

The Importance of the Comic Genius

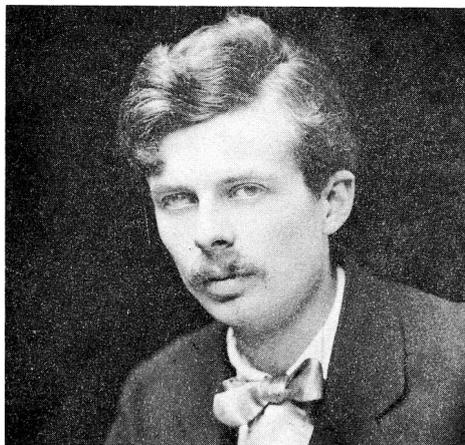
Showing That True Comedy, like Genuine Tragedy, Is an Invention in the Grand Manner

ALDOUS HUXLEY

THE history of literature and art provides us with more examples of fine serious than fine comic achievements. A list of the world's great creators of comedy turns out, when one takes the trouble to compile it, to be surprisingly small. Aristophanes, Chaucer, Rabelais, the Shakespeare of Falstaff, the Balzac of the *Conles Drolatiques*, Dickens; and among the pictorial artists, Daumier, Rowlandson, Dore, when he was not wasting his talents on horrible and unsuccessful religious compositions, and Goya, in certain moods. These are the names that first occur to one; and though it would, of course, be possible to lengthen the list, there would not be so very many more to add.

True, we might compile a very long list of the writers and draughts men who make us laugh, but few of them would be what may be styled makers of pure comedy. The number of our physiological reactions to emotion is strictly limited, and we go through the same bodily convulsions in response to very different stimuli. Laughter, for example, is provoked in us by a number of quite distinct emotions. There is the laughter of mockery—the laughter that is a social punishment, applied by the sane majority to those whose crime it is to be unlike their fellow-beings. Go out in an exceptionally large hat or an exceptionally bright tie, and you will hear plenty of that kind of laughter. Satire, whether in art or literature, provokes this cruel laughter. The fact that it is generally written by the exceptional man against the only too sane majority does not prevent it from having fundamentally the same source as the mockery of the majority against the exception. And then, there is the laughter that is our response to the smoking-room story—the laughter that is a safety-valve for letting off innocuously a part of our somewhat excessive interest in the blushful mysteries. There is, also, the laughter released in us by sudden surprise—the loud and rather nervous laughter of children when they hide and pounce out on one another from dark recesses; the hysterical, involuntary laughter that seizes one when stout old Uncle Ebenezer slips on a banana skin and comes thudding to the pavement. Its surprising, startling quality is, perhaps, the principal reason why verbal wit makes us laugh.

Satire, sex, wit—all these things make



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us laugh, and they may all be present in a work of pure comedy. But they are not, themselves, pure comedy. It is not right to include in one's list of pure comic geniuses the savage satirist, such as Swift; or the mild satirist, like Sheridan, who writes the comedy of manners; nor have the masters of verbal ingenuity, like Congreve; the hardy pornographers of Wycherley's stamp; or the subtler, sniggering suggesters, like Sterne. Your great comic genius is much more copious, much larger, and more inclusive than a mere satirist, or writer of comedy of manners, or a creator of wit. And he is, accordingly, much rarer than the satirist or the wit. He is as rare as the great tragic genius—and, perhaps, even rarer than he.

THE pure comic genius must be a great inventor. That is why he is so rare; the gift of invention is not a common one. You can be an admirable satirist or a fine serious writer, and not be an inventor—(only an interpreter of actual life. Tolstoy is the supreme example of the latter class. But to create a coherent, satisfying, comic universe, you must be an inventor. You cannot stick very close to reality—particularly, the inward, spiritual reality—and make pure comedy. And the same applies to pure tragedy—though with this difference, that pure tragedy moves in the internal world, and largely ignores the externals from which pure comedy starts its flight. The characteristic creations of pure comedy, as well as of pure tragedy, are really not human

beings at all. They are inventions of the poet's mind, living not in our world, but in a parallel world; similar, but not the same. The Wife of Bath, Panurge, Falstaff, Mr. Pecksniff; Medea, Macbeth, Ivan Karamazov—these are all creatures of fable, larger than life, as befits mythological beings; and living, not with the everyday life of men, but more intensely—with the prodigious and god-like life infused into them by their creators. Serious realistic art is not creative, like pure tragedy. It depends on actual life, of which it is a picture and practical interpretation. Similarly, satire, the comedy of manners, and wit are not creative, like pure comedy. Satire and the comedy of manners depend on the actual life they portray and mock at, with greater or less ferocity; while wit is an affair of verbal ingenuity. The difference is important.

All these varieties of what we may call contingent art are less eternally interesting than the two great creative and absolute types of art. For though, to contemporary readers, a book which deals directly, and so to speak scientifically, with the life they know may be immensely valuable, it will lose much of its interest and value when the conditions of life on which it is based have changed. Only the ideal, perfected world, that is parallel to the real world, remains forever comprehensible and fresh. It is difficult not to believe, for example, that Dickens will outlast Tolstoy; though Tolstoy, in certain respects, is much more interesting and valuable to us at the present time.

It would be absurd, of course, to pretend that great comic creations are as profoundly significant as the great creations of tragedy. Comedy necessarily leaves out of account some of the most important elements of man's spiritual life. It is of the earth, earthy—its strength, its size, its colossal energy—and these are the essential characteristics of all great comic creations, from Gargantua to Micawber, from Falstaff to the fabulous Burgesses of Daumier's impassioned invention. There are the strength, size, and energy of earth-born things; there is something superbly animal, something sappy, full-blooded, and earthily un-self-conscious in pure comedy. We seem to be looking on at the gamboling of mastodons, the playing of young whales, the tumbling of a litter of dinosaur puppies. The mind,

the troubled spirit of man, have but little place in comedy, the stage is occupied by his healthy body and its natural instincts. But this does not prevent a comic creation from being, in its own sphere, a delightful, and even a grand, magnificent, and beautiful, thing. Comedy deserves to be taken seriously.

THIS is a fact too frequently forgotten; a fact that is not even understood by the second-rate practitioners of comedy. These lesser exponents of comedy humiliate their art to an association with triviality, ugliness, and vulgarity. The great mass of what passes nowadays (or that has passed, for that matter, at any other period) for comic literature or art is stamped with this pettiness and vulgar hideousness. The average comic drawings, comic novels, comic plays, comic films-how small and grubby they all are! One has only to compare these little horrors with the creations of the genuine comic geniuses to see how miserably debased, how unworthy of the name of comedy, they are. A great comic work can be as large, as magnificent, and, in its own way, as beautiful, as a work of serious art.

The fact is that the *beau ideal* and the grand style are not exclusive possessions of serious art. There is also a comic *beau ideal* and a comic grand style. Comic poetry can be genuine poetry; that is to say, beautiful poetry. Comic art can be grand. A huge scale, a colossal, earthy energy, are, as we have seen, the characteristics of comedy. The comic grand style is, accordingly, a rich, emphatic style, that chiefly differs from the grand style of serious art by being too rich and too emphatic.

The step is short from the sublime to the

ridiculous-and in much art that is intended to be serious, that short step has been taken. The baroque style in the plastic arts, for example, is essentially a comic grand style; its extravagance is unfitted for use in serious, tragic art. The rich, turgid prose of the seventeenth century is essentially a prose for the expression of comedy. The best passages in Milton's prose works are those in which he is making some enormous joke (the portentous phenomenon occurs more than once in the *Areopagitica*, and produces overwhelming effects). This clotted, extravagant style of prose, which the critics have agreed to call "poetic," is seen in Urquhart and Motteaux's translation of Rabelais to be the most perfect medium for comic expression. And the gorgeous rhetoric of the Elizabethans, which, when employed in serious passages, trembles perilously all the time on the verge of the ludicrous, is seen, when used for comic purposes, to be perfectly suitable.

RETURNING to pictorial arts, we find that practically the only good artist produced by the romantic movement is Gustave Dore; and he is good, not when he is being romantically serious, but in his masterly comic works (the illustrations to Balzac's *Contes Drolatiques* are a typical and noble example). The romantic style, with its extravagance, its picturesqueness, its violent contrasts, is, like baroque, an essentially comic grand style. Briefly to sum up, we may say that the principal difference between the comic grand style and the tragic is that the comic grand style is the grander. It is ludicrous in its exaggerated vehemence, but beautiful.

The great comedians have all combined

comedy with beauty and magnificence. Aristophanes was one of the finest of Greek poets. In the *Canterbury Tales*, you will find the richest comedy, expressed in terms of a limpid beauty hardly rivaled in all literature. Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* are positively heroic in scale; in them, the sublime is fused indissolubly with the ridiculous.

We see the same beauty, the same grand style, in the works of the great comic artists. All Goya's sense of beauty appears in his comic work. He was, in his comedy, an intensely *serious* artist: witness his admirable series of "Caprices." Daumier, in the world of comic art, is what Michelangelo is in the world of tragic art. His comic conceptions are on the same grand scale, and exhibit the same prodigious energy, as the frescoes on the roof of the Sistine Chapel. Dore, as we have seen, makes the grotesque romantic. And the best of Rowlandson's drawings and engravings-for example, the marvelous *Soiree at Burlington House-are* marked by a force and grandeur of scale that would do credit to a great tragic creation.

It is unnecessary to speak here of our contemporaries. A few men of real comic talent are producing books and pictures at the present time. Not many, however. Most of our comic literature is mere satire, mere comedy of manners, mere wit. Most of our comic art is either not intrinsically comic at all-it is a mere accurate illustration of a funny scene, corresponding to the comedy of manners in literature-or else, when it tries, by distortion and an energetic exaggeration, to become intrinsically comic, it achieves only a petty ugliness and a mean and irritating vulgarity.