpose of tragedy, says Aristotle, is not to depict "character," but, rather, to show "men in action," so that the "character" of a tragic hero reveals itself in a deed which expresses his moral disposition. Comedy, on the contrary, can freely yield its action to surprise, chance, and all the changes in fortune that fall outside the necessities of tragic myth, and can present "character" for its own sake.

Following what Aristotle implied, Cornford is able to say that if tragedy requires plot first of all, comedy is rooted so firmly in "character" its plot seems derivative, auxiliary, perhaps incidental. Unlike tragedy, comedy does not have to guard itself by any logic of inevitability, or by academic rules. Comedy makes artistic all the unlikely possibilities that tragic probability must reject. It keeps more of the primitive aspect of *play* than does tragedy.

From the anthropologist's view the tragic action, however inspiring and however perfect in artistic form, runs through only one arc of the full cycle of drama; for the entire ceremonial cycle is birth: struggle: death: resurrection. The tragic arc is only birth: struggle: death. Consequently the range of comedy is wider than the tragic range—perhaps more fearless—and comic action can risk a different sort of purgation and triumph.[9] If we believe that drama retains any of the mythical values of the old fertility rite, then the comic cycle is the only fulfilled and redemptive action, and, strange to think, the death and rebirth of the god belong more fittingly to the comic than to the tragic theatre. Is this the reason why it is difficult for tragic art to deal with Christian themes like the Crucifixion and the Resurrection? Should we say that the drama of the struggle, death, and rising—Gethsemane, Calvary, and Easter—actually belongs in the comic rather than the tragic domain? The figure of Christ as god-man is surely the archetypal hero-victim. He is mocked, reviled, crowned with thorns—a scapegoat King.

[9] Gertrude Rachel Levy in *The Gate of Horn* (1948), p. 319 ff., stresses this interpretation; but, again, my primary debt is to Cornford.

If the authentic comic action is a sacrifice and a feast, debate and passion, it is by the same token a Saturnalia, an orgy, an assertion of the unruliness of the flesh and its vitality. Comedy is essentially a Carrying Away of Death, a triumph over mortality by some absurd faith in rebirth, restoration, and salvation. Originally, of course, these carnival rites were red with the blood of victims. The archaic seasonal revel brought together the incompatibles of death and life. No logic can explain this magic victory over Winter, Sin, and the Devil. But the comedian can perform the rites of Dionysus and his frenzied gestures initiate us into the secrets of the savage and mystic power of life. Comedy is sacred and secular.

Thus it happens that from the earliest time the comic ritual has been presided over by a Lord of Misrule, and the improvisations of comedy have the aspect of a Feast of Unreason, a Revel of Fools—a *Sottie*. Comedy is a release, a taking off the masks we have put on to deal with others who have put on decent masks to deal with us. The Church herself knew how salutary is this comic rite of unmasking, for near the season of Lent the monks used to appoint one of their number to be Lord of Unreason and chant the liturgy of Folly, during which an Ass was worshiped and the mass parodied in a ceremony no less religious, in its profane way, than the Dionysian and Saturnalian revels of Greece and Rome.[10] During these *ludi inhonesti* the monks at vespers gave the staff of office to a Lord of Misrule while they chanted *"deposuit potentes de sede, et exultavit humiles."* In performing the mock mass the celebrants brayed the responses. The first Herod of the mystery plays may have been *Rex Stultorum,* and we know that medieval drama never excluded the comic from its religious ritual. Those in the thrall of carnival come out, for a moment, from behind the façade of their "serious" selves, the façade required by their vocation. When they emerge from this façade, they gain a new perspective upon their official selves and thus, when they again retire behind their usual *personae,* they are more conscious of the duplicity of their existence. That is why Freud thought of the comic as an "unmasking," a mechanism that allows, whether we watch or play it, a "free discharge" of impulses we daily have to repress. The carnival is an hour when we are permitted to recover our "lost infantile laughter" and to rejoice again with the pleasure of a child. It redeems us from our "professional" life.

Aristotle said that tragedy works a purgation or "catharsis" and carries off harmful passions by means of an allowed public cleansing

[10] This parody is described in A. P. Rossiter: *English Drama from Early Times to the Elizabethans,* 1950.

of the self, enabling us to face with poise the calamities of life. Tragedy has been called "mithridatic" because the tragic action, inoculating us with large doses of pity and fear, inures the self to the perils we all face. Comedy is no less mithridatic in its effects on the self, and has its own catharsis. Freud said that nonsense is a toxic agent acting like some "poison" now and again required by the economy of the soul. Under the spell of this intoxication we reclaim for an instant our "old liberties," and after discharging our inhibited impulses in folly we regain the sanity that is worn away by the everyday gestures. We have a compulsion to be moral and decent, but we also resent the obligations we have accepted. The irreverence of the carnival disburdens us of our resentment and purges our ambivalence so that we can return to our duties as honest men. Like tragedy, comedy is homeopathic. It cures folly by folly.

The tragic law works a transformation: from sin and suffering come calm of mind and resistance to disaster, to fears that weaken us. The transformations in comedy are equally miraculous: from license and parody and unmasking—or putting on another mask—come renewed sanity and responsibility, a confidence that we have looked at things from a lower angle and therefore know what is incorruptible. In Shakespeare's play the madness of midsummer night is necessary to purge doting and inconstant lovers. After the fierce vexation of their dreams comes the bright Athenian dawn, with secure judgment. As Hippolyta says:

> And all their minds transfigured so together,
> More witnesseth than fancy's images,
> And grows to something of great constancy;
> But howsoever, strange and admirable.

The comic perspective can be reached only by making game of "serious" life. The comic rites are necessarily impious, for comedy is sacrilege as well as release. That is one reason why comedy is intolerable to the sober moralist Rousseau, who gravely protests that the women of Geneva will be corrupted by going to the theatre to see how Molière satirizes virtuous men like Alceste. Plato has the same puritan timidity, despising the art that stirs up "the rebellious principle" in men, "especially at a public festival when a promiscuous crowd is assembled in a theatre" where passions are roused and fed. Plato's high-minded snobbism, like Rousseau's petty-bourgeois "seriousness," is brought to bear chiefly against tragedy; yet both have an abiding fear of the carnival, which has the power "of harming even the good" by its contagious impieties. Plato warns his Guardians

of the ideal State not to be given to laughter, for "violent laughter tends to provoke an equally violent reaction." He especially fears buffooneries or any "impulse to play the clown"—"and by encouraging its impudence at the theatre you may be unconsciously carried away into playing the comedian in your private life." But Freud saw what this impudence means, for the comic action is a mode of "representation through the opposite," and man must periodically befoul the holy and reduce himself to folly. We find ourselves reflected in the comedian, who satisfies our need for impieties.

Nietzsche believed that we discover truth in the excesses of a Dionysiac orgy, which is ecstasy as well as pain. This orgy takes place in the theatre he calls "epidemic" because it sweeps the individual into the tide of a mass emotion. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche says that Greek drama was played at a point of conflict between our Apollonian and our Dionysian selves. The Apollonian self is reason (*logos*), while the unruly Dionysiac self finds its voice in song (*melos*)—the song of the chorus. Who are the chorus, singing before the actors (who stand apart to speak their dialogue)? They are the satyr-selves, the natural beings madly giving out cries of joy and sorrow that arise from the vast cosmic night of primordial existence. "Is it possible," Nietzsche asks, "that madness is not necessarily a symptom of degeneration, of decline, of a decadent culture? Perhaps this is a question for alienists—there are neuroses of *health?*" Nietzsche finds the substratum of both comedy and tragedy in the old satyr-self: "Our deepest insights must—and should—appear as follies, and under certain circumstances as crimes." So Zarathustra rejoices in the Ass-Festival: "A little valiant nonsense, some divine service and ass-festival, some old joyful Zarathustra-fool, some blusterer to blow your souls bright." When he sings the wild songs of Bacchus, man loses his personal identity, his "differentiation," and ceases to be a thinker. He becomes the Dionysiac hero, the archetypal Reveller. In the epidemic theatre there is a metamorphosis, for civilized man finds again his archaic being among the throng.

The Dionysiac theatre consecrates truth by outbursts of laughter. Comedy desecrates what it seeks to sanctify. The orgiastic cleansing of the self and the tribe is ritually performed in Shakespeare's *Henry IV,* 1 and 2, which is a Feast of Unreason ceremonially held in the taverns of Eastcheap, with Falstaff presiding as Lord of Misrule. The Lancastrian king Henry IV, Bolingbroke, has under the guise of just causes usurped the throne and slain the anointed king, Richard II. After this stroke of power politics Henry has ventured to put on the mask of repute and piety; but behind this decent royal *persona* is the

"shadow" self of the old unscrupulous Bolingbroke, and he confesses to Hal:

> . . . God knows, my son,
> By what by-paths and indirect crookt ways
> I met this crown; and I myself know well
> How troublesome it sat upon my head . . .

Henry cannot wear the royal garments easily because he has come to his throne by the unholy cunning of the opportunist. Richard's blood will not out, and like a tragic guilt it stains the grace of Henry's rule. Yet Bolingbroke cannot drop the mask. So Hal's heritage is tainted, and the Lancastrian line must be purged. This false righteousness can be washed away only by rites acted hilariously on Gadshill, where Hal connives at another, baser thievery that is detected—a parody of his father's practice. In the depths of bohemia, amid whores, parasites, and cowards, a realm where Falstaff is king and priest, young Hal is initiated into the company of Fools and Rogues. Falstaff asks the ruthless question: "What is honor?" The Lancastrians must answer before they are legitimate kings. With all the lewdness of the comedian Falstaff reduces to absurdity the lineage of Bolingbroke when he jests at the parentage of young Harry and knows him to be his father's son only by a villainous hanging lip, which proclaims him honestly begot. In this pit of degradation Hal cleanses himself and his line from the policy of his ancestors, and by coming out from behind the façade of Lancastrian pompousness he proves that he is, indeed legitimately, the heir apparent. By stooping to Doll Tearsheet, Harry makes himself eligible to woo Kate of France. Falstaff is at once devil and priest, coward and hero, tempter and scapegoat, and essentially the satyr who lives ineradicably behind the façade of every culture. Without his ribaldry, his drunken wisdom, Britain cannot be redeemed.

III. The Guises of the Comic Hero

Hence the range of comic action is far wider than Bergson supposed when he remarked that the comic is something mechanical encrusted on what is living and that the comic hero is dehumanized because he makes only gestures, automatic motions, which look ridiculous when they are "interrupted." Bergson, perhaps following Stendhal's notion that we remain untouched by the plight of the comic figure, saw him from only one angle, treating him as if he were a toy manikin which, wound up, is geared to execute the same motion wherever he is put. Bergson's comic hero is only a caricature of a man. Yet

Don Quixote, even while making mechanical gestures, enters the realm of *human* action as a figure like Tartuffe cannot. In Dickens and Dostoevsky, too, the characters are geared to make a few stormy gestures, but are not merely comic machines like Tartuffe and Harpagon, who by contrast merely gesticulate. Chaucer's Wife of Bath is another creature capable of only a few responses who is, nevertheless, more than an automaton.

Above all other comic heroes, perhaps, Falstaff is a grotesque who has by no means disqualified himself from being a man; in fact, he has a kind of massive "probability" and authentic selfhood-in-depth. Behind his great belly there is an ample personality, and his gesticulations, mechanical as they seem, are comparable to the moral "action" of a tragic hero. Nor is Falstaff isolated from us like Tartuffe, even when his cowardly motions are "interrupted" as he is caught red-handed at Gadshill or on the field at Shrewsbury. Exactly when Falstaff is driven into the tightest corner—when like Tartuffe he is "caught" firmly in the mechanical trap of comedy—he asks his most troublesome questions: What is honor? What is so much like a counterfeit man as a dead hero? Tartuffe does not have this ingenuity, this power to come to grips with us at close quarters. Falstaff is never so dangerous as when he is at bay—which proves that he has an existence of his own apart from the intrigue in which he has a role. Some of Dostoevsky's grotesque people who have obsessive notions also have this power to challenge us as we stand outside the comic arena and watch them from a position of presumed safety. The sickly hero of *Notes from the Underworld* faces us with some very awkward problems which a character so absurd and artificial has no right to raise. Furthermore, at the basest level of his "low" comedy Falstaff ventures to address himself directly to us, making us doubt Bergson's opinion that only "high" comedy is close to life. Indeed, Falstaff shows how narrow the margin sometimes is between high and low comedy, for he was doubtless born a comic machine of a very low order—the *miles gloriosus*—yet as if by a leap he traverses the whole distance between "low" and "high" and is able to dwell disturbingly among us in his own libertine way.

The truth is that the comic hero has a complexity of character Bergson and Meredith did not suspect. Falstaff and Hal are both comedians who take part in the ancient ritual of feast and sacrifice, orgy and debate. In the oldest comedy there was a struggle, or *agon,* with the Imposter (or *alazon*) who looked with defiling eye upon the sacred rites that must not be seen. The alazon was put to flight after a contest with either the young king or with a character known as

the *eiron,* "the ironical man." The alazon is a boaster who claims, traditionally, more than a share of the agonist's victory. It was the duty of the eiron, who often professed ignorance, to reduce the alazon, to bring him to confusion. Sometimes the king himself assumed the character of the eiron—"the ironical buffoon"—to deflate the boaster or "unwelcome intruder" who appeared to know more than he actually did. Thus somewhere at the heart of old comedy—ritual comedy—was a combat of the king-eiron against the imposter-intruder-alazon.

This ancient struggle was still being waged in Aristotle's *Ethics* (II, 7; IV, 7, 8) in the contrast beween the boaster (alazon) and the self-depreciator (eiron); and midway between these two characters is the "straightforward" man who neither exaggerates nor understates. Here, as in old comedy, the alazon is the alter ego of the eiron. The two extremes appear together.

Aristotle mentions Socrates as the "mock-modest" character who understates things; and, in fact, Socrates is a kind of alter ego to Falstaff, the boaster-buffoon. The double nature of the comic hero is symbolized in these two: Falstaff and Socrates. They are of opposite disposition, yet not so unlike as we might think. The essential character of the eiron is incarnate in Socrates, who was "ignorant" and who also had the disposition of the "buffoon" or "fool," the features of the comic spirit itself, the coarse, ugly mask of the satyr or clown. The Socratic method is a tactic of winning victory by professing ignorance, by merely asking questions of the "impostors," the so-called "wise" men of Athens. Irony "defeats the enemy on his own ground," for in the course of the comic debate the supposed wisdom of the alazon is reduced to absurdity, and the alazon himself becomes a clown. Thus Socrates, without risking any dogmatic answers, corrects the folly of those sophists who claimed to know the truth, or who were ignorant enough to presume there is no truth. So the ironical man by his shrewd humility ("lying low beneath the gods and saying nothing") proves to be wiser than the wisdom of the world. Irony has been called one of the faces of shame. Yet we must remember that Falstaff the buffoon and impostor used the same sort of interrogation Socrates the ironist used. He asks the same sort of questions: What is honor? Socrates asked: What is justice?

Socrates, like Falstaff, is both ironist and buffoon; he is the questioner using a philosophic buffoonery to seek the truth. In *The Republic* Thrasymachus speaks of Socrates' "shamming ignorance" in his "imbecile way." Socrates is a sort of supersophist who inquires or doubts, and thus again resembles Falstaff. He has a double or triple character, for he is, as Falstaff was, both victor and victim—a

victim, eventually, of the unthinking Athenians who refused to have their creed unsettled. He was finally condemned to drink the hemlock because he asked too many impious questions. And Falstaff is rejected by King Hal. The eiron himself, with the rude face of the satyr, is at last, like the king in the fertility rite, sacrificed by the tribe. Socrates is a kind of alazon too, since he did claim to have his "wisdom," given him by his daemon, a still small voice he held sacred. When he is condemned to death by the court he stubbornly insists that if they kill him they will injure themselves far more than they injure him, for they will not find another like him, a gadfly given to the city by God. This is a considerable claim. He adds, "I know but little, and I do not suppose that I know. But I do know that injustice and disobedience to a better, whether God or man, is evil and dishonorable." Here we need to recall that Aristotle classified comic characters as being of three kinds: buffoon, ironist, and impostor. Socrates is all three—and so is Falstaff.

Thus is revealed the deep ambiguity in the comic hero: the Impostor, the enemy of God, is not only the alter ego of the ironist; he is, in Cornford's phrase, the double of the very god himself. The god must be slain and devoured; therefore the guilt feeling of the tribe arising from sacrificing their god-king is transferred to the figure of the alazon, the antagonist and profaner who serves as scapegoat for the injury done the god during the fertility ceremony. The impostor profanes the rites; then he is beaten and driven out. So the tribe rationalizes its sin by persecuting the One Who Dares To Look. Cornford says: "The reviling and expulsion of the Antagonist-Impostor is the darker counterpart of the *Kômos,* which brings in the new God, victorious over him in the *Agon.*" The god who is savior must be hated and slain. He has a double nature: he who is venerated, he who is reviled. Before the resurrection there is the crowning with thorns. The alazon is one of the disguises worn by the god-hero before he is sacrificed; he is also, by the same token, the "antagonistic" self that must be disowned before the worshiper is "possessed" by the god. Hence the ambivalence toward the comic hero.

Or the alazon-eiron may be simply the agent of God, like Goethe's Mephisto, who explains how he is "the spirit that endlessly denies" but is also "part of a power that would alone work evil, but engenders good." The Impostor, Profaner, or Devil is a "darkness that is part of light." Evil is inherent in Good, and to reach salvation man must pass through a "negation of negation." Therefore Faust finds himself bound to the impudent spirit who is only his darker self. Faust exclaims: "Why must I be fettered to this infamous com-

panion who battens upon mischief and delights in ruin?" He does not yet know that the one who goads him—the Tempter—is a deputy of God. And the eiron, who can put on the features of the buffoon and scapegoat, is, in his other self, a mocker, blasphemer, and Offender. He embodies, again, the side of the god that must be rebelled against before the god can be worshiped. God must be hated before he can be loved, denied before he is believed. The comedian plays the role of Doubting Thomas. He is at once a stone rejected by the builder, and the cornerstone of the temple. Comedy is destructive and creative. So Falstaff, like Socrates, has a double nature and a double fate: eiron and alazon, tempter and clown, hero and knave, the great god Pan and also Pharmakos—he who is expelled with communal sins heaped on his head.

Falstaff is a central image in comedy. Symbolically he is the Fool; and the province of the Fool is the whole wide circuit of life and death, laughter and tears, wisdom and ignorance.[11] The fool is comic man. He is no mechanical figure. His gestures have daemonic power, and he carries his scepter by right of ancient rule. We fear him as god; we laugh at him as clown. All the ambiguities and ambivalences of comic action pivot on this archetypal hero of many guises. The fool wears motley—the particolor of human nature—and quickly changes one mask for another, putting on indifferently and recklessly the shifting features of man, playing with gusto more roles than are suitable to the tragic hero. The fool at last proves to be the clown; and the clown is He Who Gets Slapped—and "is none the worse for his slapping." He is resilient with a vitality lacking to the tragic hero, who must accept his misfortune and his responsibility with a stoic face, with a steadier logic than the absurd logic of comedy.

In general one may distinguish two orders of fool, natural and artificial. The natural fool is the archaic victim who diverts the wrath of the gods from the anointed figure of the king. He is the alter ego of the Successful Man, who needs to exempt himself from the jealousy and ill will of the Olympians and who therefore provides himself with someone insolent or ignorant, whom the gods smite. The fool is vicarious Sufferer. He is reviled, beaten, and stricken; but he has the privilege of vilifying the Prosperous Man; he is free to humble the Exalted by mockery. The fool saves the hero from the awful sin of pride (*hubris*). He is the Ugly One who by slandering, guards the king, or even the priest, from the evil eye. He may be dwarfed

[11] In discussing the nature of the Fool and his many roles, I have relied heavily on Enid Welsford: *The Fool,* 1935, as well as on Kris: *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art,* 1952, and J. A. K. Thomson: *Irony,* 1927.

and deformed; he may be an idiot. But the idiot has the wisdom of innocence and the naïveté of the child.

To this order of natural fools belongs Friar Juniper, the holy clown of the Franciscan order, whose antics were a token of grace, who had great power against the Devil and went about in ragged cowl, greatly comforted when the people called him blockhead. In his mind the fool bears the stigmata of holiness. Dostoevsky's saintly prostitutes like Sonia, or his "idiots" like Muishkin and Alyosha, have a close kinship with the natural fool. Kafka's heroes—those anonymous abused innocents known only as K—are natural fools who behold their own affliction with wide, credulous eyes. Everything strikes K with wonder and surprise, since he is the amateur in living who cannot be sophisticated by custom, who never learns his way around. For him life is always astonishment, effort, and uncertainty.

At his most contemptible the artificial fool may be the parasite of the old Greco-Roman comedies, a servile instrument in the hands of wealth and power. These fools use the oily manners of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or Osric, that yeasty, superserviceable knave spacious only in the possession of dirt.

But the fool can also be the seer, the prophet, the "possessed," since the madness of the fool is oracular, sibylline, delphic. He may be the voice crying in the wilderness, an Evangelist or Baptist, or an Imbecile-Prince like Muishkin, whose friends tell him he will always be a child, and who has revelations: "The recognition of God as our Father, and of God's joy in men as His own children, which is the chief idea of Christ." The fool may be the godly Dolt like the medieval Tumbler of Our Lady, or the poetic Seer like Rimbaud. He may, like Touchstone, look askance at life with a cool reluctance to commit himself. Sometimes his intuition is tragic, like the naïve cynicism of Lear's Fool, who sees the folly of playing Machiavellian games in a world rent by tempest. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us with the voice of Innocence that we must accept the ridiculous as the basis of morality: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

The comedian is indeed a "revolutionary simpleton." No modern has claimed this more emphatically than Kierkegaard, who saw how the religious man must first of all be a comedian: "The religious individual has as such made the discovery of the comical in largest measure." Kierkegaard's religious man is not necessarily the comic poet or actor, but he is the one who has seen that our deepest experiences come to us in the form of contradictions. Therefore he is afflicted with the "higher madness" that is the comedy of faith, a passionate

belief in the absurd. The knight of faith knows that the pathetic is inherent in the comic, that suffering is a mark of blessedness: "And hence it comes about that one is tempted both to weep and to laugh when the humorist speaks." Kierkegaard restates in another key the theme of Nietzsche's existential comedy: that one who suffers "by virtue of his suffering *knows more* than the shrewdest and wisest can ever know." Like a modern saint Nietzsche writes: "Suffering makes noble: it separates."

Thus in almost all his roles the fool is set apart, dedicated, alienated, if not outcast, beaten, slain. Being isolated, he serves as a "center of indifference," from which position the rest of us may, if we will, look through his eyes and appraise the meaning of our daily life. Archimedes is said to have promised "Give me a place to stand, and I will move the earth." In art, in ethics, in religion the fool finds a place to stand, for he is the detached spectator who has been placed, or has placed himself, outside accepted codes. From this point "outside"—this extrapolated fulcrum—he takes his leverage on the rest of us, and from his point of vantage can exclaim with Puck, the comic avenger, "Lord, what fools these mortals be."

There is something malign in Puck's spirit; he is scornful and delights in confusion. When this scorn is fierce enough we have the comic spirit of Swift, who frightens us out of laughter into dismay, if not despair. Just as Kierkegaard discovers the extreme absurdities of faith by extrapolating the attitude of the humorist, so Jonathan Swift leads us to the verge of a gulf of hopelessness by extrapolating the mischievous attitude of Puck. His Majesty of Brobdingnag tells Gulliver, after deliberation, "I can not but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth." The most galling of all comic figures are Swift's loathsome Yahoomen who reduce us all to intolerable shame.

There is something Puckish, also, in Hamlet's spirit, taunting and curious as it is. Amid the rottenness of Denmark the Prince serves as a philosophic and temperamental fool, a center of "indifference." He stands apart from gross revelry under his own melancholy cloud; and from his distance he is able to perceive more things than philosophy can dream; for the dust of great Alexander may stop a bunghole, and however thick my lady paints, she comes to a foul grave, the noisome state of Yorick, who is eaten by the same worms that feed upon Polonius, that duller fool. Hamlet is humorist and sufferer existing alone with his disdainful soul. He allows himself every incaution, and with midsummer lunacy puts an antic disposition on. Some of

Hamlet's motives are devilish—Mephistophelian; his vocation is picaresque, to ask impudent questions and lead us along the narrow ledge where the immoralist walks, making us quarter our thoughts with an obsessive guile. Hamlet, Mephisto, Byron, Stendhal, Nietzsche, and Gide are heroes who belong in a comic theatre where man is goaded and teased, led down the dimmest passes of sin, to see what is learned by evil.

When he appears as tempter, the fool—the comic hero who stands "outside"—must put on the mask. He disguises himself as clown or devil, wearing as need arises the garb of buffoon, ironist, madman. He must lead us, finally, to the witches' kitchen and the Walpurgis Night; or to the wilderness where we meet our "shadow" selves face to face, although we have disowned these selves in our public life. There in the wilderness or on the Brocken the god in us is confronted by the Adversary, our "other" self, who lays before us illusions of pomp, knowledge, and pleasure. In tempting us the Adversary must have the features of innocence, must charm us with mannerly good will, gaiety, finesse, and high spirits. He may seem as honest as Iago, whose motiveless malignity wears the bland mask of friendship. Iago is the Socratic interrogator who destroys us with our own ideals; yet he is an illusion: "I am not what I am," he says. This Adversary may speak folly or profanity; or jest insanely, as did Nietzsche, who tempted the whole respectable middle class with his madness. His Satyr-Heroes have recognized Dionysus as god and they "*revert* to the innocence of the beast-of-prey conscience, like jubilant monsters, who perhaps come from a ghostly bout of murder, arson, rape, and torture with bravado and moral equanimity, as though merely some wild student's prank had been played."

The rebel, the immoralist, the free and licensed self in this terrible comedy of the future has passed "beyond" and looks back from a new and daring perspective upon the morality of the herd, which is hollow. Nietzsche's comic hero is the Despiser, the Blond Beast; or else he is the Great Sick Man overcome by his disgust, his nausea as he examines, from his point "outside," the premises of a morality we have never examined. To feel the spell of this Tempter we must take the awful risk of entering into a "boundary-situation" where nothing is taken for granted and where all our values must be found anew without help from "the others." Here we walk alone upon the margin of Reason. The Adversary goes with us to this highest precipice of comedy, the edge of the abyss where we glance with Nietzsche into Chaos. There we must stand on the brink of Nonsense and Absurdity and not be dizzy. If we do not fall, or plunge, we may

be saved. Only by taking this risk can we put Satan behind us. Only thus can the Rebel learn what is Good. The comic Feast of Unreason is a test and a discovery, and our season spent mumming with the Lord of Misrule can show what will redeem us. The Adversary must be expelled. The Tempter must perish. That is, we must sacrifice him to save ourselves.

Young Hamlet, late from Wittenberg, stands alone on the brink of this abyss, sees himself as a ridiculous fellow crawling between heaven and earth with more sins at his beck than he has time to act. So he puts on the antic disposition of the fool. And if a sense of contradiction and absurdity is a cause of comedy, then Hamlet is a profoundly comic character. He encounters what Kierkegaard calls either/or choices, the extremes that cannot be mediated but only transcended. That is, the comic hero and the saint accept the irreconcilables in man's existence. Both find themselves face to face with the Inexplicable and the Absurd. When, for example, as Kierkegaard points out, Abraham holds the knife above Isaac and at the command of God is about to slay his son, he places himself outside and beyond all moral norms and is either, quite simply, a murderer or a believer. He stands alone in a situation that allows no middle term whatever. He meets an extreme peril that cannot be related to "virtue" or any human ethic. His dilemma can only be transcended by a "perspective from infinity"—looking at it from the infinite distance of faith, a perspective so far extrapolated beyond ethics that it extends from "eternity." Then Abraham is rescued from the irreconcilables in his crisis.

The comic hero finds himself in situations like Abraham's because comedy begins from the absurd and the inexplicable and, like faith, tolerates the miraculous. Dostoevsky, as usual, begins with the Unaccountable when old man Karamazov lies with Stinking Lizaveta and begets Smerdyakov, who is as truly his son as the saintly Alyosha. In the same way Miranda in *The Tempest* knows that good wombs have borne bad sons: Antonio is proof. Prospero accepts these incompatibles in reality, then transcends them by his "perspective from infinity," for at the farthest reaches of his magical vision life is like some dream that seems to come and fade. Precisely because he is face to face with the Inexplicable the comic hero is eligible for "rescue," like Don Quixote, who is mad to the degree of pouring curds over his poor head but who dies, like a saint, in a state of grace.

Often the comic hero is rescued because Improvisation and Uncertainty are the premises of comic action, and the goddess Fortuna presides over great tracts of the comic scene. But the law of In-

evitability or Necessity bears heavily on the tragic hero, who is not eligible for rescue because in tragedy man must somehow take responsibility for the flaws in the nature of things or at least pay a penalty for them. To be sure, the tragic hero meets the Inexplicable—by what logic does Oedipus happen to confront his father on the road to Thebes and kill him in a narrow pass? Behind tragedy, too, is a riddle of the Sphinx, the warning of oracles only hoarsely spoken. In any case the tragic poet feels some compulsion to look backwards across the gulf of disaster and help us understand why the hero met his doom. Or he must fortify us against the Inexplicable and reassure us that Justice is not wrecked by it; whereas the comic artist can accept absurdities as the open premises of his account of life and not be troubled by them. The comedian practices an art of exaggeration, or overstatement.

The tragic hero, however, must heed some "golden mean" between extremes; he does not dare *play* with life as the comic hero does. The tragic hero meets either/or dilemmas but must pay some penalty for not being able to conciliate incompatibles. His only refuge from despair is a stoic endurance between those incompatibles; he must somehow prove himself adequate to the disasters he suffers. The tragic poet cannot, like the comic artist or the religious hero, look at man's struggle from infinite distances and revise its human weight or its penalties. Tragedy is a form of ethical heroism, suggesting that "man is the measure," even between desperate choices.

The tragic hero, noble and magnified, can be of awesome stature. The comic hero refuses to wear the trappings of moral or civil grandeur, usually preferring motley, or the agility of the clown. He is none the less man, and Hamlet more than once rouses our suspicion that the tragic hero is eligible for comic roles: or is it the other way round, that Hamlet is a comic hero who generates tragic values? The Prince touches his deepest meanings when he has on his antic humor. Then he needs no grandeur to hide his weakness, which is laughably naked.

Under the auspices of Fortuna comedy allows a play of character impossible in tragedy, which requires a hero "greater and better than most men" but capable of "error." As Aristotle says, the tragic hero cannot be either "depraved" or simply a victim of "bad luck." Comedy, however, delights to deal with those who are victims of bad luck, along with those who are "depraved" or "vicious"—by means of the grotesque. By disfiguring the hated person in caricature, comedy is able to elevate hatred to art. Swift evidently saw man as depraved and vicious, and projected his hatred into the grotesques called Ya-

hoos. At the severest phase of grotesque we can behold the unnatural figures of King Lear and his daughters, who seem to have reduced life to horrors from which tragedy turns away. The crazy Lear wails:

> When we are born, we cry that we are come
> To this great stage of fools.

In this savage play men seem to be puppets (but not automatons).

Cornford tells us why comedy can utilize the grotesque. In Greece and Rome comedy was gradually transmuted from religious Mystery to theatrical Mime. So when comedy lost its appearance of being what originally and essentially it was, a fertility celebration, the characters tended to become grotesques, and the comedian continued using many of the stock masks tragedy had discarded. The original chorus of celebrant animal-figures gave a name to some of Aristophanes' comedies like *The Birds* and *The Wasps.* The old goat-chorus and satyr-masks invaded the final comic unit of the tetralogy. The Impostor, particularly, became a stylized, stereotyped figure, like the Vice in medieval plays with his lath dagger and his sortie from Hell-Mouth. In this way the comic personality did indeed become dehumanized when it was a vehicle for making certain gestures—the automatic gestures of Punch and Pierrot. Are not these lively creatures the ancestors of Tartuffe and other caricatures? They are born of Mime and live the repetitive existence of Bergson's manikins, oscillating between life and art. Yet we must once more remind ourselves that Falstaff born of a "mask," generates a personality and temperament more human than his gestures entitle him to.

IV. The Social Meanings of Comedy

The tradition of Mime, Mask, and Caricature, then, explains why Bergson thought, with Stendhal, that comedy requires a certain rigidity in the comic personage, an *insociabilité* in the hero and a degree of *insensibilité* in the spectator. But Falstaff breaks down this insensibility and offers us a sort of release and purgation Pierrot cannot. Falstaff proves what Freud suspected: that comedy is a process of safeguarding pleasure against the denials of reason, which is wary of pleasure. Man cannot live by reason alone or forever under the rod of moral obligation, the admonition of the superego. In the person of Falstaff the superego "takes a holiday." The comedian is the self behaving as prodigal and bohemian. From its earliest days comedy is an essential pleasure mechanism valuable to the spectator and the society in which he lives. Comedy is a momentary and publicly useful resistance to authority and an escape from its pressures; and its mech-

anism is a free discharge of repressed psychic energy or resentment through laughter. Its purpose is comparable to the release of the dream, except that the dream is private and asocial, whereas the comic uproar is "infectious." Freud goes so far as to say "The comical appears primarily as an unintentional discovery in the social relations of human beings." Meredith, of course, emphasized more strongly than Bergson that comedy is "the ultimate civilizer."

The ambivalence of comedy reappears in its social meanings, for comedy is both hatred and revel, rebellion and defense, attack and escape. It is revolutionary and conservative. Socially, it is both sympathy and persecution.

One of the strongest impulses comedy can discharge from the depths of the social self is our hatred of the "alien," especially when the stranger who is "different" stirs any unconscious doubt about our own beliefs. Then the comedian unerringly finds his audience, the solid majority, itself a silent prey to unrecognized fears. He can point out our victim, isolate him from sympathy, and cruelly expose him to the penalty of our ridicule. In this role the comic artist is a "conservative" or even a "reactionary" who protects our self-esteem. Wherever comedy serves as a public defense mechanism, it makes all of us hypocrites: we try to laugh our doubts out of existence. Wherever comedy is a symptom of fear, our mirth indicates the zeal with which we are maltreating our scapegoat. Certainly the laugh of the satirist is often a sneer; and there is an undercurrent of satire in most comedy.

To this extent the comic response is tribal and, if it is malicious, uncivilized. Any majority secretes venom against those who trouble it, then works off this venom in mocking some figure like Shylock the Jew, the Usurer, hated by right-thinking Christians precisely because he lives in the free and open market on a premise of ruthless competition. Shylock is the naked image of renaissance "initiative," whose thrift is called greed only because he is Hebrew. "And thrift," Shylock protests, "is blessing if men steal it not." Could any gentile entrepreneur put it better? The inconsistency is implied by the shadow of pathos falling across Shylock's ugly figure. Let us avoid the old dispute whether Shylock is tragic: it is clear enough that according to the confused premises of the play a Christian without money is tragic and a Jew without money is funny. And Jews should be without money. Unless the Jew is Jessica, who becomes Christian by gilding herself with ducats.

Granted that Shakespeare sees his victim in double perspective (for Shylock the monster becomes Shylock the man when he asks "If you

prick us, do we not bleed?"), the Elizabethan audience probably did not see the Jew in this double way but took his grotesque figure to be a hateful and hated image of greed. The higher the social charge in comedy, the less the audience is likely to care about distinguishing truth from prejudice. The classical instance would be *The Clouds,* a play in which Aristophanes evidently leads a pack of right-minded Athenians in hounding down sophists who have insulted the gods and shaken the ordinary pieties. Never mind what questions the sophists really asked; never mind whether we can answer their questions—we must quell these troublemakers:

> Strike, smite them, spare them not, for many reasons: BUT MOST BECAUSE THEY HAVE BLASPHEMED THE GODS.

The attack in Molière's *Highbrow Ladies* is not so blunt, but it is none the less based on the premise that women are not entitled to be foppish; they must be conveniently stupid.

Usually the comedian will address us with most assurance when he is conservative, when he affirms the security of any group already unsure of itself. In middle-class societies, particularly, the comic artist often reassures the majority that its standards are impregnable or that other standards are not "normal" or "sane." Then the comedian banishes doubt by ridicule and is the "diplomatic artist." [12]

Yet this defense of the *status quo* occurs in a society where there is a hidden conflict in social standards; and the comedian may appear on the other side of the barricades, with the revolutionaries. Falstaff gleefully invites us to join him in making bohemian sallies among the ranks of the Philistines, bringing confusion to their hosts. The very appearance of Shylock as a sympathetic villain indicates the malaise in Elizabethan society about "rugged individualism." Similarly the figure of Tartuffe is a focus for the conflict between an ideal of personal integrity and the unscrupulous piety of an acquisitive class. In despising Tartuffe we despise our own hypocrisy, whether it be a false puritan asceticism or the slippery indulgence of the Jesuits. Tartuffe could be born only in a society anxious about its honesty. He is a sign of what we reject.

Or else the comedian can evade the conflict, relieving the stress between competing ideals by laughter. He may enable us to "adjust"

[12] In *The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean* Albert Cook advances the ingenious but somewhat narrow-gauge theory that tragedy ventures to make the Dark Voyage toward Risk and Wonder, whereas comedy stays safely within the limits of a Golden Mean. This is a tenable argument, certainly; however, the distinction can hardly be made this simply, and the comedian is often a "revolutionary" as well as a "diplomatic" artist.

incompatible standards without resolving the clash between them. Thus we laugh when Tartuffe brings our conflict into the open, because we may not wish to recognize that we, too, seek power, women, and money, and that all these may be more desirable than piety. We laugh at Tartuffe because we do not intend to see clearly what he means. We may also laugh at Falstaff because we do not—must not—grant that good sherris sack is, after all, the real value of life, and honor only a word. Falstaff raises questions we wish to blink, and we laugh at him to prevent his damaging our convictions which are taboo.

In its boisterous moods comedy annihilates the power of evil in the person of the scapegoat. Yet we have already seen that this triumphant laughter is a mode of defense, because the enemy who has power over us must be neutralized by transforming him into a harmless victim.[13] Falstaff, we have said, has the sacred power of a god of fertility; therefore he must be disguised before he can be laughed out of existence, lest he threaten us too closely. Comedy is at once a defense against the Enemy and a victorious assault upon Him. He vanishes in an explosion of choral mirth.

At its most triumphant moments comic art frees us from peril without destroying our ideals and without mustering the heavy artillery of the puritan. Comedy can be a means of mastering our disillusions when we are caught in a dishonest or stupid society. After we recognize the misdoings, the blunders, we can liberate ourselves by a confident, wise laughter that brings a catharsis of our discontent. We see the flaws in things, but we do not always need to concede the victory, even if we live in a human world. If we can laugh wisely enough at ourselves and others, the sense of guilt, dismay, anxiety, or fear can be lifted. Unflinching and undaunted we see *where we are.* This strengthens us as well as society.

When comic art is generous enough, it is a triumphant affirmation of truth—which, we see, cannot be damaged by our failures. "Great comic artists assume that truth may bear all lights." [14] In this belief lies the heroic courage of the comedian. The unvanquishable Falstaff is an ageless witness that truth can bear all lights: this comic giant proves that honor cannot be sullied in Eastcheap or on Gadshill. He

[13] The best discussion of the complicated psychology behind this sort of comedy seems to me Hugh Dalziel Duncan: *Language and Literature in Society,* 1953, which I have utilized in the following comments.

[14] So argues Duncan, p. 53 ff. Ernst Cassirer has also written a major comment on the "sympathetic vision" of the great comic artists who, he says, bring us close to the realities of our human world and dissolve our scorn in a laughter that liberates us (*Essay on Man*).

breaks down our unreliable attitudes—unreliable because they are overguarded. His obscene questions strip us of our linen decencies and free us from the iron yoke of conformity. This high priest of comedy is doing us the service John Milton gravely did in *Areopagitica* when he protested against fugitive and cloistered virtues. "That which purifies us is trial," Milton writes, "and trial is by what is contrary." Milton requires trial by "dust and heat." Falstaff challenges us from alleys and bawdy houses. He asks us to walk out of the whited sepulchre we have made into our world; and when we walk abroad with Falstaff we discover what John Milton discovered: that truth is strong next to the Almighty and will not be put to the worse when she grapples with falsehood in open encounter.

To be able to laugh at evil and error means that we have surmounted them. Comedy may be a philosophic, as well as a psychological, compensation. Whenever we become aware that this is not the best of possible worlds, we need the help of the comedian to meet the "insuperable defects of actuality." [15] We escape with him into a logical order by laughing at the imperfections of the world about us; the comic artist releases us from the limitations in things as they are. Chafed by the deficiencies in reality the comedian may be more intransigent than the tragedian. Tragedy accepts the flaw in the world as it is, then ventures to find nobility in "the inexorable march of actual situations." If the tragic illusion is potent enough we are reconciled to the tears at the heart of things. But unless he is in his "diplomatic" mood, the comedian refuses to make these concessions to actuality and serves, instead, as chief tactician in a permanent resistance movement, or rebellion, within the frontiers of human experience. By temperament the comedian is often a fifth columnist in social life.

An outrageous rebel is that same picaresque knave Falstaff, who dares us to stride with him across the boundaries of caution into the Walpurgis Night of a new philosophic order where one lives completely at ease. Even the rococo comedy in *Tristram Shandy* is daring, for Sterne trespasses smirkingly against every decency for the sake of liberating his exquisite feelings. One of the annoying intransigents in our own society was André Gide, who temperamentally was unable to write tragedy but insisted on publishing, in the teeth of his "serious" friends, his diabolical *Corydon*. Gide kept saying, "My function is to disturb." He is the classic type of comic artist who is *agent*

[15] James Feibleman: *In Praise of Comedy*, p. 178 ff., develops this view and shows how comedy is a form of "rebellion" against "things as they are."

provocateur. In Gide and Goya and Swift the tenor of comedy is uncompromising, irreverent.

In her own quiet way Jane Austen devastates our compromises and complacencies—especially male complacency. It is said one can read her novels and never guess that France was red with terror or that British troops were dying at Waterloo. She leaves all that turmoil to the "romantics." Meanwhile Miss Austen placidly undermines the bastions of middle-class propriety. Her irreverence is calm, but she knows better than the "romantics" that one must not compromise one's honesty. She is not the less dangerous because she operates inconspicuously. There she resembles Henry James, who lays bare in his overbred prose the shameless vulgarity of the *haute bourgeoisie*. We must not be deceived, either, about Miss Austen's cool disposition, which seems defensive, wary of being taken in. She is using the caution native to those comic artists who contrive to protect themselves against scorn while they are making us scorn others. Her contempt is polite.

This is comedy near its "highest," which, Bergson and Meredith agree, is a game played in social life. In *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* Bergson described two orders of society, the one unchanging, mechanical stratified, conservative, and "closed"; the other mobile, organic, fluid, and "open." A colony of insects is a "closed" order, alert for danger, attack, defense. It is a society with Spartan efficiency and, ability to survive. The members of a closed society care nothing for humanity but live untroubled by dreams or doubts. The open society has a different morality because it is sensitive to the fringe of intuition, "vague and evanescent," that envelops every clear idea. Those living in an open society are self-aware, responsive to the nuance, the not-wholly-formulated. The open society gives play to individuality, true selfhood. Stendhal's hero Julien Sorel belongs in an open society but is trapped within the confines of a closed caste system. So his adventures become a picaresque comedy played at the expense of the insensitive people about him and of his own malaise.

To expand Bergson's idea a little, we may say that the "lower" the comedy, the more it needs a "closed" social order, and the "higher" the comedy, the more the situation is "open" socially and morally. The mechanics of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* are possible in a situation firmly "closed," where events exactly balance each other in a series of neatly arranged coincidences. The moral rigidity in this world is suggested by the Duke's mechanical, paralyzing ethic which causes him to say to Aegeon: "For we may pity, though not pardon, thee."

The situation in *Twelfth Night* seems to be more "open" but really is not. Behind the delicate manners in Illyria is a tightly closed social order, as the aspiring Malvolio finds, to his distress and our delight. The fellow is a bounder; his eye is fixed hard on Olivia; he is the butler who woos his mistress. The man is a yellow-stockinged fool; and he is a fool first of all because he wishes to leap the barriers, which are far too high. At all costs Malvolio must not climb. Obviously Malvolio is an ass—obviously. Yet no more so than Sir Andrew Aguecheek, at whom we laugh, but not malignly as we do at Malvolio. Sir Andrew has a prerogative of asininity in virtue of his birth. He is a natural, not a bounder. Hard-mindedly we identify our scapegoat, Malvolio parading cross-gartered, even if we do not choose to see him for what, socially, he is: the Impostor who must be expelled with a vengeance. Sir Andrew cannot be devalued by the sneer alone, because he is guarded by his rank. But Malvolio the popinjay rouses our archaic wrath at the Pretender—who is, in this event, our own social alter ego to be publicly tormented, disclaimed, icily denied. Comedy of manners often releases the cruelty in a closed society; and the stiff ranks in this society put us in unnatural positions.

At the height of comedy the whole situation "opens" in many directions. *Love's Labour's Lost* begins as if it were to be a "closed" comedy like *Twelfth Night,* for the scene is the fastidious Academe in Navarre where some precious fools are pledging themselves to an ascetic life for three years, depriving themselves of sleep, food, and love. Berowne alone protests, in the name of "grace." Then one by one the lordly fantasticoes fall in love with very frail women and break their vows, yielding to the flesh. These wits bring themselves face to face with human realities. But before they can readjust, the King of France dies, and they all find themselves standing at the mouth of the grave, where they must pause. The entire company disperses with a curiously somber and hesitant benediction: "You that way, we this way." The play shows how the movement of high comedy is expanding, scattering itself from situation to situation always farther abroad, opening toward other possibilities, holding all in suspense.[16] Berowne is one of those who, with Benedick and Mercutio and Hamlet, cannot be at home in a closed plot, a closed society, a closed ethic.

Shakespeare's most "open" comedy—nearly mystic in Bergson's sense—is *The Tempest,* where all the machinery of plot is suspended in evanescent meanings that are almost musical. This play disperses

[16] The point is made by Paul Goodman: *The Structure of Literature,* 1954, p. 89 ff.

into unknown modes of being, where even Caliban can seek for grace. The act of forgiveness is the moral pole of this comedy, and under the spell of Prospero's sea-change we are able to look as if from afar, backward upon the wrongs done in the dark abysm of the past. Evil is there, in Antonio and Sebastian, in Stephano and Trinculo and Caliban; but at these moral latitudes we can see even the vicious Antonio as if he were only a troubling recollection. Amid devouring shows and strange noises human nature is transfigured. Prospero's magic is the godlike charity of understanding, thus enduring, all. Using the tolerance of high comedy, and its confidence, Prospero speaks gently to those who tried to kill him. In this larger perspective sin seems to be the last delusion of man's mind, an error that is absurd. Prospero's vision of life is not tragic because sin is seen from distances that exempt man from disastrous penalties. All miracles are performed at this height of comedy, which brings us into a shifting, open world that continuingly transforms itself without being emptied of the cruelest actualities. Antonio is eager to murder with his three inches of obedient steel; yet these failings in men cannot damage the illusion that is truth. The vile Antonio cannot destroy what is good. Tragic danger is here cancelled by a feat of moral insight. The drama of Prospero's isle, the farthest reach of comedy, is an insubstantial pageant. It is also a triumphant revision of life, a politics of illusion.

Bergson must have seen life as Prospero did, since he described this politics of illusion in *Two Sources of Morality and Religion:*

> The open society is the society which is deemed in principle to embrace all humanity. A dream dreamt, now and again, by chosen souls, it embodies on every occasion something of itself in creations, each of which, through a more or less far-reaching transformation of man, conquers difficulties hitherto unconquerable.

Prospero's charity is the imaginative fulfillment of an ethic such as Bergson mentions. There is nothing in actuality to justify his mercy, his confidence, or his vision; yet these master the failings of nature and work a change in man. Comedy is, indeed, like a dream, as even Bergson perhaps did not suspect. In saying that life is rounded with a sleep, Prospero is but repeating the words spoken by Theseus, king of a realm where there were midsummer-night dreams; for when Theseus saw the silly interlude rudely played by the mechanicals in honor of him and Hippolyta he explained: "The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse if imagination amend them." Theseus saw that the drama was there, even if it was badly

played; and he was grateful to the wretched players, who gained their triumph not on their poor stage but in Theseus' fancy.

The high comic vision of life is humane, an achievement of man as a social being. Meredith addressed himself to "our united social intelligence, which is the Comic Spirit." He suspected that comedy is "the ultimate civilizer." If Prospero's comedy is transcendentally "open," Meredith's social comedy remains a worldy discipline with, nevertheless, full moral overtones. In all civilized societies, Meredith insists, the comic spirit must hover overhead, its lips drawn in a slim, hungry smile, wary and tense, thoughtfully eager to see the absurdities of polite men and women. Kierkegaard might have been describing Meredith's faun when he said the "comic spirit is not wild or vehement, its laughter is not shrill." For Kierkegaard, too, the highest comedy, like the highest pathos, rarely attracts attention by making great shows. Only the "lower forms of the comical do show themselves by something extrinsic. The highest in life does not make a showing, because it belongs to the last sphere of inwardness." No society is in good health without laughing at itself quietly and privately; no character is sound without self-scrutiny, without turning inward to see where it may have overreached itself. The perception of the self as comic touches the quick; and honest self-inspection must bring a sense of the comical. This kind of awareness is an initiation into the civilized condition; it lightens the burden of selfishness, cools the heat of the ego, makes us impressionable by others.

So the comic spirit keeps us pure in mind by requiring that we regard ourselves skeptically. Indeed this spirit is an agent of that civilizing activity Matthew Arnold called "criticism," which is essential to "culture." It is an activity necessary to middle-class society, where we gravitate easily toward that dead center of self-satisfaction, the Philistine. Arnold tells us why criticism brings salvation, and why culture *is* criticism:

> And thus culture begets a dissatisfaction, which is of the highest possible value in stemming the common tide of men's thoughts in a wealthy and industrial community, and which saves the future, as one may hope, from being vulgarized, even if it cannot save the present. (*Culture and Anarchy*)

Shakespeare's plays, says Meredith, are saturated with the golden light of comedy—the comedy that is redemptive as tragedy cannot be. Consider what happens in *Much Ado About Nothing* when Benedick makes the startling comic discovery that he himself, together with the other mistaken people in the play, is a fool. Here is a moral perception that competes with tragic "recognition." The irony of

Benedick's "recognition" is searching, for he has boasted, all along, that he cannot find it in his heart to love any of Eve's daughters, least of all Beatrice. And Beatrice, for her part, has avowed she will never be fitted with a husband until God makes men of some other metal than earth. Both these characters are too deep of draught to sail in the shoal waters of sentimentality, and both have bravely laid a course of their own far outside the matchmaking that goes easily on in Messina. Each is a mocker, or eiron; but in being so, each becomes the boaster (alazon) betrayed into the valiant pose that they are exempt from love. Then they both walk, wide-eyed, like "proud" Oedipus, into the trap they have laid for themselves. There they see themselves as they are. When Benedick hears himself called hard-hearted he suffers the bewilderment of comic discovery and knows that his pose as mocker is no longer tenable. So he turns his scornful eye inward upon his own vanity: if Beatrice is sick for love of his ribald self he must give up his misogyny and get him a wife. He yields himself, absurdly, to Beatrice, saying "Happy are they that hear their detractions and can put them to mending." At the extreme of his own shame Benedick is compelled to see himself as he sees others, together along a low horizon. Thus occur the comic purgation, the comic resignation to the human lot, the comic humbling of the proud, the comic ennobling after an act of blindness. Those who play a comic role, like Benedick or Berowne or Meredith's Sir Willoughby Patterne, wrongheadedly are liable to achieve their own defeat and afterwards must hide their scars. The comic and the tragic heroes alike "learn through suffering," albeit suffering in comedy takes the form of humiliation, disappointment, or chagrin, instead of death.

There is a comic road to wisdom, as well as a tragic road. There is a comic as well as a tragic control of life. And the comic control may be more usable, more relevant to the human condition in all its normalcy and confusion, its many unreconciled directions. Comedy as well as tragedy can tell us that the vanity of the world is foolishness before the gods. Comedy dares seek truth in the slums of Eastcheap or the crazy landscape Don Quixote wanders across or on the enchanted Prospero isle. By mild inward laughter it tries to keep us sane in the drawing room, among decent men and women. It tells us that man is a giddy thing, yet does not despair of men. Comedy gives us recognitions healing as the recognitions of tragic art. They are sometimes revelations and come in the moonlit forest of a summer night; then Bottom, with his ass head, is transformed to a Seer, a Visionary, and Bottom's Dream is apocalyptic. For Bottom, the poor weaver, reports: "I have had a dream; past the wit of man to say

what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream." After this midnight dream everything is seen from a new distance; as Hermia says:

> Methinks I see these things with parted eye
> When every thing seems double.

Tragedy needs a more single vision than comedy, for the comic perception comes only when we take a double view—that is, a human view—of ourselves, a perspective by incongruity. Then we take part in the ancient rite that is a Debate and a Carnival, a Sacrifice and a Feast.