



Humor as Epiphanic Awareness and Attempted Self-Transcendence

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Citation	Shonkwiler, Curt. 2015. Humor as Epiphanic Awareness and Attempted Self-Transcendence. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences.
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Humor as Epiphanic Awareness and Attempted Self-Transcendence

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Department of Comparative Literature

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

Comparative Literature

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

December 2014

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Humor as Epiphanic Awareness and Attempted Self-Transcendence

Abstract

The starting premise of this dissertation is that the formal techniques of comedy make the comic novel a distinct form within the category of the novel, not just in terms of content, the way one novelistic genre is distinct from another, but also in terms of form, similar to the way poetry is distinct from prose. The argument is that the formal structures of comedy, such as set-ups, punchlines, and comic rhythm, combine to constitute a formally rigorous, almost rule-bound art form. These techniques are explored through close readings of various 20th century comic novels, in particular *Voyage au bout de la nuit* by Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Le Sabotage amoureux* by Amélie Nothomb, *Moskva-Pethushki* by Venedikt Erofeev and *Catch-22* Joseph Heller.

The further extension of this argument is that these formal structures create certain fundamental characteristics the comic novel, which in turn instantiate spiritual and emotional functions of the comedy on a structural level. The most important of these functions are that

comedy serves creates a sudden, epiphanic awareness of reality, a sense of self-transcendence, and an instant bond between people. Finally, the dissertation considers the limitations of these functions. For example, comedy creates awareness of that which was previously latently grasped, but rarely substantively new knowledge. The sense of self-transcendence it is real but momentary, fleeting. And the connection it fosters between people is instant but limited by its own basic impersonality.

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Acknowledgments

This dissertation itself has been a journey taken practically alone, through the forest, in the dark, full of strange omens and mysterious sightings that I tried to interpret with only the aid of firelight and primitive superstition. However, my life during the course of writing it has been anything but, and so my thanks are due above all to the precious friends and family that filled me with courage and moral fortitude. Above all to my parents, Don and Paula, whose forms of aid and loving support have been innumerable and immeasurable, who have left me a debtor to no human, but with a debt that can never be repaid. I count also my blessings for my family and for the many friends who are always close to my heart, who even in their hours of need somehow inspire me. I will only mention by name, since they simply can't be excluded, the stalwart Zhenya Matrosov and Dmitriy Zinchenko, the ethereal Sabrina Sadique, my pillar-like brother Clay, and of course the lovely Priscilla Bondis. My advisers on the dissertation too must be mentioned, Bill Todd, Luis Girón-Negrón and Judith Ryan, who with extreme patience, grace, and ability to overlook my seriously deficient ability to follow rules followed my meandering trains of thought and offered suggestions, guidance and that hard-to-monetize thing called hope. To all the other people I could stretch this to book length by mentioning, I will attempt to cover as succinctly as possible by being as vague as possible. So if you're wondering, yes, I do mean you, and yes, I am thinking of you.

Introduction

Writing about humor is always a challenge and an enigma. It is a commonplace that one can't explain a joke, and maybe even that one shouldn't. There is something slightly taboo-like about delving into the inner workings of humor, although it is not something forbidden, but something which it is feared will no longer exist if unearthed, a pleasure which can only survive if it remains lacking in self-consciousness. It is a curious boundary in an area which is often erroneously believed to lack any boundaries or rules. I won't pretend that this aversion is absolute: there have been theories and analyses of humor from ancient times on, and humor studies is a growing field today. But I started to realize that the relative lack was not only a result of neglect but also of resistance. It is strange to find, even in some of the contemporary literature on humor, an apologetic note for explaining the joke, so to speak, and even for the analysis itself not being funny.

I suspect another source of resistance, at least in academic circles, stems from the perceived subjective nature of humor. Safer to stick with verifiable and objective qualities of literature, rather than run the risk of one's work turning out to be simply built on a foundation of value judgments, or even--the horror!--literary criticism. However, even if humor is subjective, laughter, as I will have occasion to repeat more than once in what follows, is not. Laughter is an audience response to art which is hard, to be blunt, to bullshit. Every working comedian has a number of fairly strict mental structures that they know, even if subconsciously, that they need to make use of in order to achieve the desired response. Having done stand-up comedy for a time

myself, I can't simply dismiss this informal "folk" knowledge when I see its techniques so manifest everywhere in comic literature.

At the same time, humor never felt like only a vehicle to entertain and make people laugh. It seemed to me a form of access to hidden knowledge, an epiphanic awareness of unglimped sides of reality. I had read at various points the four novels that comprise the base texts for the analysis that follows--*Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Moskva-Petushki* by Venedikt Erofeev and *Le Sabotage amoureux* by Amélie Nothomb--and felt a deep similarity in the kind of humor in each. I wanted to explore whether there really was some kind of stylistic linkage. They did not seem to be linked in any direct way, and I was not really interested in direct lineages or influences anyway. That simply establishes the most shallow and literal connection. A connection in the absence of direct cross-pollination would actually be more interesting. It is a myth and an illusion to imagine that humor is unchanging or monolithic, but the spirit of humor in some form is certainly universal, and to find affinities across space and time suggests that something fundamental is asserting itself. As Luigi Pirandello puts it in his study *On Humor*:

"It is...a question of whether humor should be considered in the wide sense in which it is usually and mistakenly considered, or rather in a narrower but more appropriate sense. If we take it in the wide sense, we will find a wealth of examples in both the ancient and modern literatures of all nations; if we take it in its more restricted sense, we will also find it in the ancient and modern literatures of all countries, but we will find much less of it, in fact, only very few exceptional manifestations."¹

1. Luigi Pirandello, *On Humor*, trans. Antonio Illiano and Daniel P. Testa, University of North Carolina Press, 1960, p. 20.

This distinction nicely teases out one of the central confusions in the analysis of humor. There is a “wide sense” of humor which consists of the endless range of different means that have been employed to provoke humor. This category is so broad as to make any generalizations about it almost impossible, which is where many theories of humor founder. On the other hand there are more particular forms or qualities of humor which may not be linked by subject matter or any clear signs of mutual influence, may in fact be found in the most disparate and far-flung contexts, but nevertheless seem to possess some common spirit. It may be hard to create a category of objective, verifiable elements to link them together, which is why comic works are often placed into more obvious thematic categories, such as the picaresque novel.

This is perhaps Pirandello’s mistake, to construe a certain type of humor he has identified as “true humor,” thus making his discussion appear like a mere discussion of canonicity, of what are the humorous works worthy of study. Rather than thinking in terms of category or genre, I prefer to focus on what potentialities certain examples of humor appear to represent. To put it in the simplest terms, I have tried to focus on what humor can be or can do rather than on what it must be. It would be a mistake to attempt to construe my four base texts as a category defined by qualities that they and only they possess. Humor, as least insofar as it interests, is a means or route to the fulfillment of certain psychic and spiritual functions. My interest is in how it connects to the rest of the universe, not in dividing or fencing it off as its own thing.

My starting point for analysis, paradoxically, was the contention that comic prose (which is prose that is intended to create a feeling of humor), because of the degree to which it conforms to tight though informal structures, should be considered as a category apart from non-humorous

prose. It is more similar in some ways to poetry. By that I don't mean to describe or characterize every single work ever written which could be considered comic. Rather, I mean that some real examples of the phenomenon I am describing exist, therefore it must be conceded that it exists as a reality, even if not perhaps the only reality. In other words, some comic works, namely the examples I cite, evince the features I am describing. Therefore any statements I make regarding them represent a possibility latent in comedy, if not a necessity. This is also similar to poetry in that not all poems bear the distinct qualities that are usually understood as distinguishing poetry from prose, such as a strict meter or rhyme. Nevertheless, some do, and it might even be contended that those qualities in some measure color the reading of all works that put themselves or put under the rubric of poetry. In the same way, not all comic works evince the features of, for example, common joke structure, with set-ups and punchlines, but some clearly do.

Comedy (within the parameters mentioned above) has beats, just like formal verse. These beats are not as identifiably regular as poetic meter, because the structures in comedy are output-based rather than input-based. In other words, poets write their verse according to regular structures and patterns. Comedians do not for the most part do this intentionally, or if they do only as a means to an end, because their goal is to produce an impression of humor in the audience, not to create formal symmetries. They could of course create jokes that all had the same number of words or syllables, or rhymed, but this would only be justified if it contributed to producing a certain effect in the audience. If the structures employed to produce humor evince certain similarities, it is probably because of a certain similarity in how different audiences perceive humor. The main constraint or shaping force on humorous prose is the management of

time. The awareness or realization that creates the feeling of humor must be immediate and sudden. The reaction of humor is explosive even violent. This is why explaining a joke almost always ruins it. When the realization of humor is arrived at methodically it does not have the same force or power. Consequently, all the elements of which the joke is composed have to be lined up in such a way that that moment of realization can hit all at once. As a result, narrative that is structured around a joke tends to be intensely linear, because the elements of the set-up are being established with an eye forwards to the moment of pay-off, and extraneous details usually have to be avoided for fear of distracting the audience, because they need to be primed and concentrating for the moment of the pay-off. For the most part succinctness and concision are thus of paramount importance, although sometimes, conversely, particularly when a joke is very complex it has to be drawn out somewhat so the different elements have time to be subconsciously registered by the audience. The paradox of humor is that this linearity is actually an attempt to approximate atemporality. The moment of realization that creates the feeling of humor is not entirely atemporal, but it consists of the simultaneous awareness of the nature and relationships of the different elements of which the joke is composed. That awareness is not itself the essence of humor, or else jokes would not never get old. But it is the way things all of a sudden come together that creates humor. Time must intensely managed to produce that split second of transcendent near-timelessness.

That is the argument made in the first chapter. But what is the broader significance of these humorous structures? What function do they serve? These are the questions addressed by the second chapter. Humor explores negative mental spaces, because it exists at the moments in

which perceptions change but before they solidify into a new form. The comic text is always in a state of movement towards and anticipation of moments of humor, but those moments once arrived at, are instantly over. The feeling that they bring can only be recaptured by immediately abandoning them and moving on to another joke. The moment of humor is almost like a black hole, a cosmic center of gravity which organizes everything around but which is itself emptiness, nothingness. But that does not mean that moment is meaningless or, so to speak, vacuous. It is a moment of freedom, in which order and certainty are suspended. The fact that this moment is necessarily transient to the point of lacking a temporal dimension itself accounts for the complex structure of a humorous text. An analogy would be: it is not true to say that humans cannot float off the ground under the conditions of earth's gravity. To the contrary, every time someone runs, at the instants both their feet are off the ground, they are floating. One might claim that this doesn't really "count" because it only lasts for a split second, and besides the person is in no way free from subjection to gravity at that time. But the astronauts floating around inside shuttles orbiting the earth are not free from earth's gravity either, and they too would eventually crash to the ground, though it would take much longer. In both cases, we can see that it takes a lot of forward momentum to achieve such weightlessness even for a moment. The person running simply lacks as much of that as the space shuttle. The brief moments of weightlessness and suspension in a humorous text similarly rely on a relentless forward momentum.

Having become familiar with various elements of humor on an informal basis in the first two chapters, it will be time in the third chapter to step back and briefly address a few of the more famous theories of humor in the history of Western culture. Generally speaking, in ancient

times the prevailing view was that laughter represented some kind of mocking or supercilious judgment. In modern times, at least from Kant on humor became progressively more identified as a part of an epistemological process, whether it represented a reprieve or relaxation from the effort to achieve understanding, or a recognition of an incongruity between mental objects, or a tool to refer to a taboo subject in non-taboo language. All of these views represent partial truths. Humor involves an appraisal or judgment, but also an epistemological event. While it contains an epistemological component, it does not seem particularly correlated with the acquisition of new knowledge. People do not generally burst into laughter every time they learn something new in school.

The first hint should be the transitory nature of humor. Knowledge is durable. New discoveries generally retain their intellectual value even after the flush of discovery has faded, at least until they are superseded. But once humor is grasped it soon disappears. The critical distinction is that while knowledge is enduring, conscious awareness is fleeting, and comes and goes. Humor represents just that moment at which something bursts into consciousness. Obviously not every instance of becoming aware of something is perceived as funny, but humor, at least insofar as we are concerned with it here, does generally accompany a new awareness, though not always new knowledge.

In fact, comedy is even in some ways the enemy of stable knowledge. For example, in a realistic novel one might expect a primary character's actions in the last chapter to be less unexpected than in the first, because if they have been portrayed in a consistent and coherent fashion, the audience's understanding of their motivations and tendencies should progressively

increase. And if the understanding of the character and their environment is great enough, what ensues may even appear somewhat inevitable. But predictability is the death of comedy. This is why in the ancient Athenian theater fate was a property of tragedy but not comedy. In comedy events have to continue to hold an equal element of surprise all the way to the end, or humor will disappear. Comedy consists of sudden shifts of perspective rather than a steady accumulation of understanding. This is the subject of chapter 4.

In comedy characters tend to be reduced to elements in a joke, sometimes even to quantities in an equation. Thus the enduring popularity of caricatures and stereotypes in humor, even (or perhaps especially) in politically or socially loaded contexts. It is true that, as James Wood argues, sometimes comic novels present complex and nuanced characters, but this is not specifically a comedic virtue, it is more a case of compromise or compatibility between the comedic and non-comedic elements of a novel. In some cases, as in three of these four novels, characters are not reduced to elements, or at least not the first-person narrators, whose perspective by contrast engulfs everything else, and it is their point of view that highlights various humorous ironies and conceits. The humor, in other words, derives from the monologic omnipresence of a single voice.

Comedy tends towards monologism rather than polyphony, partly because the comedic manipulation and orchestration of time and pacing demands on synchronization and choreography which are constantly threatened by the chaos of true interpersonal interaction. Comedy itself is a form of connection between people, but also of isolation. Jokes tend to preclude intimacy, and laughter and the threat of laughter render the expression of serious and

deep feelings precarious. Humor forms an instant bond between strangers and then subsequently goes no deeper, which also makes it a perfect device for those who wish to express (or feign) personal warmth while eschewing the vulnerability of intimacy. Humor represents broadening not just of mind (awareness) but also of the emotions (connection). Both are forms of self-transcendence that humor achieves, but only momentarily. It sometimes appears as a strategy of keeping others close but at bay. In other words, both the opening and closing of the moment of humor serve a function. The opening creates a bond between two people, and the closing prevents from becoming deep or lasting. As such, if its virtues have perhaps been underestimated in the history of the novel, its limitations can be measured with a watch, in the time that elapses from the moment laughter breaks out at a joke to the moment it dies out. That path, from the rise to the fall of a joke, is now what I want to trace and explore in greater detail.

Chapter 1: The Possibility of an Anti-Epic Novel

Traditionally the signal quality of the novel, both its strength and weakness, has been held to be its flexibility of form, which can indefinitely expand, asymptotically approaching if never attaining the total portrayal of a reality. At the same time, it can appear diffuse, always approaching but never arriving at a finished state, never embodying the essence of anything in and of itself. Describing his view of the aesthetic philosophy of Dostoevsky, for him an exemplar of the novel as an “open” art form, Mikhail Bakhtin writes in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*: “Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free.”² In other words, the infinite here is approached infinitely. The infinite detail of reality is depicted through an accumulation of detail ever approaching infinity, through arguments that carry on and are never truly resolved. And any formal structures that set limits on language, such as rhythm, are suspect. As Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson summarize Bakhtin’s views in their study, “Rhythm itself flattens out the diversities of heteroglot speech...Or...at least does not permit their rich development.”³ György Lukács makes a similar, though less invidious, point by distinguishing the “swift flight of verse” from the “deliberate pace” of prose.⁴

But can a novel ever approach the infinite finitely? Poems, for example, pertain to formal categories, or at least they used to. A poem is either a sonnet or it is not a sonnet, it is either in blank verse or it isn’t. The work either fulfills the form or it doesn’t. In practice, of course,

2. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 166.

3. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, Stanford University Press, 1990, p. 322.

4. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock, MIT Press, 1968, p. 59.

classification may be more complicated. Can a novel ever arrive at an essence in this way? It would seem not, because it would seem to lack any absolute units. Comedy, however, is an exception to this, because it is built around humor, which in turn depends on laughter, and thus promotes strict formal structures to produce it. Bakhtin himself writes quite a lot about humor and laughter. In fact in his essay “Epic and Novel” he links it directly to the rise of the novel itself, seeing the novel as a kind of bastardized parodic form that arose out of satire and irreverence towards more formal genres like the epic. And he sees laughter as an important component of an ongoing anatomization of authority, received viewpoints, hierarchy, etc.: “Laughter has the...power of making an object come up close...where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it,”⁵ and so forth. In the Rabelais book he goes even further, linking it to the carnival festive culture of the Middle Ages and both the quasi-anarchic socio-political state and the altered internal state of being that he sees embodied there. Typical of his views is this sentence from the introduction to the work: “During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part.”⁶ Humor, at least Rabelaisian “folk” humor, is a direct expression and continuation of this spirit. Now, regardless of whether people in the Middle Ages actually managed, in the course of a holiday weekend several times a year, to cobble together something resembling these messianic visions, this represents a compelling ideal.

5. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 23.

6. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, The MIT Press, 1968, p. 7.

Yet for all his meditations on the metaphysical meaning of humor, Bakhtin never really analyzes humor from a technical point of view, and thus seems to overlook the precision and tight structuring required to produce humor, which perhaps makes it not such an enemy of poetry and formal artifice as he imagines.⁷ For example, *Catch-22* opens with:

“It was love at first sight. The first time Yossarian saw the chaplain he fell madly in love with him. Yossarian was in the hospital with a pain in his liver that fell just short of being jaundice. The doctors were puzzled by the fact that it wasn’t quite jaundice.”⁸

These sentences are structured around repetitions of words, phrases and ideas (“love,” “Yossarian,” “jaundice,” love at first sight and the disease that wasn’t quite jaundice), a kind of stasis which paradoxically highlights the impression of movement in the passage. For example, the first sentence broaches the idea of “love at first sight,” but the reappearance of that idea in the second sentence, with the phrase “he fell in love with him,” heightens, through immediate juxtaposition, the reversal of expectations engendered by the phrase, as the object of this “love” is the chaplain.⁹ The sentences about the “not quite jaundice” rely even more heavily on the effect of repetition. In essence, the narrator turns “not quite jaundice” into a set phrase, thus showing how the doctors are so attached to rigid labels that they create a label out of a condition

7. Parenthetically, it strikes me that Bakhtin’s rhapsodizing about the mad, altered state induced by and conducive to carnival laughter is not so different in a way from the claims of the Romantic poets or even the surrealists, with their pretensions to inspiration by divinely inspired fugue state, dreams, etc.

8. Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*, Simon & Schuster, 1955, p. 7.

9. It seems clear that this is no reference to gay romance since, even aside from the way Yossarian’s character is subsequently depicted, homosexuality, while frequently an object of humor during this era, could hardly be viewed as the kind of manifest absurdity which the structure of these sentences sets up.

whose very nature (or rather, Yossarian's purpose in inventing it) is to elude classification and hence treatment and discharge.

We can see here how the demands of wit impose a radically pared-down style. These are the first two sentences of the novel, after all. Exposition and background detail are non-existent; the narrative starts *in media res*, except in this case the audience's initial ignorance is an advantage, not a disadvantage, from the author's point of view, insofar as it can be manipulated to heighten the sense of irony. The simplicity of detail is necessary comedically because the central comic ideas need to remain present enough in the reader's mind to make connections between them with the instantaneousness necessary to activate the humor. Yet at the same time a kind of balance is necessary: within those bounds of instantaneous recall and recognition, humor is often greater the more intricate the patterns and symmetries that the mind recognizes. In other words, pacing is crucial. The competing dictates of brevity and complexity can be satisfied in various ways. One of these is the deliberately cumbersome effect of repetition in this passage. If, for example, the second sentence about Yossarian's ailment simply referred to the "pain in his liver that fell just short of being jaundice" as "it" or "his symptoms" or something like that, the meaning would still be clear, but the humor would be gone, because the repetition serves to create an impression of precision to an object that inherently lacks it. The size and complexity of the phrase conveys an idea of complexity which, because it is a repetition, does not detract from the focus and clarity of the passage. Quite to the contrary, it emphasizes them, and for good measure imparts a propulsive rhythmic element as well.

The tightness of structure required on this sentence-to-sentence level inevitably somewhat de-emphasizes large-scale narrative structures. Which is not to say that the characters and incidents in *Catch-22* are not intricately connected, as evidenced by Heller's detailed blotter sheet charting them all,¹⁰ but the novel remains highly episodic in nature. The incident with the not-quite-jaundice, for example, is only described for a couple of paragraphs, and Yossarian's purported love for the chaplain is hardly developed at all thereafter. This may be explained to an extent by Heller's claim that the first lines of the novel formed the immediate inspiration for the novel as a whole, and that he initially wrote the first chapter as a self-contained piece,¹¹ but it is consistent with much of the rest of the work. One could even say that it is an appropriate introduction in a way in terms of setting the tone of brusqueness and seemingly arbitrary happenings. Also, by omitting virtually all expository detail on characters' physical appearances, personal backgrounds, etc., it denies them a humanizing, conventionalizing context and thus makes them seem all the more as mere instruments of the warped military logic that dominates their lives. Not coincidentally, the most background detail is generally lavished on the positive characters, and only Yossarian is more or less spared from caricature.¹²

Catch-22 is not a short novel, but its episodes do not much build on each other except tonally. And any sense of progression is undermined by the extraordinarily digressive and non-linear narrative movement, with constant cutting from one time frame and character to another. Part of this is no doubt attributable to the basic anarchy of comic writing. Because jokes are by

10. Heller, pp. 480-481.

11. David M. Craig, *Tilting at Mortality: Narrative Strategies in Joseph Heller's Fiction*, Wayne State University Press, 1997, p. 48.

12. Except the cover image.

the standards of art relatively unambiguous, in terms of their success or failure at eliciting humor, there is always a temptation to hoard the best ones even at the expense of narrative coherence and continuity. Even the best comic writers struggle to maintain a balance between the two. Heller wrote the first chapter of *Catch-22* as a short story before seeing the latent possibilities for a larger narrative, then left it in place despite the lack of importance of the chaplain and Yossarian's hospital stay in the subsequent narrative, presumably because the humor in this episode is so striking. Soseki Natsume wrote the first chapter of *I Am a Cat* in the same way, and Evelyn Waugh even shoehorned an entire previously written novella into the second half of *A Handful of Dust*. The only section in *Catch-22* that really follows one character and one time frame for an extended period is the chapter "The Eternal City," which follows Yossarian on a night journey through the apocalyptic remains of occupied Rome, and not coincidentally this, along with the story of Snowden, is the most somber episode in the novel. In the description of occupied Rome, without the constant cutting away from individual characters, the audience loses some of the emotional distance necessary for comedy and briefly sees the carnage all around through their eyes. At the same time, this is the exception that proves the general rule.

Céline, on the other hand, employs a more relaxed syntactical structure, though this may be concealed by his tone of address, often teetering on the verge of hysteria. Take the opening lines of *Voyage*:

“Ça a débuté comme ça. Moi, j’avais jamais rien dit. Rien. C’est Arthur Ganate qui m’a fait parler. Arthur, un étudiant, un carabin lui aussi, un camarade [It started like that. Me, I never said

anything. Anything. It was Arthur Ganate who made me talk.
Arthur, a student, a med student like me, comrade].”¹³

There is a fair amount of repetition in this passage, as in *Catch-22*, but it does not draw attention to irony or parallels, it is more an imitation of speech, where, since words are not preserved for future reference as they are in writing, their presence must be maintained and re-asserted through repetition. The repetitions are particularly heavy in this passage because of the narrator’s mode of address: he does not describe or even recount, but instead seems to be arguing a point, responding to implied objections. The repetitions for emphasis, like “moi” and “rien,” then, are in fact not simply the kind of repetitions common to casual speech, but a rhetorical device for argumentative forcefulness.

While Céline’s syntactical constructions tend to be less tightly symmetrical, he brushes by background detail with equal rapidity. In *Voyage* we see even more clearly the influence of orality. Paradoxically, the lack of detail shows an observational astuteness. Many prose narratives present themselves as oral first-person narratives but then fill them with unrealistic levels of detail, introducing characters with a laundry list of physical characteristics and background details characteristic of the realistic novel, whereas genuine spoken anecdotes typically focus much more exclusively on the action. In that sense the tales in the *Decameron* are more “realistic” than, say, a Conrad story. There is something in this of the idea that Lessing develops in his *Laokoon* on the distinction between poetry (which we might associate with narrative more generally), whose natural medium he regards to be time and hence whose natural objects of representation are events, and “painting” (representing the visual arts), whose natural medium is

13. Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Voyage au bout de la nuit, suivi de Mort à credit*, Éditions Gallimard, 1962, p. 11.

space and whose objects of representation are, well, objects. This is because painting or sculpture cannot literally show the passage of time, and so temporal relationships can only be implied. Narrative, which consists purely of sequence, cannot literally depict objects simultaneously, and thus can only depict temporal sequences, i.e. events. Depicting events obviously requires the depiction also of the objects that enact them, “aber nur andeutungsweise durch Handlungen [but only implicitly through events].”¹⁴ Hence Homer only describes objects through how they are created and used, and people through their actions.

In this passage, similarly, when the narrator introduces a character, Arthur, he only mentions the aspects which pertain to him, the narrator, and the story. As it turns out, as in *Catch-22* this initial episode is only thinly connected to the rest of the novel, as it ends with the narrator, Bardamu, joining the army, and never seeing or mentioning Arthur again. Alton Kim Robertson notes that “this pattern of transition that will characterize the links between the episodes throughout the novel...lacks even a modicum of logic or motivation,”¹⁵ and notes that this type of structure has been a source of the “critical objurgation of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*[, which] has generally been founded on its failure to adopt the principles of causality and closure that are characteristic of classical narrative structures.”¹⁶ This seems an oddly reactionary critique: why is “failure to adopt the principles of causality and closure...characteristic of classical narrative structures” a disqualifying attribute of a novel from the modernist era? Many of the great modernist works foreground issues of narrative perspective. The disconnectedness of

14. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon, oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*

15. Alton Kim Robertson, *The Grotesque Interface: Deformity, Debasement, Dissolution*, Iberoamericana, 1996, p. 25.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

the episodes in *Voyage*, in juxtaposition with the constant narrative voice, does likewise. As Richardson writes: “it has been suggested that the only element of cohesion in the entire novel is the presence of the narrator who mediates the account.”¹⁷ That is precisely the point, and in this respect is perhaps not so different from a number of other major modernist works. However, Céline does not, in contrast to, for example, the great stream-of-consciousness modernist works, present us with an inadvertent narrator. Bardamu clearly appears to be telling a story. His narrative is thus at all times consciously constructed, and in consequence can employ a tighter, more “finished” style. Perhaps this leads some to automatically place him under the strictures of a more classical storytelling decorum. But this would be to fail to appreciate, however, that fragmentation here, just as much as in Joyce or Woolf, focuses attention on the medium of narrative, except here the medium is rhetoric rather than “overheard” thoughts. Unlike a more plot-driven work, *Voyage* does not, unlike Heidegger’s *Dasein*, only find its full meaning at its ending. Its meaning rather lies in the rhetorical artifice which is present at every moment. This constitutes the essential brevity of the work, almost independent of the actual (considerable) length of the work.

So Céline does not offer unmediated access to the thoughts of his narrator, thus leaving a gap between thought and speech. In the opening of *Le Sabotage amoureux* we become aware of an even wider cleft, although for reasons that only retrospectively becomes clear. The opening line of the novel reads: “Au grand galop de mon cheval, je paradais parmi les ventilateurs [With the great galloping of my horse, I paraded among the electric fans].”¹⁸ The juxtaposition of horse

17. Ibid.

18. Amélie Nothomb, *Le Sabotage amoureux*, Éditions Albin Michel, 1993, p. 5.

and electric fans already creates a hint of disjunction, but the nature of the “horse” is only revealed later, when the narrator shows it to her *bien-aimée* Elena, who says that it isn’t a horse but a bike, to which the narrator insists that it is a horse and further reflects:

“A mes yeux, cette vérité était si établie qu’il ne m’avait fallu aucune foi pour montrer l’animal. Je n’avais même pas pensé qu’Elena pourrait y voir autre chose qu’un cheval [In my eyes, this truth was so well-established that it required no leap of faith to show her the animal. I didn’t even consider that Elena might see anything other than a horse].”¹⁹

This seems to be pushing the limits of even the naïveté of a small child to the limits of credibility, but either way it opens up a huge gap between the narrator as narrator and narrator as subject. Either she is misrepresenting or misremembering the incident, or her perspective at the time was incredibly insular and eccentric. Either the narrator’s point of view as a child was radically out of joint with conventional reality, or the author is using the perspective of a child as a realistic pretext to fashion the narrative voice into a constant estranging device, offering an idiosyncratically skewed view of an environment, the China of the early ’70’s, which is itself peculiar. In this sense the rhythm and style of the narrative is inseparable from the narrator’s observations and provocations. The citation of Wittgenstein in the first pages is appropriate:

“‘Le monde est tout ce qui a lieu,’ écrit Wittgenstein en sa prose admirable. En 1974, Pékin n’avait pas lieu: je ne vois pas comment je pourrais mieux exprimer la situation [‘The world is everything which is the case,’ writes Wittgenstein in his admirable prose. In 1974, Beijing was not the case: I don’t see how I could better express the situation].”²⁰

19. Ibid., p. 43.

20. Ibid., p. 12

Wittgenstein's works possess their own compacted, rhythmic quality precisely because of their broken, aphoristic style. By omitting the smooth, dulling, familiar contours of sustained argument, those conventionalizing structures which eat away at perception and replace it with mere recognition, Wittgenstein's aphorisms function as estranging devices as Viktor Shklovsky defines them in *Theory of Prose*, making the philosophical concepts discussed seem new and strange again by their lack of rootedness in the familiar.²¹ By making the movement from idea to idea abrupt and jarring, Wittgenstein forces attention on the individual ideas themselves, not simply the overall structure of the argument.

Nothomb fills the narrative with similar sharp, provocative ideas left hanging in space, not rounded off with explanation or justification. This seems emblematic of estranging perception, which Shklovsky associated above all with Tolstoy. Actually Tolstoy is a strange case, as his style, overloaded as it is with exhaustive descriptive detail, superficially would seem the very antithesis of Wittgenstein's. But there is, after all, more than one kind of descriptive detail. One could say that there is detail which nuances one's understanding and then there is detail which alters its direction or nature. Yet Tolstoy's descriptions often somehow combine these to an unusual degree. Shklovsky's examples include a description of a horse's existence (from the horse's perspective) in terms of who uses the words "mine" with reference to it ("Many of the people, for example, who call me their horse did not ride on me. Others did. These same people never fed me. Others did"²²), and a description of a theatrical performance which makes

21. Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher, Dalkey Archive Press, 1990, p. 5.

22. Shklovsky, p. 7.

no reference to the plot or story of the play per se.²³ From these one could learn about the social status of the horse's owner or the details of performance at a 19th century Russian theater, but these descriptions go much further than this. Although they add to the details of the scene, their unusual points of view and foci have the effect of seeming to cut through the meaningless or insincere conventions of society and storytelling. This quality gives a paradoxical sense of leanness and efficiency, of clarity and simplicity, to these vast, complicated descriptions.

Tolstoy's style, then, is quite unique, and by choosing him as an exemplar of estranging detail Shklovsky perhaps gives a false impression of the role of "objective" realism in estranging perception, because in Flaubert or the naturalists we do not find such a voice insistently forcing us to step back and consider the scene from another angle. Instead, the ostensibly neutral authorial voice, which those writers steered the novel towards, can paradoxically allow the reader to remain mired in their preconceptions, just as the actual objects and events of the world don't enforce a particular interpretation of them. So one could say that their mimetic project in a way actually succeeds too well, whereas Tolstoy enters into a dialogue with the reader which forces consideration of new perspectives. Nothomb is true to this aspect of Tolstoy's style, even though her own, which largely bypasses descriptive detail, would seem to be the opposite. However, her method is to confront her audience directly at the level of interpretation, offering strange yet resonant generalizations that are all the more unsettling for their lack of detailed contextualization. "Pékin en 1974 n'avait pas lieu" alone, with its contradictory logic, is one such statement, forcing a feeling of irrationality and disorientation on the reader, which is quite appropriate given that she is trying to evoke an impression of the Cultural Revolution, an event

23. Ibid., p. 8-9.

whose monstrous weirdness has over time been worn down through its incorporation into innumerable historical narratives.

While *Le Sabotage amoureux*, as well as *Voyage* and *Catch-22*, derive their brevity principally from their focus on small-scale structures, anecdotes and observations linked together to what could in principle be of indefinite duration, *Moskva-Petushki* owes its succinctness more to the structural affinity of the whole to theater and poetry. In fact Erofeev subtitles the work “поэма [поем]” (the term implies a long narrative poem). And his language is often poetic, expansive and declamatory. He speaks with a greater emotional range than Céline, Nothomb or Heller, which he can do without sacrificing his satirical edge because the drunkenness of the narrative proxy, Venichka, permits him to veer unpredictably between sincerity and mockery. For example, in the first chapter he writes:

“Я пошел направо, чуть покачиваясь от холода и от горя, да, от холода и горя. О, эта утренняя ноша в сердце! О, иллюзорность бедствия. О, непоправимость! [I went to the right, slightly shaking from cold and grief, yes, from cold and grief. O, this morning burden in the heart! O, illusoriness of disaster. O, irreparability!].”²⁴

The pathos of his exclamation of “cold and grief” is almost immediately undercut by the repetition of “yes, from cold and grief,” which provides enough of a glimmer of self-reassurance/deception to suggest that a hangover is the true culprit. The end of the passage most clearly illustrates the rapid veering from tragedy into farce:

“О, эфемерность! О, самое бессильное и позорное время в жизни моего народа - время от рассвета до открытия магазинов! [O, ephemerality! O, the weakest and most shameful

24. Venedikt Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, Zakharov, 2004, p. 6.

time in the life of my people - the time from sunrise to the opening
of the [liquor] stores!.”²⁵

The first phrase, suggestive of a grandiose historical statement, is here overtly juxtaposed with the comedic smallness of the second. Yet for all the appearance of disheveled raving, note how carefully these phrases are balanced. In the first, merely the act of repetition provides the irony: by his slight over-emphasis on the cause of his shaking, Venichka gives away the game. The second expectation is more overtly broken with the dash between phrases. The parodically “poetic” diction like “ephemerality” both points to and conceals the genuinely poetic construction of these sentences. There could almost be a caesura in the middle and line breaks between them. This is the same basic logic of wit as we see in Heller or Nothomb, with a more lyrical sensibility.

Erofeev shows perhaps most clearly that poetry and humor are not necessarily mutually corrosive, that in fact rhythmically they can be very similar. In fact his monologue resembles Shakespearean soliloquy to a surprising degree, and not only because Venichka himself considers passing off his unstable contortions as the rehearsal for a performance of Shakespeare. One could imagine a drunken Hamlet in his downward mental spiral madly equivocating in a manner not unlike Venichka. Venichka’s monologue adheres to an Aristotelian unity of place and time. Venichka’s nominal two hour journey from Moscow to Petushki unfolds in the novel in “real time,” i.e. the journey takes about equally long to read. On the other hand, it also shares the ambiguous nature of the address of a soliloquy. Like a soliloquy, it appears to capture the unfolding thought of a character at the moment of narrative action, and yet that character’s thoughts are more stylistically finished and perfected than any plausible stream of consciousness,

25. Ibid.

and overtly directed towards an audience. So the monologue exists both in and out of time, and both within and outside of the scene in which the character is participating.

Partly this narrative mode seems implicit in the movement within the modernist era from Joyce to Woolf. In *Ulysses*, for example, in a passage which Seymour Chapman cites as a particularly fine example of stream of consciousness, there is nothing inherently notable about Leopold Bloom's thoughts: "Tell him if he smokes he won't grow. O let him! His life isn't such a bed of roses. Waiting outside pubs to bring da home. Come home to ma, da. Slack hour: won't be many there."²⁶ These thoughts become aesthetically notable not because of their content but because of the recognition on the part of the audience of the mimetic skill with which the fragmentary, humdrum contents of consciousness have been captured and mimicked. In fact, Bloom himself becomes an artistic creator of the same type by himself projecting even more simple-minded thoughts onto the boy outside the pub. Of course, the case of *Ulysses* is complicated by the fact that it is more truly mimetic of styles of writing than of a literal progression of consciousness. This is somewhat evident in all the many genres that are parodied in various episodes, some of them, like journalese or mock-epic, clearly extraneous to the scenes they describe. Even the seemingly realistic stream of consciousness sections like the passage above or the Molly Bloom monologue, have been criticized, by Dorrit Cohn²⁷ and Nabokov²⁸ among others, for an almost unrealistic verbosity, but this would be to mistake these scenes for

26. Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Cornell University Press, 1978, p. 192.

27. Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*, Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 86-87.

28. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980, p. 363.

transcriptions of the characters' actual thoughts, rather than descriptions of their perceptions in the register they would use were they to fully verbalize those perceptions, which is what Joyce seems to be doing. This still represents a kind of miniaturist's art in which the author demonstrates his skill by thinking himself into smaller and more narrowly constrained boxes of consciousness and mimicking the voices of those trapped inside. This in fact is the pattern of the whole novel, which begins with the adult Stephen Dedalus and proceeds through the progressively more limited mental frameworks of Leopold and then Molly Bloom.

By contrast, Virginia Woolf, although she theoretically also employs stream of consciousness, seems to have a different goal in mind than a successful reproduction of reality. Her characters never deliver dull, fragmentary thoughts. Like Shakespeare's characters, they are almost always brilliant poets. For example, this is how the six-year-old James Ramsey perceives the interaction between his father and mother: "a rosy-flowered fruit tree laid with leaves and dancing boughs into which the beak of brass, the arid scimitar of his father, the egotistical man, plunged and smote, demanding sympathy."²⁹ Thoughts in Woolf are selected and shaped in a way that Joyce consciously resisted. Even the literary parody sections of *Ulysses* are continuous with the portrayals of consciousness, because all of them attempt to inhabit and reproduce discourse, albeit in deliberately incongruous contexts. Woolf's goal, on the other hand, seems to be an elevation of reality and language. And so her characters' addresses are generally closer to speech than to spontaneous thought, and closer to poetry than to speech. This tendency is most evident in *The Waves*, where characters' monologues are presented in quotation marks.

29. Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, Harcourt, Inc, 1927, pp. 41-42.

In fact Cohn, in her study of narrative forms of presenting consciousness, while not explicitly advocating any progressive notion of literary history, nonetheless seems to implicitly argue for a process of increasingly mimetically convincing depictions of consciousness from the 18th to the 20th centuries, more or less culminating with *Ulysses*. Yet she suggestively mentions *The Waves* briefly at the end, claiming that its non-mimetic form places it somewhat outside the ken of her study properly speaking, and yet, by its placement at the very end seeming to suggest that it might be a next step beyond, or at least outside the model created by Joyce, much the same way Lukács brings up Dostoevsky without further detail at the end of *Theory of the Novel*.³⁰ Although the monologues in *The Waves* clearly lack the mimetic verisimilitude of Joyce or Faulkner's monologues, they do not suffer what Cohn considers the shortcomings of earlier, less realistic literary attempts to model characters' thoughts, because Woolf does not seem to be attempting "to create the illusion that the reader is overhearing a 'real' mind thinking its thoughts."³¹ It is interesting, in reading Cohn's survey of the last 300 years of literary life, to note how every gain in literary realism in one area is generally won only by jettisoning realism in another. For example, in the 18th and early 19th centuries writers of novels were very concerned to conjure up a realistic explanation for how their fictional narrators could have come to learn the inner thoughts of fictional characters, and thus came up with various artifices, like highly detailed diaries or characters being overhead actually speaking their thoughts aloud. Later 19th century writers as well as the modernists were able to devise more convincing portrayals of inner thought processes only by abandoning the pretense of providing a plausible explanation for the mode of

30. Or, for that matter, how Dostoevsky brings up Raskolnikov's new life without going into details at the end of *Crime and Punishment*

31. Cohn, p. 265.

transmission of those thoughts from character to author. Rather than a net increase in “realism,” then, the area of focus and even the nature of realism had simply shifted. In the 18th and early 19th centuries more of an interest existed in presenting narratives as plausibly realistic *documents*, with the limitations on information and authorial perspective that that implies, whereas later novels rarely make any claim to presenting a specific, factual reality; realism consists in some more abstract, general quality of being true to life. So modernist narratives are just as dependent on artifice as literary texts ever have been. Whether for this reason or another, Woolf seems to have disburdened herself of modernist epistemological concerns, finally arriving, with *The Waves*, at some kind of boundary region with poetry and theater. As Cohn notes, Woolf herself called *The Waves* “a new kind of play...prose yet poetry; a novel and a play.”³²

Heller, Céline, Nothomb and Erofeev work in a post-Woolf literary universe where the presentation of a living consciousness has embraced theatricality. *Moskva-Petushki* most closely resembles a stream of consciousness, and was in fact written, according to its author, in less than two months in 1970,³³ yet nevertheless, like Woolf’s work, sets itself outside of a realistic context. For instance, Erofeev overtly identifies the narrator with the author of the work, specifically as “автор поэмы ‘Москва-Петушки,’”³⁴ thus implying that this “поэм” is already a well-known work in the public domain of which he is the author, implying in turn that the narrative is being composed after its own publication. The end of the work involves an even bigger temporal paradox, as the narrator describes his own murder, or at least permanent loss of consciousness: “И с тех пор я не приходил в сознание, и никогда не приду [And from that

32. *Ibid.*, p. 263.

33. Ryan-Hayes, p. 6.

34. Erofeev, p. 18.

moment I did not regain consciousness, and I never will].”³⁵ In addition, the text is ostensibly the record of a train journey from Moscow to Petushki, helpfully marked with periodic breaks noting each station passed, and yet at some point during this short morning journey day turns to night and the train mysteriously reverses course without stopping or changing direction, winding up back in Moscow in the shadow of the Kremlin even as the chapter heading labels it as “Petushki,” before hedging self-contradictorally with “Kremlin.”³⁶

For what purpose does Erofeev introduce this strange atemporality and a-locality into the work? For one thing, Venichka’s state of mind is so clearly disordered that an ambiguity surrounds the strange events that occur as to whether or not they are pure products of the narrating mind. In other words, while the narrative as it is recounted is clearly not wholly realistic, that does not rule out a realistic explanation for its surrealistic elements. As such, Venichka occupies a boundary space between reality and imagination,³⁷ still subject to the constraints of time and space, but not granted the predictability of natural laws that their presence implies. So Venichka’s narrative is in some sense unbounded, free associational. The ostensible train journey from Moscow and Petushki is but a vacant backdrop for his free-ranging hallucinations. The lack of linear progression is ironically highlighted precisely by the implication in the title of a defined endpoint, Petushki, place described by Venichka in paradisaical, though with tongue-in-cheek exaggeration, as a place where “Первородный грех - может, он и был - там никого не тяготит [Perhaps original sin exists, but it does not burden anyone

35. Ibid., 73.

36. Ibid., p. 71. Technically “kremlin” is a general term in Russian for a certain kind of fortress--but no kremlin exists in Petushki.

37. I refuse to use the word “liminal.”

there].”³⁸ As it turns out, there is a definite endpoint, and one that was implied from the very start of the work, but it is the opposite of paradise, it is the Kremlin, where Venichka is run down and stabbed. So if there is a progression then it is the circular progress towards the Kremlin which he alludes to at the beginning (“целый вечер крутился вокруг тех мест, и не так чтоб очень пьян был [the whole evening I circled around that point [the Kremlin], and not because I was so drunk]”³⁹), and it is thus the paradoxical movement of a narrowing spiral, which moves towards a certain point without its velocity at any given moment being directed toward that point. In this way it is the opposite of a journey narrative like *Heart of Darkness*, where not only is the end point, the mysterious Kurtz, known, so too is his significance and inherent interest mysteriously self-evident to the narrator from the beginning.

Yet while Venichka’s narrative appears to careen forward chaotically towards its final disaster, in reality the pacing and rhythm of its comic ranting is precisely calibrated. Erofeev is a master at alternating tonalities for comic effect. One of his most common devices is to switch registers rapidly from the poetically elevated to the extremely vulgar:

“я не предприму ничего, чтобы повторить мой печальный опыт
возвышения...и...плюю на всю вашу общественную
лестницу...Чтобы по ней подыматься, надо быть жидовскою
мордою без страха и упрека, чадо быть пидорасом,
выкованным из чистой стали [I will not undertake anything to
repeat my sad brush with eminence...and...I will spit on your social
ladder...In order to climb it, you have to be a fearless,
irreproachable kike, a fag forged from pure steel].”⁴⁰

38. Erofeev, p. 19.

39. Ibid., p. 5.

40. Ibid., p. 39.

As undeniably crude and offensive as it is, one ought not overlook the masterful play of expectations and registers here. The passage begins in a kind of wistful, reflective vein, perhaps of a memoirist about to impart some hard-won lessons. But then it turns into a kiss-off to society as a whole, couched in the most vulgar terms possible. It is undeniably offensive to Soviet society in the way it blends the kind of glowing, bland encomiums of Soviet propaganda (“fearless, irreproachable” “forged of purest steel”--the latter perhaps a parodic reference to Stalin, the “man of steel) are applied to simple slurs. There is a contrast between the former, long, abstract and repeated so often in the public sphere as to become meaningless, and the latter, short, curt, with the inherent explosiveness of language which is repressed. For while it might express common prejudices, this kind of language is still clearly a violation of decorum. This is the speech that is working class precisely insofar as it would be inappropriate in the mouths of polite society and public figures. And by intruding rudely into literature in this way it performs the opposite of that moralizing fiction, the speech of peasants and workers in Tolstoy or the socialist realists, thoroughly censored and domesticated. In any case, the juxtaposition between permissible and impermissible speech relies wholly on temporal sequence, on the establishment of a certain tenor of speech, to then be comedically (yet violently) shattered by a lower, earthier diction.

A similar device is at work in the episode devoted to Venichka’s grotesque home spirit-brewing recipes. It begins with the simple contrast between a liquor’s poetic name, “Ханаанский бальзам [Balsam of Canaan]” and its frightening contents: “Денатурат-50 г., Бархатное пиво-200 г., Политура очищенная-100 г. [Methylated spirits-50 g, Velvet beer-200 g, Purified

floor polish-100 g],”⁴¹ and then proceeds through the principle of escalation to ever-more baroque concoctions. The key to the humor of this scenario is the arrangement. The recipes by themselves, even with their misleadingly seductive names, do not constitute a joke. Even listing all of the recipes in a row, though it would make them stand out in the text, would tend to blur together in the mind. After having grasped the general idea, the reader’s eye would be apt to slip down the list without stopping to read them all. This would create the opposite of an estranging effect. Instead, Venichka arrests the reader’s attention at each ludicrous ingredient by introducing the recipes the same way Gandalf introduced the dwarves to Beorn to *The Hobbit*: one by one at intervals, with plenty of narrative tissue in between their arrival so as to draw his listener’s attention in and not tax his patience or overwhelm him. Venichka manages to turn the list of recipes into a digression of several pages, with many throwaway jokes along the way, such as that old comedic literary trick, the out-of-context citation of an eminent author who in reality was writing about something very different than the tawdry matter at hand: “‘В мире компонентов нет эквивалентов,’ как говорили старые алхимики [‘In the world of components there are no equivalents,’ as the ancient alchemists said].”⁴² Then there is the mismatched description of symptoms, in which the verbs typical of a description of chemical or medicine’s effect on the body are instead applied purely to unverifiable spiritual essences:

“‘Ландыш,’ например, будоражит ум, тревожит совесть, укрепляет правосознание. А ‘Белая сирень’ - напротив того, успокаивает совесть и примиряет человека с язвами жизни [“‘Lily of the Valley,’ for example, excites the mind, disturbs the conscience, and strengthens one’s awareness of one’s rights. But

41. Ibid., p. 31.

42. Ibid.

‘White Lilac,’ on the contrary, calms the conscience and reconciles a man with the pains of life].”⁴³

All of this culminates with the last recipe:

“‘Венец трудов превыше всех наград,’ как сказал поэт...это музыка сфер. Что самое прекрасное в мире? - борьба за освобождение человечества. А еще прекраснее вот что: Пиво жигулевское-100 г., Шампунь ‘Садко-богатый гость’-30 г., Резоль для очистки волос от перхоти-70 г., Средство от потливости ног-30 г., Дезинсекталь для уничтожения мелких насекомых-20 г. [‘The laurels of labor are above all reward,’ as the poet says...this is the music of the spheres. What is the most beautiful thing in the world?-the fight for the liberation of humanity. But more beautiful is this: Zhiguli beer-100 g, Sadko shampoo-30 g, Dandruff medicament-70 g, Treatment for foot sweat-30 g, Insecticide for small bugs-20 g].”⁴⁴

Note how the passage builds. First, another incongruously learned citation, this time of Blok.

Then a parody of both Shelleyan Romantic pretensions and Soviet rhetoric in the bit about the liberation of humanity, followed by the climactic recipe, which is the longest and most vile-sounding of them all. The language, in addition to heightening the effect of the ever-lengthening recipes, also provides spacing between them. There are multiple paragraphs between every recipe, thus splitting them into short sections of text and making it more likely that readers will actually read them through, which could well make them, like Venichka after one particularly nasty draught, “Схватил себя за горло и душу [Clutch one’s throat and heart],” and have to pass this off to any onlookers as an extemporaneous rehearsal of *Othello* where one “Играл в одиночку и сразу во всех ролях [Played all the roles at the same time].”⁴⁵

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., p. 32.

45. Ibid., p. 13.

The list-based structure of this passage, which consists of a list (with commentary!) of cocktail recipes, which themselves consist of lists of ingredients, illustrates well Shklovsky's contention that "art...with its 'longing for the concrete' ...is based on a step-by-step structure and on the particularizing of even that which is presented in a generalized and unified form,"⁴⁶ amongst whose devices, according to him, are in particular all manner of repetition (parallelism, tautology, fairy tale formulae, etc.). Generally repetition is considered a negative quality in literature, as it is associated with that which need not be expressed (because it already has been or can be inferred), or that which is expressed in an uncreatively imitative (or self-imitative) fashion. But without repetition in some form there could be no rhythm. In this passage repetition creates comic rhythm. Of course, in one sense it appears to be the opposite of rhythmic: a prose passage periodically disrupted at intervals lists of ingredients. But rhythm would not be comic if there were nothing unwieldy or disproportionate about it. The wispy poetic names Venichka gives his obscene concoctions ("Balsam of Canaan," etc.), juxtaposed with the lists of household chemicals which are the actual substance of these names, give together the strange sense of actually dissecting the contents of a poetic phrase. In other words, it is as if the ingredients actually told us what the phrase "Balsam of Canaan" means at the the most basic level, so that we see the whole universe of specific details hidden in seemingly elusive poetic phrases. Mentioned in sequence, it is almost like one of those pages of a definitive scholarly addition of Dante or some other classic poet, in which only three lines of verse appear per page and are almost dragged to earth by the avalanche of footnotes covering the whole rest of the page and hooked to the text with little numbers, like Lilliputian grappling hooks.

46. Shklovsky, p. 22.

Humor in Céline typically functions somewhat differently. He derives less comic effect from the transitions between different registers and viewpoints. His humor is less dependent on ironic reversals or twists on expectations. His narrative unfolds in a string of observations loaded with value judgments, so there is less of the kind of temporal division between set-up and payoff of the kind that has been shown in Heller, Nothomb and Erofeev. A good example can be found at the beginning of the very first chapter, when the narrator's friend Arthur remarks:

“Les gens de Paris ont l’air toujours d’être occupés, mais en fait, ils se promènent du matin au soir; la preuve, c’est que lorsqu’il ne fait bon à bon promener, trop froid ou trop chaud, on ne les voit plus [People in Paris always have an air of being busy, but actually they stroll around from morning to night; the proof is that when the weather isn’t good for strolling around, when it’s too cold or too hot, you don’t see them anymore].”⁴⁷

There is an implicit irony here between the pretensions of Parisians and the character's appraisal of them, but the notion of the busyness of Parisians is delivered along with its negation, thus no temporal lapse which allows for the creation of an expectation to be reversed. So while conceptually the humor is based on a familiar ironic reversal, structurally it is more disconnected than Heller or Erofeev's. We can see this not just on the micro level of individual sentences but on the macro level of narrative shape. Where Heller's plot is intricately woven together and Erofeev's derives a cohesion from its unity of place and time, Céline's is composed of almost what in television are called “modular” episodes, not really connected to an encompassing narrative arc.

The cohesion and propulsiveness of the narrative derives instead from the vituperative energy of the narrator's observations. The above-mentioned passage about Parisians, while

47. Céline, p. 11.

perhaps not as intricately structured as Erofeev's list of moonshine recipes, achieves a crescendoing effect from the thematic unity and rising vehemence of the two character's remarks. Arthur's mockery of the pretension of Parisians leads into Bardamu's dismissal of the entire French "race":

“La race...c'est seulement ce grand ramassis de miteux dans mon genre, chassieux, puceux, transis, qui ont échoué ici poursuivis par la faim, la peste, les tumeurs et le froid, venus vaincus des quatre coins du monde. Ils ne pouvaient pas aller plus loin à cause de la mer [Our race...is just this big heap of scroungers like me, rheumy, flea-ridden, cold, who washed up here pursued by hunger, plague, tumors and cold, defeated, from the four corners of the world. They couldn't go any further because of the ocean].”⁴⁸

With such a remark we see how humor in Céline often shades into something else. The idea of France becoming the homeland simply because it was impossible to run any further wittily plays against overblown patriotic claims for the unique virtues of the land. On the other hand, it is also poignant, and a dark presage of the war to come.

As this passage hints at, the narrator's voice does not merely draw or illustrate ironies and absurdities, it is itself a source of them. Céline became fairly notorious for his extravagant use of punctuation, especially elipses and exclamation points, a trait that became more marked in later works, but they serve above all to illustrate how violently the narrator imposes himself on his story. For example in this passage where Bardamu imagines the benefits after the war of having been a soldier:

“On entrerait au restaurant, on vous servirait sans payer, on payerait plus rien, jamais plus de la vie! On est héros! qu'on dirait au moment de la note... Des défenseurs de la Patrie! Et ça suffirait! ... On payerait avec des drapeaux français!... [You'd enter the

48. Céline, p. 11-12.

restaurant, they'd serve you without paying, you wouldn't pay for anything ever again in your life! You'd say you're a hero when the moment for the bill came...Defenders of the nation! And that'd be enough!... You'd pay with French flags!...]”⁴⁹

Once again we see a crescendo to an absurd image of flags being employed as currency. Yet the image still exists only in the fevered imagination of the narrator. His insincere participation in the patriotic enthusiasm of the country at some point seems to tap into his own very real vein of mania, producing a frenzy that leads him to this ridiculous idea. Yet because it exists in his own mind rather than in the external fictional reality, the absurdity is not (or not only) an emergent quality of the universe revealed through description but a latent quality of the narrator's personality. In other words, the humor of the narrative voice comes not only from wit but has a performative aspect: Bardamu's tone of voice, at times ludicrously overwrought and frenzied as it is, is comedic in and of itself.

Wit is a technique as well as an effect, and if I have employed the vocabulary of comedians to parse passages from these novels it is not because I wish to suggest that these works are comedic rather than comic, i.e. defined only by their jokes and humorous moments. I do so rather to emphasize that the comic element here is not simply a product of theme and point of view, that presentation is all-important, especially compactness and brevity. This fundamental compactness seems to go along with the priority that Nabokov, a very witty novelist, gave to individual moments in literature over large structures, saying, for example, in *Lectures on Literature*, of Dickens's descriptions: “Some readers may suppose that such things as these evocations are trifles not worth stopping at; but literature consists of such trifles. Literature

49. Céline, p. 22.

consists, in fact, not of general ideas but of particular revelations.”⁵⁰ In Nabokov, as in Dickens, humor helps to prevent the granularity of prose from being devoured by smooth enveloping structures. For example, in describing his grandmother’s complaint about an incident between her husband and a dressmaker’s debt collector in *Speak, Memory* he writes: “she also complained, furiously and bitterly, that the *huissier* had actually threatened to jail Dmitri Nabokoff, ‘*Conseiller d’État, homme sage et plein de mesure* [a sedate, self-contained man]’ only because the said gentleman had attempted to throw the *huissier* out of the window.”⁵¹

In this passage the ironic humor develops in the juxtaposition between the strange and violent behavior of the old man with the unruffled reactions of the policemen and wife. Technically, we see the classic modulation between slow and fast and between different registers, between, for example, the platitudinous, leisurely elegance of the countess’s French, which draws out the moment, which is then resolved with the rapid, matter-of-factly stated pay-off (“throw the *huissier* out the window”). In quoting the countess’s words, which serve the essential comic function of prolonging the moment and contrasting in their grandiloquence with the strange and violent behavior of her husband, Nabokov is able to fall back on an outside voice. Sometimes his brevity goes to such an extreme as to actually dampen the humor. For instance, there is a passage in *Lolita* in which Humbert and his family are driven around Paris by “a stocky White Russian ex-colonel with a bushy mustache.”⁵² Humbert maliciously refers to him as “the Tsarist,” which works its ironic trick by politically caricaturing him. Yet the word “Tsarist,” after all, is only two syllables, so the ironic moment is gone almost before we become aware of it. It

50. Nabokov, p. 116.

51. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, Vintage International, 1947, p. 57.

52. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, Everyman’s Library, 1955, p. 29.

lacks the necessary prolongation, what Shklovsky would call a “deceleration” or “progressive structure,” such as repetition, parallel structure or elaboration, which makes the forward progress of the narrative slightly cumbersome or obstructed, forcing the quantities or qualities being compared to the forefront of the reader’s attention. In this case, anything to delay the moment for an extra beat and make the contrast between aristocratic political affiliation and current humble profession explicit, even simply adding an epithet to “tsarist” or turning “tsarist” into an epithet itself, such as “the tsarist chauffeur.” It would also of course be unnecessary, since we already know that the “tsarist” is a chauffeur, which is probably why Nabokov excluded it. But in humor what information has been revealed or could be inferred often matters less than what is subconsciously present or instantly able to be recognized and recalled in the reader’s mind.

These instantaneous associations of ideas, words and images often supplant more realistic structures of space and time in these narratives. Heller, who, as has already been mentioned, cited Céline as a direct source of inspiration, touches on this element of affinity in the following explanation of the influence: “Céline did things with time and structure and colloquial speech I’d never experienced before. I found these experiences pleasurable...It was unlike reading Joyce, who did things I’d never seen but that were not pleasurable.”⁵³ And in *Catch-22* pleasure, in the sense of the logic of wit and humor, really is an organizing principle of time and structure. In doing so, he frequently draws attention, with estranging effect, to the ways in which these violate physical boundaries and characters’ limited frames of reference. For example, at one point Colonel Cargill, the minion of one of the generals, sends out a memorandum that reads:

53. Harold Bloom, ed., *Modern Critical Interpretations: Joseph Heller’s ‘Catch-22,’* Chelsea House Publishers, 2001, pp. 134-135.

“Any fool can make money these days and most of them do. But what about people with talent and brains? Name, for example, one poet who makes money.’

‘T.S. Eliot,’ ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen said in his mail-sorting cubicle at Twenty-seventh Air Force Headquarters, and slammed down the telephone without identifying himself.

Colonel Cargill, in Rome, was perplexed.

‘Who was it?’ asked General Peckem.

‘I don’t know,’ Colonel Cargill replied.

‘What did he want?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Well, what did he say?’

“‘T.S. Eliot,’” Colonel Cargill informed him.”⁵⁴

Here ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen, and by extension Heller, literalizes the mental dispute readers often carry with their reading material, picking up the phone and offering up a riposte to the author, and at the same time highlighting the artifice of narrative intersubjectivity. In other words, the narrator has access to the minds of all the characters, and can connect them instantly in ways that they themselves cannot without either further explanation or confusion. Heller in this passage draws attention to how this narrative intersubjectivity serves as an economizing device by pushing the economizing just over the edge of absurdity.

The technique of parodic exaggeration also serves a simplifying, condensing role. The most famous example in *Catch-22* is, obviously, *Catch-22* itself, but another particularly example comes when the camp doctor, Doc Daneeka, is deemed to be dead because he is listed on the flight manifest of a downed plane even though he wasn’t actually on it:

“Sergeant Towser’s heart was heavy; now he had *two* dead men on his hands--Mudd, the dead man in Yossarian’s tent who wasn’t even there, and Doc Daneeka, the new dead man in the squadron,

54. Heller, p. 36.

who most certainly was there and gave every indication of proving a still thornier administrative problem for him.”⁵⁵

This passage demonstrates why the question of realism in Heller’s depiction of the war is to an extent beside the point. Not only is a passage such as this clearly comic caricature but, more importantly, it is necessarily so. In order to estrange reality, to make it be seen afresh, the familiar must somehow be made to seem unfamiliar. The usual run of military regulations, absurd as they may be, have lost their strangeness through familiarity. It is precisely by pushing past the point of verisimilitude that they become noticeable again and the grotesque becomes recognizable as such. In this case, as in many other episodes in the novel, the exaggeration takes the form of what Henri Bergson, in his study *Le Rire: essai sur la signification du comique*, regarded as the inherently comedic idea “d’un mécanisme superposé à la vie...C’est de l’automatisme. Mais l’automatisme parfait sera, par exemple, celui du fonctionnaire fonctionnant comme une simple machine.”⁵⁶ This is a fairly precise formulation, though the “automatisme parfait” could very easily appear tragic depending on the treatment. He continues: “ou encore l’inconscience d’un règlement administratif s’appliquant avec une fatalité inexorable et se prenant pour une loi de la nature.”⁵⁷ This description could have been written about the passage above (or any number of other incidents in the novel), because an administrative regulation taking itself for a law of nature is exactly what the continuing bureaucratic insistence that Doc Daneeka is dead is.⁵⁸

55. Heller, p. 340.

56. Henri Bergson, *Le Rire: essai sur la signification du comique*, Librairie Félix Alcan, 1928, pp. 46-47.

57. Ibid.

58. Along with the similar claim that the dead man in Yossarian’s tent isn’t really there, since he was killed before he had been officially enrolled in the regiment.

The reason such exaggeration serves as an economizing device is that, were the narrative to confine itself within the bounds of realism, with the gradations and qualifications that that entails, the intended effect, i.e. the feeling of absurdity, would depend on authorial tone, commentary and presentation of the action, whereas by presenting an obvious absurdity the narrative point of view *becomes* the action of the story, and so event and interpretation are fused into one. Character, too, as Bergson's comment on the comic potential of the mechanization of human behavior suggests, becomes subordinated to the machine-like workings of events. While this is generally held to be a flaw in fiction in the relationship between character and plot, in this case Heller turns it to advantage by depicting, as Joseph Brodsky wrote about the fictions of Andrei Platonov, "not a hero against a background but rather that background itself devouring a hero,"⁵⁹ or at least characters so in sympathy with the inhumanity of their tasks that they do nothing to resist the demands placed on them.

One can see how various aspects of technique mutually reinforce one another. Compression of narrative and heightening of the grotesque almost intrinsically serve the cause of comedy since, as has been noted, speeding up, for example, the speed of a film makes the movements of the people in it seem more comic, and exaggeration of particular features is perhaps the most central technique of caricature. They also heighten each other: exaggeration can serve as a form of compression, as has been noted, but compression can also heighten the exaggerated qualities. In *Catch-22* the characters' actions are sped up so much that they become emptied of interiority; they become like billiard balls, whose inner content and direction consists of nothing more than the force they received from the last ball to strike them, and so on down the

59. Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One: Selected Essays*, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1986, p. 289.

line. And all of this feeds into the anti-epic quality of the narrative, both in the sense of brevity, for self-evident reasons, and in subverting the origins of the epic in the heroic. Ironically, the exaggeration of the anti-epic narrative, in contrast to the exaggeration of the epic, serves to diminish the stature of its characters. In *Catch-22* the institutions of war, are both the gods and the heroes, and the soldiers, like the unfortunate non-heroes on the battlefield in the ancient epics, exist merely to demonstrate the prowess of the heroes by dying at their hands.

Comic compression also has the effect of bridging or compensating for monotonous or empty existence. In *Le Sabotage*, for example, we see obliquely the individual existences of the entire foreign community frustratingly put on hold for as long as they are stationed in China due to the inability to integrate into a larger community there. As Nothomb writes:

“la Chine est presque absente de ces pages...En trois ans nous n’avons eu de vraie communication humaine qu’avec un seul Chinois: il s’agissait de l’interprète de l’ambassade, un homme exquis qui portait le nom inattendu de Chang [China is almost absent from these pages...In three years we only had real human communication with one Chinese person: the embassy interpreter, an exquisite man who bore the unexpected name of Chang].”⁶⁰

One must be skeptical of the insinuating use of the collective “we,” especially considering that no characters aside from the narrator and her “beloved” are developed with any depth. But there is a delicate ambiguity of representation and represented here: if the lack of portrayal of many members even of the foreign community suggests a basic introversion/self-absorption on the narrator’s part, this tendency appears to be of a piece with the isolation that her residence in China inflicts, where in fact even the one familiar face from the local community, the interpreter Chang, “fut remplacé presque aussitôt par une Chinoise revêche qui portait le nom inattendu de

60. Nothomb, p. 82.

Chang [was replaced almost immediately by a gruff Chinese woman who bore the unexpected name of Chang].”⁶¹ Here the the lack of individuality of the Chinese attendants is comically underlined by their all having the same name. Yet underlying the joke lies the reality of an existence starved of contact with the local community in which the narrator lives.⁶² From a distance, and from the perspective of a brief moment, in other words, being surrounded by a sea of strangers with the same name is funny, but experienced as a continuous reality it becomes more poignant.

Nothomb concludes: “cette histoire s’est passée en Chine autant qu’on le lui a permis--c’est-à-dire très peu [this tale took place in China to the extent that it was permitted--which I to say very little].”⁶³ The children’s lives are characterized by an absence of an anchoring environment, and this is only increased by the fact that their meager contacts among the Chinese frequently have to substitute for the absent parents as well (the narrator says of the family’s cook, also named Chang: “Il assistait à tous les repas que nous prenions sans nos parents, c’est-à-dire à presque tous nos repas [He was present at all the meals that we took without our parents, which is to say at almost all our meals]”⁶⁴). In the end the narrator concludes:

“la Chine tient dans ces pages la même place que la peste noire dans *Le Décameron* de Boccace; s’il n’en est presque fait mention, c’est parce qu’elle y SEVIT partout [China in these pages plays the same role as the Black Death in the *Decameron* by Boccaccio: if it

61. Ibid., p. 83.

62. Of course life is doubtless much worse for the Changs, who enjoy the delightful privilege of being fully immersed in a local community--but one enduring the Cultural Revolution.

63. Ibid., p. 85.

64. Ibid., p. 84.

is hardly ever mentioned, that is because it DEVASTATES everywhere].”⁶⁵

The comparison to the *Decameron* is instructive, because while Boccaccio in the preface of that work makes clear that he finds those that abandon the city to wait out the plague in isolation to be acting selfishly and without compassion (“tutti quasi ad un fine tiravano assai crudele, ciò era di schifare e di fuggire gl’infermi e le lor cose [almost everyone followed a very cruel course of action, which was to loathe and flee from the sick and their affairs]”⁶⁶), this nevertheless understandable if not justifiable response lends a desperate edge and special vibrancy to the atmosphere in the country retreat. While the storytellers may laud their temporary home as a perfect refuge from the world, they cannot know whether they will truly be safe from infection or what will be waiting for them when they return to the city. This allusion, then, implies that Nothomb’s narrator does not fail to register the Cultural Revolution maelstrom surrounding her but rather has made a deliberate decision to elide it. The brevity of the consequent narrative perhaps testifies, by implication, to the difficulty of doing so.

Erofeev, Heller, Nothomb and Céline all partake of this history, where comedy is often a symptom of tragedy. In *Moskva-Petushki* the narrator’s dissociated thought process is a side effect of his drunken downward spiral towards death. In *Catch-22* the absurdity of the war is both the joke and the misery of its characters. In *Voyage* Bardamu encounters almost every historical tragedy touching Western society in his time: war, colonialism, segregation, slum life. *Sabotage* seems to be composed only of the lighthearted scraps and shards of life left untouched by the surrounding maelstrom. So narrative compression is not only an ingredient of humor but

65. Ibid., p. 85.

66. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, Mursia, 1966, p. 31.

also a response to tragedy. Rather than “bearing witness,” they obliquely trace the outlines of tragedy. They are shaped by history but not defined by it, partly because they describe an open-ended universe of encounters with the unknown which owes more to the journey or quest narrative than to the closed universes of stable social structures which became predominant among novels in the 19th century. But that will be the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 2: Comedic Anticipation and the “Anarchic Moment”

The distinction between open and closed universes is an important distinction in literature. Not open and closed in the Bakhtinian sense, but rather that between narratives that primarily concern the relationships between a relatively fixed cast of characters in a stable environment, and those focused on literal or metaphorical journeys in which encounters with unknown people and places play a central role. To make, in the spirit of Isaiah Berlin, a symbolic authorial contrast, it is the difference between Shakespeare and Cervantes. In Shakespeare’s plays, for the most part, though the setting may be exotic, mythical, or pre-historical, one finds a stable sort of social ecosystem, the relationships and conflicts between whose members will be revealed and developed over the course of the drama. In *Don Quijote*, by contrast, as in the journey and quest narratives that it parodies, encounters with strange people, places and things play a far more significant role. In Shakespeare, encounters with strangers are generally only important insofar as they play a role in the relationships between familiars. In *Quijote*, by contrast, encounters with the unknown along the road are one of the central elements of the narrative. In Shakespeare, interactions between characters draw their power from the defined significance of the relationship between them; in *Quijote*, although deep complex relationships between characters exist, most notably between the don and Sancho, constant contact with the unknown also creates a sense of open-endedness and possibility.

The court, where Shakespeare’s dramatic universe centers primarily, and the countryside, where the action of *Don Quijote* primarily transpires, defined much of the psycho-geographical space in Renaissance society, and both constituted relatively small, familiar communities. In fact,

in some ways the central contrast in social existence lay not between the court and the provinces but between fixed communities and the open road, where one such as Don Quijote could indulge his inexhaustible taste for the exotic. The subsequent rise to dominance of the city made interactions with strangers a daily part of most people's lives. No longer did one have to take to the road to find unknown people and practices. Where standard dramatic construction, with a limited cast of characters who for the most part know each other and are connected by substantial personal ties, might have reasonably approximated the nature of life in a village or at court, the new urban way of life, surrounded by strangers, which in some ways more resembles Don Quijote's wandering life among strangers, subjected this form of narrative to the risk of meaninglessness. How can one construct a meaningful narrative if most of one's interactions with others are devoid of the depth that comes with emotional attachment and a shared history? This is probably partly behind the implausible and much-derided coincidences in Dickens and other 19th century novelists, where so many of the strangers introduced in the text turn out to have some intimate connection to the protagonist and/or story. It is a kind of narrative trickery that turns strangers into familiars, thus turning the unknown into the known and imbuing it with depth.

In the aforementioned *Ulysses*, we see another attempt at more realistically imparting stable significance on the phenomenon of strangers in the city constantly brushing against each other. On the one hand, by linking his narrative to the foundational journey narrative in Western culture, Joyce acknowledges the open-universe quality of the city. However, he also wants to connect the various characters with a thick web of connections, not just the common

denominator of their relationship to the protagonist, as in *The Odyssey*, and to avoid overly straining credulity by attempting to connect every character *dramatically* à la Dickensian coincidence. Instead, he creates an impression of inter-connectedness through structural means: while many of the characters do know and meet each other in the course of the day, their actions are linked primarily through Nabokov calls the elaborate “synchronization” of their movements. It is through depicting so many characters at various moments in such a way as to allow a reconstruction of their trajectories over the course of the day relative to each other, rather than through the mechanics of a coordinated plot, that an impression of intricate structure and connection are created.⁶⁷ So *Ulysses* represents a grand attempt to domesticate and humanize the city. While outwardly it appears to be a wedding of the journey epic to city life, wherever Leopold wanders in the city he is always put in spatial and temporal relation to familiar elements. So in a way *Ulysses* is, in spirit at least, an attempt to create closed-universe narrative out of the materials of an open-universe narrative tradition and the disconnectedness of urban life.

Part of this is due, perhaps, also to the nature of city life: while a great deal of mystery and unknown exists behind doors and down alleys in the city, the city is nonetheless in many ways a familiar space. The city is, as Donald Rumsfeld might call it, a known unknown, whereas the distant countries of the old quest narratives might be true unknown unknowns. So in modern urban open-universe narratives, like “The Nose” and “The Metamorphosis,” contact with the

67. Not that the narrative is devoid of dramatic action--the self-exile of Leopold Bloom during the course of the day and subsequent return home form a narrative framework to which, however, the vast scale and cast of characters is not dramatically necessary in the traditional sense.

unknown juxtaposes strangely with banal daily life in contrast to the more comprehensively fantastic adventures in the older journey epics. The nose of the protagonist of “The Nose” leaves his face and begins an independent life in the former, and the protagonist of the latter turns into a giant insect in the latter, strange happenings made all the stranger by the relative lack of shock on the part of the characters in the story. When Gregor Samsa in “The Metamorphosis” awakens from his “unruhigen Träumen [unrestful dreams]” to find himself turned into a giant insect, his first thought is simply “‘Was ist mit mir geschehen?’, dachte er [‘What has happened to me?’, he thought].”⁶⁸ Then he begins a train of thought cursing his work and seeming to believe his insect state to be a psychological delusion caused by work stress. Never does he wonder what might have proximately or physically caused such a change. He resists and laments the change, but not with any appearance of genuine metaphysical wonderment or confusion.

Major Kovalev expresses more overt surprise at the loss of his nose in “The Nose”:

“Испугавшись, Ковалев велел подать воды и протер полотенцем глаза: точно нет носа! Он начал щупать рукою, чтобы узнать: не спит ли он? [In a panic, Kovalev ordered to be given water and rubbed his eyes with a towel: still no nose! He began to feel with his hand, in order to find out: was he not dreaming?]”⁶⁹.

But it soon becomes clear that he is so distraught not so much at a loss that would seem to defy the laws of the natural world, but principally because he perceives it as a great loss of face (so to speak), for someone of his social status to be traipsing around in public with nothing hanging above his whiskers. Finally, when he apprehends the nose in the Kazan Cathedral, praying “c

68. Franz Kafka, *Samtliche Erzählungen*, S. Fischer, 1969, p. 64.

69. Nikolai Gogol’, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii: Tom tretii: Povesti*, Izdatel’stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1938, p. 53.

выражением величайшей набожности [with a tone of the greatest piety],” he accosts him in these terms:

“мне кажется...вы должны знать свое место...Мне ходить без носа, согласитесь, это неприлично...Ведь вы мой собственный нос! [It seems to me...You should know your place...For me to go without a nose, you will agree, is unbecoming...You know, you are my own nose!]”⁷⁰

This passage begins with the Major awkwardly, deferentially, and politely addressing the nose, with pauses and hesitations, as the nose is wearing the uniform of a rank above his own, but eventually he works himself up to a declaration of ownership of the nose. But again, his incredulity is not that of the metaphysical befuddlement one might expect of someone confronted by such an event, but the resentment of a petty functionary at an escaped servant. In both cases, the characters seem not so much broad-mindedly philosophical in their acceptance, but rather so narrow-mindedly subsumed in their own affairs as to regard everything in their world exclusively with respect to their little goals and desires. It seems significant that in both stories the characters simply wake up and find themselves in their new conditions: no mechanism or explanation for the change is ever provided, the characters slide from normalcy into the uncanny without being aware of it until later.

These works are different than pure fantasy, which tends to evade the dictates of realism rather than resisting them, cordoning themselves in a mythological realm of self-contained norms and physical laws. But when the irrational and supernatural starts appearing in drab European apartments, this division becomes impossible. And yet the characters, while incapable of fully integrating these events into the matrix of their parochial interests, by so heroically attempting to

70. Ibid., p. 55-56.

do so fail at every turn to respond appropriately the magnitude of the event. In “The Metamorphosis,” Gregor reacts to his change with stark denial, such as when he first scurries out of his room to greet his boss and ridiculously tries to assure him that “ich werde mich gleich anziehen, die Kollektion zusammenpacken and wegfahren [I will get dressed, pack the samples and leave the house].”⁷¹ Meanwhile, those around him react with undisguised horror: his boss flees from him, his mother cries “Hilfe, um Gottes willen Hilfe [Help, in God’s name help]!”⁷² and faints when she first sees him, and his father pelts him with apples. And yet their horror, certainly explicable at first glance by the shock of the situation, betrays a heavy fear of scandal. Their reaction seems one more of shame than genuine loss: certainly, they don’t seem to genuinely fear Gregor or doubt that the insect really is him. This deeply conservative bourgeois world, where heaven lies in utter predictability, is so antithetical to the unknown that it becomes unresponsive in the face of it. The impulse to repress comes even more quickly than conscious perception. No one is able to focus on the present reality itself without constant worried glances over the shoulder at the future of the family finances or the possible reactions of others. Their shock at the unknown is really just another form of denial, as it is quickly engulfed by considerations of its impact on their social standing. Not that the loss of a family’s primary breadwinner is merely a narrow-minded concern, but on the other hand this is not really the devastating blow that Gregor’s family had previously insisted it was, since, thinking over their prospects after his death, they realize that

“diese bei näherer Betrachtung durchaus nicht schlecht waren,
denn aller drei Anstellungen waren...überaus günstig and besonders

71. Kafka, p. 75.

72. Ibid., p. 77

für später vielversprechend [these, on closer inspection, were by no means bad, since they were all three employed...extremely favorably and particularly promisingly for the future].”⁷³

As we can see from this, they are exactly in the grip of mourning for his loss as a person, meaning their torment really was over the perceived scandal and shame of his transformation more than any more generous impulse.

The supernatural change in “The Nose” is even more exclusively filtered through the social position of the characters. As mentioned before, Major Kovalev repeatedly insists that he needs his nose in order to make a favorable impression on the wealthy girl he is courting and her mother, and when he catches up to the nose, he addresses it with offense at an act of insubordination rather than wonder or bafflement. Outside of these parochial concerns, no one else seems able to summon up much interest in such an extraordinary happening at all. When he goes to the newspaper to try to place an ad about its loss, the editor refuses because of the fear that he might “потерять репутацию [lose reputation]”⁷⁴ by running such a ludicrous ad, and even when Major Kovalev allows him to see that he has, in fact, lost his nose, he merely remarks: “В самом деле, чрезвычайно странно...место совершенно гладкое, как будто бы только что выпеченный блин [Indeed, very strange...The area is totally smooth, as if it were a fresh-baked pancake].”⁷⁵ Likening the spot to something as banal and commonplace as a fresh-baked pancake does not suggest a mind afire with wonder at this unheard-of happening. This suggests a refusal not only to accept, as with those around Gregor, but even to perceive any aspect of reality that does not serve the characters’ search for status. The story, unlike “The

73. Ibid., p. 112.

74. Gogol, p. 61.

75. Ibid., 62.

Metamorphosis,” does not end tragically, as the nose is eventually tracked down and returned to its owner who, although he is unable to reattach it to his face, eventually wakes up one morning with it back in place. It has been, perhaps, all just a dream. But the essential drama in both cases arises from the inability of people’s imaginations to encompass the expansion of reality that has been thrust upon them.

This is the central drama in both stories: the confrontation of humans with the unfathomable, and the process by which that strange reality is domesticated into banal social life while nonetheless shaking it deeply. The shock and turmoil that the central events provoke in these narrative worlds show clearly enough that they do not simply belong to an alternate universe of fantasy where these events are usual, but yet the nature of the characters’ reactions, while they do affirm our sense that these events are not normal, by their own alienatingly status-obsessed preoccupations do not reaffirm the outwardly realistic world into which these events intrude as normal or rational. Instead we enter a third space, where the normal has become strange, but the strange has not become normal. It is significant that in both “The Metamorphosis” and “The Nose” no suggestion is made that the weird central event has either precedent or analogue. This is what makes the bizarrely unflappable, unsurprised reactions of the characters so unnerving. Were these stories written in a genuinely surrealistic mode, with something absurd or impossible happening frequently, their lack of wonderment would be understandable, as the extraordinary would simply be normal, and we would be in the realms of fantasy. But their lack of any reckoning with the implications of an event so at odds with the rest of their existences, though it provides the substance of the comedy in both works, is perhaps

actually stranger even than the event to which it fails to respond. The singularity of the events probably also guarantees the brevity of the surrounding narratives. The idea of a misplaced nose commandeering a stagecoach and escaping towards Estonia creates a comedic mismatch of agent and action, but stretched to novel length the human behavior of the nose would undermine the sense of its inhuman physical quality, and it would gradually become a more typical picaresque hero, just as the giants in Rabelais to some extent cease to be giants. In other words, the human contours of the narrative's events would make the nose lose its nose-ness. In fact this happens to some extent in the story as it is, for example when Major Kovalev sees the nose getting in and out of a carriage and praying in a cathedral while wearing an official uniform. The picture of the nose implied by these action descriptions suggest a more or less full human form, not a nose. This gradual erosion is not a problem in, for example, Aesop's fables, where the animals are simply analogies for human traits, but is problematic in a story like "The Nose" where the strangeness and inexplicability of the image is essential. This strangeness, then, is thus a fleeting, unstable quality. It is probably no coincidence that when Kafka and Gogol turned to the novel form they abandoned the overt supernaturalism of these stories.

And yet paradoxically the central images of the nose and the insect possess a certain atemporality. Both of them come into being by no explicit cause, and they are thus seemingly not explainable by prior events. This is somewhat reminiscent of Kierkegaard's discussion of Jesus's appearance on earth in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. For Kierkegaard this event is an utter absurdity and affront to the understanding, and thus a basis for faith. He writes: "Men at den efter sit Væsen Evige bliver til i Tiden, fødes, voxer, dør, er et Brud met al Tænkning [But that that

which by its nature is eternal should come into being in time, be born, grow, and die, that is a breach with all thought]”⁷⁶. Because divinity is absolutely different than the finite world of mortals, any explanation or understanding of how and why God came to earth in human form are bound to fail. So it may be arbitrary and inexplicable that Jesus was born and lived at such-and-such a date, in such-and-such a place, and so on, but all those facts pertain to the finite world not to the infinite world of God, so they simply conceal a more fundamental gap or leap of the understanding as to how the eternal become temporal, and the mind is helpless to explain that. While Gregor and Maj. Kovalev’s transformations are not radically opposed to temporal reality in the same way as Kierkegaard’s conception of Christ, the futile attempts by characters to explain their disjunctive appearance in the reality of the narrative simply serve to underline that they are not facts to be parsed and explained, they are simply eruptions of the inscrutable.

In this way we see how small and incomplete the very notion of cause and effect itself is to explaining our vast cosmos haunted by inexplicable apparitions and spirits. Cause and effect always seeks to explain the occurrence or existence of something that has not previously occurred or existed with reference to something that has. This can only isolate the agent that was the occasion for non-being to come into being; it cannot fathom the process itself or the realm of non-being out of which it arose, because that is inconceivable. In fact, “The Nose” begins literally, if not chronologically, with an episode illustrating the fallibility of such chronologically based reconstruction of events to reveal causality by introducing the barber Ivan Yakovlevich, who finds Maj. Kovalev’s nose in a bread roll and thus concludes that he must have accidentally

76. Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Skrifter 7: Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*, Gads Forlag, 2002, p. 526.

cut the major's nose off while shaving him. So these stories illustrate dramatically how a chronological sequence of events can create a false narrative sense of their causal connection. The central events in these have no preceding event to reassuringly take the credit as their cause. The stories begin with the supernatural transformation already having taken place, and the narrative thus comes into being just as inexplicably as its contents.

So in these stories we see a very modern way of creating the sense of strangeness and the unknown of open-universe narrative, but one which is limited in scope by that very strangeness. Both Kafka and Gogol made attempts on the novel form, but they were all left incomplete. Heller, Erofeev, Céline and Nothomb, too, attempt to create this sense of imaginative possibility at novel length through a different method. For one thing, all four are intensely autobiographical in their identification of protagonist with author. All four give the deliberate sense of not following a classical narrative structure of introduction, development and conclusion, but simply representing a certain span of time in the life of the author-surrogate. This strong identification of author with narrative subject thus lends the narratives some of the sense of open-endedness of a real life in progress. As Heidegger writes in *Being and Time*: "A constant unfinished quality...lies in the essence of the constitution of Da-sein. This lack of totality means there is still something outstanding in one's potentiality-for-being."⁷⁷ Dasein, which here essentially means individual human existence as it is experienced subjectively, is unfinished and incomplete because it is always in a state of becoming something else, and the human is aware of and oriented towards the future and its own unrealized possibilities, including, most notably, death. This lack of

77. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Stambaugh, State University of New York Press, 1996, p. 219-220.

conclusiveness and finality is a very deep aspect of individual existence, and the seeming lack of beginning-middle-end structure in these novels, most obviously *Catch-22*, which ends with Yossarian literally in mid-sprint, represents this open-endedness of the subjective experience of life.

The major exception to this is the ending of *Moskva-Petushki* which, although it has already been discussed in the first chapter, perhaps deserves a bit of individual consideration, as it is perhaps the most narratively problematic event in any of the novels. On the one hand, the narrator Venichka seems to die, or at least, what is functionally equivalent in terms of narrative logistics, he “не приходил в сознание, и никогда не придёт [did not return to consciousness, and never will].”⁷⁸ This seems to be a clear violation of realism: how can he die and yet still be writing the tale, especially as he shares his name with the (then-living) author? On the one hand this would seem to be the exception that proves the rule: it is the final act of the narrative, so whatever fragile compact between reality and fiction had been constructed previously is now dynamited and nothing follows. And on the other hand, since he is identified most closely of all with his author, since he is explicitly named as Venedikt Erofeev and even as the author of *Moskva-Petushki*, the relationship between the fictional character and the real author is also the most complicated. His death at the end of the novel is no mere curtain-falling death, or even the death of the narrator of a first-person narrative, as in Machado de Assis’s *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. In such cases a non-realistic premise could be simply invoked, that of a character speaking from beyond the grave. In this case, however, this is limited by the open identification of the possibly posthumous narrator with a living author. It is an equation with two sides: just as

78. Erofeev, p. 186.

the fictional nature of the narrative prevents Venichka's death from being literally interpreted as the real death of the author, so conversely does the autobiographical identification prevent it even from being too literally interpreted as itself, i.e. a death. In other words, Venichka's identity is clearly not wholly that of Venedikt Erofeev, author of *Moskva-Petushki* (though he is "the author of the well-known poem *Moskva-Petushki*"), but equally clearly it is, at least in part, and thus insofar as his identity is that of Erofeev he leads an independent existence outside of the literary work, and thus continues on after it, narrative events notwithstanding. So just as the novel is not bound to a strict correspondence to the events of the author's life, its partial correspondence frees it to an extent from its own internal logic. In other words, insofar as Venichka is a character he can die in the text even though he has not in real life, but insofar as he is the author he in a sense survives, notwithstanding his death in the text.

In any event, the narrative open-endedness in these novels offers some analogues with Bakhtin's concept of "unfinalizability," which he sums up in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* thus: "nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is free open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future."⁷⁹ While Bakhtin here is describing the dialogic quality of Dostoevsky's novels, specifically the open-ended quality of the debates among and within his characters, it possesses some applicability to the open-ended recounting of Heller, Nothomb, Céline or Erofeev. The fit is not exact: Bakhtin's concept of unfinalizability, at least in the temporal sense, seems to have more to do with epistemology, with the meaning and interpretation of events and beings. For Bakhtin it is not so much existence that is open-ended as

⁷⁹. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 18.

the debates concerning it. The world is infinitely detailed and many-sided, so one definitive interpretation or understanding of it or even of any part of it is possible. Characters in Dostoevsky, for example, continue to reveal new aspects of it through their never-ending debates, but while the debates continue on through time, the passage of time is not itself an essential part of the dialogue, it is simply a medium whereby the aspects of reality that are present at every moment are revealed. In fact, Bakhtin claims that Dostoevsky's novels are relatively atemporal, that they evoke the simultaneous relationships in space of objects and people more than their relationships across time. In the novels by Heller, Erofeev, Nothomb and Céline, by contrast, temporal sequence is of the essence. It is the backdoor that continually releases characters from their own frequently unhappy conditions, and offers the perpetual promise of potentiality itself, of unpredictable adventures and an uncharted destiny. The lack of over-arching structure fosters this sense that nothing that has happened so far in the characters' lives determines their futures or even absolutely constricts the possibilities open to them.

While the episodic nature of the narratives leaves the characters' lives open to unforeseen events, because of the narrative length these require a more stable relationship with their environment than in "The Metamorphosis" or "The Nose," and so they frequently create a kind of perspectival surrealism, as with the angels and demons in *Moskva-Petushki* or the horses/bicycles in *Le Sabotage*, where a certain ambiguity exists as to the nature of the imagery. It is similar to the undecidability between natural and super-natural explanations for narrative events that Todorov defined as the "fantastic" in literature. For Todorov, the fantastic in literature was not so much a genre marker as a unique ambiguous dynamic that only occurred at certain

moments in certain works where narrative events could be interpreted either within a realistic or supernatural framework. For example, in Pushkin's *Queen of Spades* it is left indeterminate whether the countess whom the protagonist has frightened to death really returns as a vengeful ghost to trick him into gambling away his fortune or if he simply dreams the whole thing up during his fevered lunge towards insanity. In these novels the surreal imagery leans more toward a naturalistic interpretation. Nothomb even has her protagonist show off her "horse" to her *bien-aimée* Elena, only to have the latter dismiss it as simply a bicycle. Erofeev introduces no outside perspective to comment on the nature of his angels and demons, but Venichka's obvious extreme inebriation seems to provide a plausible and adequate explanation. It remains unclear whether these characters actually see such visions, in short if this really represents their internal reality. So a similar question exists as that which Todorov identifies, but in a psychological rather than metaphysical context.

And what is the value of such ambiguity, beyond simply serving as a textual puzzle? They expose the limits of genuine personal knowledge and how restricted these are when deprived of the vectors of assumption, extrapolation and received knowledge that extend to vast distances beyond one's personal perceptions. And this holds true in these narratives not only in the case of the possibly supernatural. For example, in cities, as has been discussed, the individual is constantly confronted with encounters with strangers, and even one's visual field is frequently filled with more buildings, let alone rooms, than one could possibly enter into. Yet a vast language of signs and symbols allows one to infer beyond personal experience what general purpose is found within and what kinds of encounters one could expect to find there: whether it

be residential, a business or government, poor, wealthy or public, etc. In this way a person “knows” a city even if they only frequent a handful of spaces within it. But in *The Trial*, for example, when Joseph K. goes to visit the court offices for the first time, he is directed to a certain area but not a specific floor or number, and furthermore it does not even look like the kind of public government building with lobby, floor directory, etc. that one would expect a court to be held in. It is simply a city tenement building which, like a good empiricist, he has to enter and knock on each door. At last he finds it when he “klopfte an die erste Tür des fünften Stockwerks [knocked on the first door of the fifth floor],” hidden in an a very unprepossessing cave-like attic space “wo die Leute nur gebückt stehen konnten und mit Kopf und Rücken an die Decke stießen [where people could only stand bent over and hit their heads and backs against the ceiling].”⁸⁰ Time and again characters are found hidden like this behind unmarked doors, in the darkness beyond the circle of lamplight, etc. Sometimes they are hiding from searching eyes but sometimes they simply, unnervingly exist, unknown, just outside of one’s field of perception, like termites living in a wall. One day in his office he he hears some strange sighing coming from “hinter einer Tür, hinter der er immer nur eine Rumpelkammer vermutet hatte [behind a door, behind which he had only supposed there to be a junk-room],”⁸¹ then opens the door and discovers a man flogging the two men who first arrested him with a whip, illuminated only by candle-light. When he and his uncle go to visit the lawyer that the uncle recommends, after speaking for some time with the lawyer suddenly makes mention of another guest present, and, “im Licht der Kerze die der Onkel jetzt hochhielt, sah man [in der Ecke] bei einem kleinen

80. Franz Kafka, *Der Prozess*, S. Fischer, 1990, p. 57.

81. *Ibid.*, 108.

Tischen einen ältern Herrn sitzen [by the light of the candle that the uncle now held up, in the corner they saw, by a little table, an old gentleman sitting].”⁸² And so forth. The closed door becomes a symbol of mystery at the most immediate level, the mysteries which do not require great complexity or distance to remain ultimately veiled from the knower, since, while any particular door can (presumably) be opened, in aggregate life will remain full of closed doors that cannot all be investigated. Sometimes the closedness of the closed door is itself misleading, as in “Before the Law,” where traveler interprets the closed door, and guard standing in front of it, as a denial of the possibility of entry which, as he learns at the end of his life, might not have been the case.

This spatial dynamic is also, of course, strongly reminiscent of the claustrophobic interior spaces in *Crime and Punishment*. Bakhtin describes how “The threshold, the foyer...This is the space of the novel. And in fact absolutely nothing here ever loses touch with the threshold, there is no interior of drawing rooms, dining rooms,”⁸³ etc. Indeed the novel places a heavy emphasis on the relationship between and linkage between adjoining spaces, a link which the threshold both physically provides and symbolizes. However, Bakhtin seems to extend the category of “threshold spaces” to the the spaces that the threshold accesses, whereas characters spend so much time on thresholds and boundary spaces partly as an escape or attempt to escape from the claustrophobic, confining interior spaces they spend most of their time occupying. For example, there is the space Raskolnikov inhabits, which is described as a “каморка,” which translates as a closet or box room, and thus suggests (a sense which is sometimes not adequately represented in

82. Ibid., p. 137.

83. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 170.

translation) a tiny space that is not even designed to be lived in by a person. It's true, as Bakhtin points out, that Raskolnikov never locks his door, even when he has something to conceal (i.e. the murder clothes), but to take this as a symbolic sign that the *каморка* as whole is a "threshold space" overlooks his psychological motivation for doing so, which must be in part the desperate need to maintain a sense of connection to the outside world and feeling of possible escape from this awful room where his manias and mental agony have bloomed, not to mention perhaps a subliminal desire to be caught. There are other points where concealment and confinement merge together, most notably during the murder itself, when Raskolnikov is trapped and forced to hide in the old woman's apartment when the students come to visit her, and then later, when they rush back up the stairs, in the empty apartment being repainted. The irony is that his attempts to elude being caught and confined in a prison cell lead him to effectively confine himself in even more constricted spaces.

Raskolnikov also demonstrates, like Gregor Samsa, how the allure of mystery and the unknown is dependent on point of view. While the investigator Porfirii Petrovich eagerly desires and grasps after the secret Raskolnikov possess, Raskolnikov, in possession of it, is almost as eager to give it away. A closed door may represent a very tantalizing unknown, but existence behind the closed door, where he passes so much of his time in the novel, is hardly fulfilling. In other words, asymmetrically distributed knowledge strives to equalize itself, like water across a pressure differential. Knowing what no one else does, and which he cannot share, puts great pressure on Raskolnikov. While he comes to see his own situation through the lens of guilt and sin, Porfirii Petrovich is a basically amoral seeker after hidden knowledge. While knowledge is

often seen as a form of power in novels and the possession or lack of it to strongly affect characters' fortunes, in *Crime and Punishment* this is hardly the case. Raskolnikov, in exclusive possession of knowledge, almost goes mad until he disburdens himself of it. Svidrigailov, another possessor of secrets, eventually kills himself. Porfirii Petrovich does not meet any bad fate as a result of the knowledge he gains but, defined as he is by the pursuit of it, the instant he acquires it he loses importance and vanishes from the novel. So while the search for the unknown may provide direction for a life, it does not confer any special benefits on people once they have gained it. In fact knowledge, like existence, becomes an agony for these characters when it becomes confined, i.e. when it becomes a secret.

Comedy, by contrast, represents a permanent "threshold space," a state of becoming. Because humor includes a necessary element of surprise, its set-up, which generally occupies considerably more time than the pay-off, and thus considerably more space in a comic text, creates expectation, a sense of imminent change and fulfillment. Where humor is a central element, then, as in these novels, expectation becomes an ongoing state. Revelation becomes a recurring, permanent feature. Just as a threshold is a threshold by virtue of adjoining onto another room or space, and conversely two rooms are separated and connected by a threshold, so too in these novels humor establishes the structure of set-up and payoff, but that structure of expectation created and then reversed itself endows the change with humor. For example, Yossarian's interactions with Milo Minderbinder in *Catch-22*. Conceptually Milo is an unsympathetic caricature of one element of America's economic and political rise, a simple-minded hayseed who through steadily increasing ambition and greed becomes the head of an

international mercantile cartel. His schemes for profiting off both sides of every transaction by essentially selling to himself are deliberately pushed past the the bounds of logic to illustrate the incestuous nature of global capitalism. Eventually this escalates to conducting the war itself for both sides as a private contractor, conducting bombing raids and also leading the defense against them. The comedy, though, comes from Milo's dialogic back-and-forth with other characters, primarily Yossarian, where in explaining his operations he constantly violates their commonsense expectations and contradicts himself. One mission he flies with Yossarian, for example, consists of exchanges like the following

“‘It’s exactly what happens with those plum tomatoes I sell to Colonel Cathcart.’

‘*Buy*,’ Yossarian corrected him. ‘You don’t *sell* plum tomatoes to Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn. You *buy* plum tomatoes from them.’

‘No, *sell*,’ Milo corrected Yossarian. ‘I distribute my plum tomatoes in markets all over Pianosa under an assumed name so that Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn can buy them up from me under their assumed names... You’ll see how much profit that can mean in about fifteen minutes when we land in Palermo.’

‘Malta,’ Yossarian corrected him. ‘We’re flying to Malta now, not Palermo.’

‘No, we’re flying to Palermo,’ Milo answered. ‘There’s an endive exporter in Palermo I have to see.’”⁸⁴

This method takes the broad satire of commercialism gone amok and feeds it through the comic dynamic of absurd figure and straight man. Were this a realistic, serious conversation, Yossarian, being a reasonable character, would presumably stop attempting to correct Milo. Instead his repeated insistences emphasize Milo's constant deviation from the ostensible mission and, by implication, his incorrigible mendacity and under-the-table dealings. Later on, when Milo is

84. Heller, p. 242.

almost ruined by buying up too much cotton and wonders how to remedy the situation, Yossarian facetiously suggests the most direct corrupt means by which to do so:

‘Why don’t you sell your cotton to the government?’ Yossarian suggested casually...
Milo vetoed the idea brusquely. ‘It’s a matter of principle...The government has no business in business, and I would be the last person in the world to every try to involve the government in a business of mine. But the business of government *is* business...And the government does have the responsibility of buying all the Egyptian cotton I’ve got that no one else wants so that I can make a profit, doesn’t it?...But how will I get the government to do it?’
‘Bribe it,’ Yossarian said.
‘Bribe it!’ Milo was outraged... ‘Shame on you!’ he scolded severely... ‘Bribery is against the law, and you know it. But it’s not against the law to make a profit, is it? So it can’t be against the law for me to bribe someone in order to make a fair profit, can it? No, of course not!’”⁸⁵

Again, there is a serious idea point being made within farcical scenario, but that idea in and of itself does not constitute the comedy. Notice the cumbersome repetitions in both, such as: “You don’t *sell* plum tomatoes to Colonel Korn and Colonel Cathcart. You *buy* plum tomatoes from them.” Simply the way that Yossarian repeats the nouns in the sentence rather immediately switching to pronouns to identify them makes the exchange more ridiculous. In part this reflects the comedic principle mentioned in chapter 1 of prolongation and elaboration: the more elaborate the structure and parallels between two things, as long as they are still readily graspable, the more comedic the contrasts between them. In doing so he emphasizes the gap between them, between appearance and reality, between word and deed. In entering into Milo’s secrets Yossarian seems to be crossing an epistemic barrier. His reaction to it registers sincere appreciation for its complexity and logic: “‘Well, I’ll be damned,’ mused Yossarian, deeply

85. Ibid., p. 275.

impressed with the idea of a share for the very first time.”⁸⁶ This is similar to his reaction when he first comprehends the titular *Catch-22*: “Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of *Catch-22* and let out a respectful whistle. ‘That’s some catch, that *Catch-22*,’ he observed. ‘It’s the best there is,’ Doc Daneeka agreed.”⁸⁷ To overlook this aspect would be to lose the essence of comedy. Of course underlying *Catch-22* and all the related schemes lie the simpler imperatives of greed, war and aggression, but overlying them is an elaborate architecture of hypocrisy which aims to keep the population placated with the appearance of justice, law and procedure, while constantly violating them in fact. Of course the idea that so much effort has gone into creating the appearance of justice rather than the reality is of course also germane to the thematic concerns of the novel. But the brutality of the military is not the source of comedy, rather it is the hypocrisy surrounding it. By seeking to conceal the true nature of their actions the military administrators acknowledge the validity of the ethical norms that they are violating, and that makes them ridiculous. It is not what men do in wartime that is comedic, but how they sell it, to themselves and others. *Catch-22* could not be *Catch-22* without the *Catch-22*.

What distinguishes comedy, at least of this kind, as a novelistic procedure from an epistemological point of view is how exaggeration and absurdity condense and simplify, make the act of realization instantaneous. For example, what makes the *Catch-22* itself absurd and also comedic is not the idea that the U.S. military might be attempting to underhandedly negate the enlisted men’s hope of discharge through bureaucratic protocols; that is a historical question. But

86. *Ibid.*, p. 243.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

where a realistic novel might make the character's realization of this gradual, arrived at through observation and the accumulation of detail, Heller encodes the impossibility of discharge in the regulation itself, i.e. Catch-22. Again, the sense of absurdity does not depend on whether such a regulation ever would be created, i.e. it does not arise from a disparity between fiction and reality per se. It arises rather from the logic by which the two provisions come together, and that realization, while it may not be immediate, is instantaneous, an instantaneousness which suits, and in fact provides the essence of the rhythm of the comedy.

This is caricature, which from the perspective of realist novels is often regarded in invidious opposition to characterization, but is in fact simply a particular form of it. Where caricature is seen as a negative quality by the standards of the Bakhtinian/Lukacsian novel, with its preference for the accumulation of detail, as has been discussed, humor depends on instantaneous recognition, which caricature provides. *Le Sabotage amoureux* spins a long comic sequence out of the simple act of labeling a group of children with a series of incisive yet far-fetched designations:

“—On les lui fera bouffer, tranchait un pragmatique...
—Très lentement, reprenait un amateur d'adverbes.
—Oui: il devra bien mâcher, disait un esprit glossateur.
—Et après, on le fera vomir, proférait un blasphémateur.
—Surtout pas! Il serait trop content! Il faut qu'il garde ça dans son ventre, se récriait un autre qui avait le sens du sacré.
—Même qu'on lui bouchera...pour que ça ne ressorte jamais, surenchérisait un confrère qui voyait loin.
—Oui, fit un disciple de saint Matthieu.
—Ça marchera pas, commenta un philistin que personne n'écoutait...
—On lui bouchera tout! exulta un mystique...
—Mais il va mourir, balbutia un pleutre qui se prenait pour la Convention de Genève

[‘We’ll make them eat it up,’ decided a pragmatist.
 ‘Very slowly,’ resumed a lover of adverbs.
 ‘Yes: he should chew it up,’ said an explainer.
 ‘And afterwards, we’ll make him vomit it up,’ offered a
 blasphemer.
 ‘Absolutely not! He would be all too happy! We have to make
 sure he keeps it in his stomach,’ cried someone else,
 who had a sense of the sacred.
 ‘Let’s even plug him up...so it never comes out,’ someone with
 long-term vision raised the stakes.
 ‘Yes,’ said a disciple of St. Matthew.
 ‘That won’t work,’ commented a philistine who no one
 listened to.
 ‘We’ll plug him up completely!’ exulted a mystic.
 ‘But he’ll die,’ stammered a coward who took himself for
 the Geneva Convention’].”⁸⁸

Obviously caricature cannot capture the full complexity of reality: it simplifies and exaggerates. But Nothomb precisely takes advantage of those characteristics for humorous effect. The caricatures of the children in the passage represent emphatically partial truths: the narrator extracts the essence of the position articulated by each, then inflates it to a formal philosophical position and defines it as the essence of their characters. As discussed earlier, the contrast or lack of proportion between two juxtaposed thought-objects is a fundamental source of humor, and here the contrast lies between the off-handed, unserious nature of the comments and the grandiose characterization drawn from them. As with the lists of ingredients in *Moskva-Petuski*, humor in this passage serves to focus readers on the specifics of this cacophony of children’s voices, which might otherwise pass like an undifferentiated wash.

Here too a knowledge act is occurring. By naming something one comes to know it, to possess it mentally. Yet names are never sufficient to capture the reality of the signified. But Nothomb turns that fact to her advantage, by exaggerating and essentializing the traits revealed

88. Nothomb, p. 27.

by the children through their words to the point of absurdity, and thus making that exaggeration itself the joke. The content, the characterizations themselves, is relatively unimportant. This is evident in the fact that none of the children are named or, with the exception for the “mystic,” with his repeated, readily identifiable invocation of “On lui bouchera tout!”, appear more than once in the scene (or appear subsequently in the novel). In part this is due to the comedic principle that one cannot repeat a joke except, as in the case of the “mystic,” as a deliberate, limited exception, where repetition itself becomes the joke. But as a result, the knowledge gained through humor is compressed down to a point, a single moment, giving it the instantaneousness of a revelation. However, when the moment of a revelation fades, one is left with stable knowledge. When the moment fades in comedy, the humor is gone. The comedic quality is momentary and fleeting. The content of comedy defines its parameters but does not set it into motion. It is like a corpse rather than a living body.

In *Catch-22* Yossarian’s attempts to form a stable picture of the truth from Milo quickly becomes an exercise in comedic futility, as when Milo offers Yossarian the company of some underage prostitutes:

“Yossarian responded indifferently... ‘I don’t want any eight-year-old virgins, even if they are half Spanish.’
‘I don’t blame you. But these eight-year-old virgins are really only thirty-two. And they’re not really half Spanish but only one-third Estonian.’
‘I don’t care for any virgins.’
‘And they’re not even virgins,’ Milo continued persuasively. ‘The one I picked out for you was married for a short time to an elderly schoolteacher who slept with her only on Sundays, so she’s really almost as good as new.’”⁸⁹

89. Heller, p. 244.

Not only does this scene resist Yossarian's unenthusiastic attempts to gain clarity, it even moves somewhat beyond easily definable satire. Milo opens by cheerfully offering the services of child prostitutes, which would seem to touch on some uncomfortable issues regarding the conduct of soldiers in wartime. But his story immediately shifts at the first sign of resistance from Yossarian, and by the end of the passage it is unclear who the girls/women are or even if they exist. They effectively vanish within the cloud of Milo's compulsive lying. The humor in the scene derives from the movement, the contrast between the scuttling shifts in Milo's explanations and the unflappable assurance of his demeanor. The question of truth or falsehood seems misguided with respect to his character. His ruses have the appearance of limitless layers of falsehood. He seems to have the ability of the compulsive liar not so much to lie constantly as to treat truth as something that can be constructed and which lasts only as long as it takes to be spoken, similar to a description of the experience of a musical piece in *À la Recherche du temps perdu*:

“les notes sont évanouies avant que ces sensations soient assez formées en nous pour ne pas être submergées par celles qu'éveillent déjà les notes suivantes ou même simultanées. Et cette impression continuerait à envelopper de sa liquidité et de son 'fondu' les motifs qui par instants émergent, à peine discernables, pour plonger aussitôt et disparaître, connus seulement par le plaisir particulier qu'ils donnent, impossibles à décrire [The notes vanished before these sensations were formed enough in us to not be submerged by those that the following or even simultaneous notes inspire. And this impression continued to envelop with its liquidity and “meltedness” the motifs which at certain moments emerge from it, barely discernible, only to immediately plunge in and disappear, known only by the particular pleasure that they give, impossible to describe].”⁹⁰

90. Marcel Proust, *Du Côté de chez Swann*, Gallimard, 1987, p. 206.

Jokes are like this too: they rely on constant motion, on being discarded as soon as expressed and apprehended. One reason Milo's explanations seem comic is that they have the rhythm of a comedian's monologue, his explanations shift and vanish as soon as spoken. This exaggerates through compression: his lack of integrity becomes utterly transparent because of the rapidity and brazenness with which he shifts from one explanation to another. But this again is the compression of comedy: the obvious self-contradiction from one sentence to another makes for an instant laughing recognition. Milo's disingenuity is not something gradually inferred, but rather recognizable in a single moment, and this makes for laughter.

Sometimes the rhythm of humor compresses even into absence. In an authorial preface to *Moskva-Petushki*, Erofeev explains that in the first edition of the novel he warned all young girls reading to skip over one section, which was composed “чистейшего мата [of pure vulgarities],” where “нет ни единого цензурного слова, за исключением фразы ‘И немедленно выпил [there was not one printable word, with the exception of the phrase ‘And I quickly drank it up’],”⁹¹ but that this simply led everyone reading the novel, and young girls in particular, to skip straight to that chapter, not even stopping to read the phrase “And I quickly drank it up,” and that therefore he was cutting out everything in the chapter after the phrase “And I quickly drank it up.” This is not a random outburst of profanity, however. It occurs just after he drinks the concoction which then makes him run around clutching his throat and pretending to be rehearsing for a performance of *Othello*. So while he seems to be editing out the scene in the name of decency, at the same time he allows readers to project their own ideas of the extreme experience, and the vulgar terms with which he denounced it in the moment, onto the blank

91. Erofeev, p. 5.

space he has left. The *idea* of a long train of obscenity replaces the sequential transcription of it, and thus becomes instantly apprehensible, a joke. It might also be useful to remember not only the traditional taboos on expressing obscenity but also on representing holiness. In Venichka's case the two seem to be inextricably linked through his drinking. His drunkenness constitutes a fallen state, yet it also allows him to see and talk to angels, which however can also turn into demons. Unlike certain born-again, seeing angels and feeling God's presence does not cause him to stop drinking; rather he has access to them through his drinking. Both these forms of taboo language seem latent in the omitted obscenities from this section, and we might also remember yet another pertinent form of censorship, the suppression of religion in the Soviet Union, and the fact that Erofeev was rumored to have been expelled from university for owning a Bible.

Comic truth is fleeting, the creation of a moment, following the logic of comic rhythm, which is then absent in the next. Milo tells Yossarian about some child prostitutes he has arranged for him, then when rebuffed, he reveals his deception and, at the same moment, offers another. Whatever the truth of that in turn does not really matter: in the flow of the dialogue it will disappear with the next moment and the next joke. It is somewhat analogous to the description of the visual field created by a train headlamp at the beginning of *The Border Trilogy*, which come "running through the tangled mesquite brakes and creating out of the night the endless fenceline down the dead straight right of way and sucking it back again wire and post mile on mile into the darkness."⁹² This clarity, which is never fixed or steady but always moving and shifting its focus, creates the impression of always moving towards or away from but never

92. Cormac McCarthy, *The Border Trilogy*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1992, p. 3-4

arriving at a definitive reality. Though none of these texts is particularly opaque, they create a sense of mystery in that, as with Milo's shifting explanations, the very lack of stable, durable meaning itself creates the sense of a fundamental reality beyond anything that exists on the surface of the text. And so Venichka's omitted page of "purest vulgarities" does not convey the actual altered, heightened state of drunkenness that it arises out of, but rather, through the vehement inexpressiveness of cursing, points to the inexpressability of that state, an absence which is highlighted by the literal absence of that page from the text.

The fleetingness of comedy, its constant verging onto nothingness, can be likened to apophasis or "negative theology," the attempt to evoke the divine through negative or self-contradictory language. The connection between apophasis and humor has previously been made by Michael Sells in *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* in which he discusses the "anarchic moment" common to both apophatic language and humor, a moment when one proposition regarding the divine is contradicted by a second proposition which "turns back" upon it and causes the mind of the audience, faced with this disjunction, which prevents it from creating a coherent conceptual representation, reels with a freedom which is also a form of emptiness or nothingness. However, in order to be distinguished from "mere nothingness" this form of language requires on the framing context of conventional theology, in the same way that a joke in violating, "accepted standards of propriety, expectation, or appropriateness,"⁹³ depends on those conventions, as well as the manner in which it is delivered, in order to achieve its intended effect. The parallels between the two in fact perhaps go even beyond this. Apophatic theology as

93. Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, The University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 210.

Sells represents it not only concerns itself with the incomprehensible but with trying to preserve it, in other words attempting to preserve a sense of its basic mystery in opposition to the mind's inherent tendency to resolve problematic concepts into non-problematic notions. He writes repeatedly of the threat of symbolic or incomplete conceptual attempts to approximate an idea of divinity "freezing" or "hardening" into dogmatic claims about it. So the task of apophatic theology is to frame nothingness in such a way that suggests not simply the absence of being but something beyond being. Conventional theology which seeks to make divinity comprehensible to believers is then fundamentally opposed to apophatic theology, which attempts to hold onto the incomprehensibility in a way which nonetheless holds the attentive mind's focus on it. So apophatic theology, like comedy, cannot be understood atemporally, conceptually, through its constituent content, but only in its movement and development, through paradox, self-contradiction and negative description.

Apophatic theology involves a constant moving and dancing around to maintain a negative space for divinity and prevent, through negation and contradiction, intrinsically inadequate signifiers to harden in the minds of the audience and thus effectively replace the incomprehensible that they signify. Humor is obviously different in some respects--the object of humor is obviously necessarily less conceptually elusive, because a recognition and understanding, even if intuitive and not fully explicit, must occur in the audience. Nonetheless, a similar movement and dancing around very frequently occurs, although sometimes for opposite reasons. Consider the incredible persistence of sexual innuendo as a source of humor. Without desiring to generalize about every instance of it, it seems clear that the enormous centrality of

sex in human existence, and the nervousness, excitement and obsession that surround, account for the enormous volume of such innuendo, and the human brain's ability to see associations between it and virtually everything in the world. At the same time, once sex becomes overt as the topic of discourse, innuendo is lost. Only by maintaining the double discourse, where discussion of sex is also a discussion of something else and vice versa, is the game kept alive. In this case, incomprehensible mystery is not the source or reason for the negative language. Rather, the subject is consummately universal and immediate. However, the topic, sex, cannot ever become the true meaning or significance of innuendo, because once it becomes the definite subject, without the unstable oscillation of ambiguity, it ceases to be innuendo and, thus, ceases to be comedic. So the "anarchic moment" is just as vital to humor as to apophatic theology: the freedom from definite meanings and pre-defined possibilities. It is a revolutionary state, and even successful revolutions lose their identities, simply through the nature of the change from an unstable to a stable state. The infinite promise of the future becomes a finite present, and its substantive content, which in prospect held the possibility of being simply a step along the way to something else becomes instead an end point and a boundary.

So comedy can only perpetuate itself by continually abandoning its own content. Like Mao's permanent revolution, the experience of the anarchic moment can only be renewed through constant upheaval, not by prolonging past humor but by pushing onwards towards new. This is certainly not to say that there cannot be a sequence or cluster of jokes on the same topic, or even a humorous prolongation of the same joke, but this involves finding new angles and elements within the general topic or simply violating expectation in a different way, as when a

joke intentionally continues after one expects it to end. Again, this is not to say that subject is unimportant--humor requires a recognition, and the more true and non-trivial the subject, the stronger this recognition is likely to be. But the essence of humor cannot be extracted as an idea from its context and frame, and in that sense its ideas cannot be considered ideas of the sort one is accustomed to working with in an academia, with their presumed eternal, universal essence which can be translated out of their original contexts. Or if they can, it is simply as ideas, not as comedic ideas. Heller's anti-militarism is a perfect example of this.

In a way humor plays precisely upon the way in which ideas are subjectively held. Newton's laws of gravitation, which held a profound emotional and spiritual significance for him as the discoverer, and probably a lesser but still considerable one for his contemporaries, cannot possibly hold the same meaning for people today for whom they are merely a bit of rote learning. Yet at the same time these laws hold an objective truth value which is the same for both--or would have, if not for subsequent discoveries. But humor measures itself precisely by the impact of that moment of recognition or understanding, and when it is lost the humor is also gone. A hilarious comedic idea might cool down into a fruitful new idea or conception of the world, just like a torrid love affair might calm down into a happy marriage, and the factors that produced the first may also help to produce the second, but they are still very different states. So humor is perhaps best viewed in general as a quality, not an essence, arising in a particular context, at a particular moment. No genre or theme or abstract category can fully predict or account for its presence, although naturally certain subjects and styles are frequent than others. The "anarchic moment" of humor really is like the liberated moment between two regimes, whose moment is

already clearly implicit in the new order which is already replacing the old one on its way out. And of course a prolongation of anarchy would not preserve that sense of freedom in any more than a new stability. Humor, like freedom, dies if it does not keep moving, and just as even good rulers must be replaced fairly frequently lest they become tyrannical, even a good joke must rapidly yield to a new one. The tendency to retroactively read some inherent humorous quality into a subject masks the potential disjunction between comedic style and subject. This mismatch nonetheless becomes quite evident in, for example, *Voyage*, which maintains a fast-moving, witty tone despite the extreme lugubriousness of the narrator's emotional outlook. For example, during Bardamu's steamer voyage to Africa, he becomes convinced that everyone on the boat is actively seeking his murder, under the emblematically paranoid principle that "On n'est jamais assez craintif [One is never fearful enough]."94 All this based on the report of one of the cabin boys

"qu'on s'accordait à me trouver poseur, voire insolent... Qu'on me soupçonnait de maquereautage en même temps que de pédérastie... D'être même un peu cocaïnomane... Mais cela à titre accessoire [that everyone was agreed that I was poser, insolent even...That I was suspected of pimping and at the same time of pedophilia...And even to be a bit of a cocaine fiend...But that only as an accessory charge]."95

It's not clear if the amusing touches of polite speech are a bit of free indirect discourse lifted from the boy's speech itself or added by the narrator to more heavily ironize the accusations, such as describing him as "a bit" of a cocaine fiend, or the formal, legalistic clarification of this habit as merely a "titre accessoire" to the main charge of being a pimp and a pedophile, as if these rumors were valid, substantive charges brought in a court of law. So the humor arises from

94. Céline, p. 113.

95. Ibid.

the way in which the rumors are framed and expressed. On the one hand we have the nebulousness of the rumors, captured perfectly in the phrase “un peu cocaïnomanie,” the qualifier “un peu” seeming not only a farcical bit of soft-pedaling but also a way of justifying the lack of any proof of the charge, i.e. while perhaps no one has seen the narrator taking cocaine or appearing to be under its influence, this is because he is not a major drug addict but merely “a bit” of one. This contrasts with the excessive formality and precision of the phrase “à titre accessoire,” as if again, this really were a coherent, organized list of charges arranged in a hierarchy. But this phrase has not only a thematic relevance, it also imparts a vividness to the conceptualization, because in fact it does represent a kind of truth, because this last accusation is thrown in seemingly just to pad out the list, to make the rumors against Bardamu seem more substantive just by virtue of sheer volume, in the same way that accessory charges are tacked on in court in the hope of raising the chances that the defendant will be convicted of at least some of them. So in that sense the judicial language possesses a descriptive value in illustrating the relationships between the different rumors even as it exposes their lack of substance by implied contrast with real court proceedings. However, the humor of the scene strikes before these implications have become fully explicit. What is striking in the moment of reading the phrase “à titre accessoire” is irony, the reversal of expectation, at this officious language that contrasts with the scurrilous rumors that precede it, but that also renders them more concrete and vivid, a jarring shift in register which also seems to represent a coming-into-focus.

It is embedded in the basic structure of the comedic text that it is built around anticipation and discontinuity. Because humor depends on freshness and movement, moments of humor pass

rapidly, and thus the majority of the space in the comedic text insofar as it is comedic consists of the anticipation and the lead-up to humor, and thus the whole experience of comedy is oriented around the feeling of anticipation, and an air of potential and possibility reigns. And because the structure of humor is also defined by the contrast between the lead-up and the joke, between that which sets up humor and that which actually is humor, contrast and discontinuity are central to the experience. These are basic structural components of humor that color the experience of it no matter the thematic content or what metaphysical or symbolic significance is ascribed to it. But at this point, having discussed comedic structures and qualities at length in an informal sense, it is probably time to take a step back and consider theories of comedy from a broader, more historical angle.

Chapter 3: Awareness vs. Knowledge in Comedy

Humor, comedy and laughter have a long history as theoretical concepts, with many definitions and explanations offered. The thinkers create these often either try to find some common thread amongst all the different definitions and forms of humor, or to create their own. The former is probably impossible, the latter irrelevant. The fact that laughter is such a basic, common, semi-involuntary somatic response makes it appear that it must have some equally basic, simple physical cause. But I take the opposite view: the very fact that laughter is so ubiquitous likely means that it is entangled in complex ways with all kinds of conscious and unconscious mental systems. Perhaps if we argue again by analogy with the erotic it will be more clear. If we were to ask what turns people on, the answers would either be simply tautological (“what turns you on is what turns you on”) or inanely general (“people tend to be turned on by shapes, actions, feelings or situations”). Yes, there is a conditioning aspect, and yes what constitutes a turn-on for any given individual at a particular time is fairly inflexible, but just try to derive a a concept broad enough to unite all of them. If, alternatively, we just seek to elevate some particular erotic stimulus as the “true” erotic, then we have simply construed the concept of the erotic as a value judgment.

At the same time, a discussion of the erotic that makes no reference to naked bodies will probably not be very useful either. Of course, you can talk about reproductive incentives and desirable traits in a mate until you’re blue in the face, and that may only make some of the weird things people get aroused by even more inexplicable. Nevertheless, there is an undeniably central relationship between reproduction, physical arousal and erotica, even if that relationship is

sometimes far from straightforward. So, to return to humor, we can talk about important themes and recurring patterns in in comedy and humor, but we cannot become too strict or absolutist. Even the boundary between humor, comedy and laughter must remain somewhat fuzzy, because they are and have been frequently used in interchangeable or overlapping senses. I would define them for now simply, for instrumental purposes, in the following terms in order to try to hew as closely as possible to contemporary common usage: laughter as not only the actual physical act of laughing but also more generally the feeling of amusement, humor as that which intentionally provokes laughter or seeks too, and comedy as a larger work of art which includes humor as one of its primary components.

If we look at the histories of these concepts, we can see that the views of thinkers on laughter, humor and comedy naturally have been shaped by their broader interests and, consequently, in relation to what other concepts they wish to define them. Plato's Socrates, for example, who is often considered the first theorist of humor in Western culture, speaks little about comedy per se, which is natural, since he has little respect or tolerance for art as an autonomous activity but he does speak about comedy and laughter as demonstrations of more central ethical concerns. For example, in *Philebus*, he asks: "do you actually know the disposition of our soul in comedies, that there is also in them a mixture of pain and pleasure?."⁹⁶ Socrates' interest in the "mixture of pleasure and pain" experienced by souls that are somehow in conflict with themselves, of which laughter is a primary example. He believes that laughing at others is predicated on envy, which turns to ridicule when someone is seen to be in some way

96. Plato, *The Tragedy and Comedy of Life: Plato's Philebus*, trans. Seth Benardete, The University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 57.

weak or ridiculous. So laughter is a mixture of pain (the envy of others) and pleasure (a feeling of superiority relative to their weakness or absurdity). Socrates emphasizes that he is only discussing comedy in order to provide an example of these mixed states of the soul. The verdict on laughter and comedy, then, is quite negative, seeing them as products of an unappealing blend of envy and superiority. This seems like a rather specific definition for comedy and laughter as a whole, but on the other hand Socrates never explicitly says he is offering a comprehensive definition, and in a way that is itself the point. Socrates evinces a profound mistrust of art, and thus comedy seems to only warrant discussion insofar as it can be used to drive a more general discussion about the soul.

Aristotle has been perhaps even more influential on the subject of comedy and humor. To some extent this is accidental, because while his ideas on comedy in the *Poetics* have become very famous, the sections of that work actually dealing with comedy have been lost. All we have left is an extremely brief introductory outline of his central distinction between tragedy and comedy. Yet this absence also proved important. Just as during the Renaissance the relics of Greek and Roman art became venerated as artistic models and in this process of appropriation some of the accidental symptoms of decay in the transmission of these artifacts, such as the white, unpainted state of ancient marble statues and buildings, or the concept of *in medias res* as derived from the Homeric epics, became themselves, ironically, principles of classical art. So did the accidentally exclusive emphasis on tragedy in the *Poetics* exert an effect. As deeply as dramatists in the Renaissance attempted to apply Aristotle's precepts, they had to go without his guidance in comedy, as they did not possess the relevant teachings. So comedy could be

sanctified by classical tradition to the same extent as tragedy, at least insofar as Aristotle was identified as the authoritative source of that tradition.

Of course, this process may not have been entirely accidental, as the loss of Aristotle's treatise on comedy may itself have been in part the result of an invidious distinction that already existed at the time of its dissemination. In other words, the more widely circulated and copied a work was, the more likely it would have been to survive the destruction of the classical world, and if comedy was perceived as less important or elevated than tragedy, Aristotle's precepts regarding it may have circulated less widely. In fact, Aristotle emphasizes this lack of status even in what little remains--for example, he describes the origin of tragedy and comedy as follows: "Poetry...soon broke up into two kinds according to the differences of character in the individual poets; for the graver among them would represent noble actions, and those of noble personages; and the meaner sort the actions of the ignoble."⁹⁷ The former of course, eventually became tragedy, and the latter comedy. Later, he writes: "Though the successive changes in Tragedy and their authors are not unknown, we cannot say the same of Comedy; its early stages passed unnoticed, because it was not as yet taken up in a serious way."⁹⁸

So the exaltation of tragedy above comedy seems to have preceded Aristotle, but he also reinforces this hierarchy, writing: "Comedy...is (as has been observed) an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards...the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous may be defined as

97. Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, Oxford, 1909, p. 11.

98. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others.’”⁹⁹ Where Plato had described laughter at others as partly a product of envy, which is a product of pain, Aristotle’s concept is more innocuous, seeing laughter’s object as a harmless form of ugliness, yet in a Greek aesthetic and ethical culture centrally predicated on the value of contemplation of the beautiful, the classification of comedy as a form of contemplation of ugliness inherently lowered it to a subordinate position in the arts.

The division of drama and, eventually, narrative art more generally between tragedy and comedy has been massively influential all the way through history to the present. Yet in some respects the specifics of Aristotle’s division seem rather remote from contemporary ideas, in particular, the delineation of the subjects of tragedy and comedy in terms of “nobility.” While the word that Aristotle uses for characters in tragedy, “καλός,” meaning noble in terms of beauty or moral goodness, is not the same as the word for noble as in well-born, which is “εὐγενής,” nonetheless the main characters in Greek tragedy tend to be aristocratic or high-born, while those in comedy are more apt to be commoners and people of low status. For a character to be a tragic or a comic hero was a function of social status as much as personal qualities or life history.

As a result, Aristotle’s definition of comedy is more about delimiting boundaries than exploring individuality. In other words, his scheme shows the proper domain for humor rather than explaining its specific mechanisms. This has led to some confusion. The most familiar frame of reference for the concept of comedy is still the comedy/tragedy dichotomy even though, as the classist connotations of Aristotle’s scheme suggest, the terms of our understanding of comedy are very different. Comedy today is defined by humor, not the presence of “low”

99. Ibid., p. 15.

characters, and in this context Aristotle holds limited explanatory power. For as Salvatore Attardo notes, “When humor is defined in pragmatic terms...it appears that the opposite of humor is not the tragic, but the ‘serious’ or the ‘un-funny.’”¹⁰⁰ Probably one reason Aristotle did not explore this distinction is that his interest, like Plato’s, is basically ethical. The ethical significance of comedy lies in its nature as a contemplation of the ugly, in contrast to tragedy, which involves contemplating the beautiful. Whether any particular instance of it is funny or not is of much less importance than the general orientation. In essence, Plato and Aristotle, both being preoccupied with moral evaluation, perceive laughter as itself primarily an act of moral judgment. Because their concepts of good and bad are deeply linked to beauty and ugliness, questions of aesthetics inevitably shade into questions of ethics, and vice versa. One result of this is that, in contrast to many later theorists like Kant, incongruity plays no essential role in laughter to them. Laughter is essentially an evaluative act rather than a knowledge-act. Laughter for them does not represent a response to the mind’s categories being challenged or its attempts at understanding being frustrated, but is instead simply the application of pre-conceived categories of judgment.

Cicero, in *De Oratore*, outlines a conception of laughter which is also ostensibly based on this notion of aesthetic and moral judgment. Cicero claims that “the seat and as it were province of what is laughed at...lies in a certain offensiveness and deformity,” and that it should be used in rhetoric as tool of aggression, because “mirth itself attracts favor to him by whom it is raised...or...overthrows the adversary, or hampers him...or...breaks the force of offensive remarks,

100. Salvatore Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, Mouton de Gruyter, 1994, p. 21.

which can not easily be overthrown by arguments.”¹⁰¹ Cicero sees laughter as an instrument of aggression, a weapon that can be mobilized in situations where reason and logic fail. While he shares Plato and Aristotle’s belief that laughter is a response to “offensiveness,” the force of this response as a moral and aesthetic judgment is somewhat attenuated by the sense that it can be manipulated as a tool for a variety of purposes.

Further, his consideration of humor for pragmatic considerations carries him somewhat further than Plato and Aristotle’s very general definitions. Cicero’s primary consideration is not what humor is in general, a question he leaves to others to resolve, but rather what types of humor are appropriate to the orator. So first of all he eliminates all the basically non-intellectual forms of humor, such as “buffoonry,” “mimicry,” “distortion of features” and “indecent language,” concluding, “So many things, then, being deducted from this part of oratory, the kinds of jesting which remain are...such as consist in thought or in expression.”¹⁰² By “expression” he means such forms of humor as plays on words, puns, etc., i.e. those which revolve around some quality of the language, rather than an idea which is conveyed through language, which would be a “thought.” The test to distinguish the two types of humor is whether the humor can be translated into other words. If so, then it is based on a “thing,” or idea, if not, then it is a purely verbal form of humor. It is important to note, in the conceptualization of an idea being conveyed through humor, that we have here, in contrast to in Plato or Aristotle, the sense of humor as a form of transmission of an idea, and laughter, by implication, as a sign of comprehension of the

101. Cicero, *On Oratory and Orators*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1970, p. 150-151.

102. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

idea on the part of the recipient. Humor then becomes a form of knowledge, by which the recipient comes to understand the world, rather than merely a form of judgment about it.

During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, ideas derived from Plato and Aristotle about laughter and comedy predominated. One definition of laughter which is clearly derivative of Plato in particular but of note because it has become perhaps the most-quoted of any is Thomas Hobbes's in *Leviathan*, where he describes laughter as a result of a feeling of

“*Sudden glory*...caused either by some sudden act of their own [i.e. of the laugher], that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison of which they suddenly applaud themselves.”¹⁰³

It's also interesting that where Aristotle regarded the objects of humor as being lowly in some sense, Hobbes views those who laugh as lowly, if not in social status then in their personal qualities: “it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favor, by observing the imperfections of other men.”¹⁰⁴ While this view is very similar to Socrates's views expressed in Plato's *Philebus*, Hobbes's description certainly has the advantage in terms of concision and clarity.

The one original quality of Hobbes's description lies in his recognition of the temporal element in humor. The use of the word “sudden” testifies to his recognition of the rapidity, even exceeding the bounds of fully conscious thought, of the judgment encoded in laughter. Laughter in Plato, by contrast, is not “sudden glory,” but simply “glory” in oneself. He never gave any kind of criterion to distinguish laughter from any other kind of supercilious or envious judgment. Of course for Plato's Socrates that is not important, because his interest is in ethics, and the

103. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 43.

104. *Ibid.*

ethical content of humor is envy. Hobbes on the other hand acknowledges that humor is special because that judgment occurs in such a rapid, jarring fashion. However, although he refers to the suddenness of humor, he does not provide any explanation for it either.

That explanation is provided by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*, where the actual bodily process of laughter takes center stage. He writes: “Das Lachen ist ein Affect aus der plötzlichen Verwandlung einer gespannten Erwartung in nichts [Laughter is a product of the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing].”¹⁰⁵ For Kant laughter, while linked to the search for knowledge, is not itself a truly intellectual reaction because it represents the body’s relaxation and return to equilibrium after the strain of seeking to know. Still, it is striking that the reversal of expectation which provokes laughter is in fact so jarring that it acts as a physical shock to the body. Laughter functions like an earthquake, causing an explosive return to equilibrium from a state of heightened tension. Kant’s conception of humor still bears some similarities to Plato’s and Aristotle’s; for example, he writes:

“Es muß in allem, was ein lebhaftes erschütterndes Lachen erregen soll, etwas Widersinniges sein (woran also der Verstand an sich kein Wohlgefallen finden kann [In everything that arouses a lively, convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which therefore the understanding can find no satisfaction)].”¹⁰⁶

This recalls Plato’s laughter, which contained an unpleasant element, envy. Here it is the presence of absurdity, which frustrates the attempt of the mind to gain understanding. Kant’s conception of knowledge here is linear and binary, because it implies that there is a single path

105. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft und Schriften zur Naturphilosophie*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft Darmstadt, 1957, p. 437.

106. Ibid.

toward the understanding, so that humor, while providing a “healthy” relaxation of tension, ultimately represents a diversion from that path, and therefore must represent “absurdity.”

In fact, Kant specifically contradicts the idea the Platonic/Aristotelian view that laughter represents a judgment of superiority over the failings of another. After recounting a joke about an Indian in colonial times who, upon seeing a bottle of beer foam up and out of the bottle, expressed amazement that the foam was ever gotten into the bottle in the first place, he claims that

“so lachen wir...nicht, weil wir uns etwa klüger finden als diesen Unwissenden...sondern unsre Erwartung war gespannt, und verschwindet plötzlich in nichts [we laugh...not because we imagine ourselves cleverer than this ignorant person...rather, our expectation was strained, and then disappeared into nothing].”¹⁰⁷

It would appear in this passage that the Greek interpretation of laughter is too restrictive and not open-ended enough for Kant. His example is well-chosen in that the humor arises from the unexpected reaction of someone ignorant of what from the perspective of Kant’s contemporary readers would seem a very commonplace phenomenon, but that ignorance cannot be ascribed to any personal failing on the part of the Indian, because presumably beer is unfamiliar to his cultural milieu. So while the joke is indeed structured upon the disjunction between the superior knowledge of the joke’s audience and the ignorance of its subject, while produces laughter, because of the context that laughter lacks any force as a moral judgment. Which would clearly suggest a category of humor that Plato and Aristotle’s concept cannot explain, and in fact that even in examples that seem to fall within its purview the source of laughter may lie elsewhere.

107. Ibid., p. 437.

If Plato and Aristotle's view of humor fails for Kant in being overly-determined, for imposing an overly narrow and elaborate interpretive act on what at root is a simple reaction to violated expectations, it is also clear that these violated expectations do not themselves constitute a source of knowledge or changed perspective. He claims that the cause of laughter must "in dem Einflusse der Vorstellungen auf den Körper und dessen Wechselwirkung auf das Gemüt bestehen [lie in the influence of the ideas on the body and its interaction with the soul]," and, lest too much ambiguity surround the term "interaction," specifies that this is

"zwar nicht, sofern die Vorstellung objektiv ein Gegenstand des Vergnügens ist (denn wie kann eine getäuschte Erwartung vergnügen?) [absolutely not insofar as the idea is objectively an object of pleasure (for how can a disappointed expectation be pleasurable)]."¹⁰⁸

Rather, it is "lediglich dadurch, daß sie, als bloßes Spiel der Vorstellungen, ein *Gleichgewicht* der Lebenskräfte im Körper hervorbringt [only by virtue of the fact that, as a pure play of ideas, it brings about an equilibrium of life forces in the body][emphasis Kant's]."¹⁰⁹ So according to Kant there can be no intellectual pleasure in humor, no pleasure in the *ideas* expressed by humor, because these are absurd and thus meaningless. The pleasure can only be a physical pleasure, the over-strained mind relaxing as its ideas are forced to come to a halt by lack of understanding.

In other words, the intellectual value of humor for Kant is nothing. This conception in fact seems to represent an attempt to reconcile his belief in the inquiring, knowledge-seeking being with his observation that humor often seems to rely on expectations or provisional knowledge being frustrated or reversed, and the evident pleasure people seem to take in this.

108. Ibid.

109. Ibid.

Therefore, his conclusion is that seeking knowledge is a form of labor, physically taxing like any other, and that humor, by terminating this strain towards knowing by showing its futility in specific instances, terminates this search temporarily and thus relaxes the body. So humor appears here as a sort of recreational sin of the inquiring mind, perhaps necessary to refresh the spirit but contributing nothing to its essential function.

Although Kant put humor in the vicinity of knowledge acts, however his assertion that humor represents a pure lack of ability to know or comprehend didn't really provide a way forward for further conceptualizations of humor. For one thing, it provides no basis to distinguish frustrations of the understanding which are humorous from those that aren't. Because clearly not only frustrated attempts at understanding something are not perceived as funny. Nor do they necessarily lead to a visceral physical relaxation of the *attempt* to understand. Quite the contrary. Someone frustrated by a math problem, for example, will probably redouble their efforts to solve it, unless they're totally lacking in motivation. Of course eventually they will give up, but not immediately upon recognizing the difficulty, much less with an involuntary release of laughter. Kant's idea seems to be that humor occurs when an absurdity occurs that manifestly and immediately asserts the impossibility of understanding it, so that its absurdity, in other words, is intrinsic and clear. We might ask, however, if that is really what is going on in, for example, the story about the Indian. Of course the situation is incomprehensible and absurd for the Indian, but he's not the one who's laughing. For the audience who knows about beer, in fact, not only is the situation clear, but the Indian's reasoning process is clear too. In fact, it's almost too logical. He simply compares the size of the bottle to the size of the foam coming out of the bottle, and

observes that the former isn't large enough to hold the latter. What has not occurred to him is that a change may taken place, and that that change itself is what is forcing the foam out of the bottle. His reasoning simply has not allowed for enough variables. Clearly there is some kind of frustration of the understanding or reasoning gone awry at work here, but Kant is too binary in seeing only knowledge and lack of knowledge as the two possible states of the understanding.

For Schopenhauer, by contrast, laughter is a quintessential act of knowing. Although he does not offer a direct refutation of Kant's theory, claiming its "Unzugänglichkeit [inadequacy]" to be self-evident, the difference in his own conception becomes immediately clear in his definition of laughter as

“die plötzliche Wahrnehmung einer Inkongruenz zwischen einem solchen Begriff und dem durch denselben gedachten realen Gegenstand, also zwischen dem Abstrakten und dem Anschaulichen [the sudden awareness of an incongruity between a given idea and the real object which had been thought of in terms of it, hence between the abstract and the perceptible].”¹¹⁰

The basic elegance of this concept is not easily conveyed into (my) English, but the basic idea is that real objects in the world are both concretely perceived and conceptualized by an abstract concept. At times of course, one becomes aware of a gap between one's mental concepts and the reality that one perceives, and laughter ensues from sudden and extreme instances of this. This could occur when one's mental "definition" of an object fails to match up with its perceived object, as when one meets a child who doesn't match one's expectations as to how children look or behave, but also when one becomes aware that an object does not actually fit within a category

110. Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung II*, Cotta-Verlag, 1976, p. 122.

that had been mentally assigned to it, or not only to that category, or at least not in all ways.

Schopenhauer writes:

“Demnach muß bei allem, was Lachen erregt, allemal nachzuweisen sein ein Begriff und ein Einzelnes, also ein Ding oder ein Vorgang, welcher zwar unter jenen Begriff sich subsumieren, mithin durch ihn sich denken läßt, jedoch in anderer und vorwaltender Beziehung gar nicht darunter gehört, sondern sich von allem, was sonst durch jenen Begriff gedacht wird, affallend unterscheiden [Therefore in everything that provokes laughter there must prove to be a concept and an individual instance, i.e. a thing or an occurrence which subsumes itself under the concept in terms of which it is conceived, but in another and more predominant sense does not pertain to it, but rather strikingly distinguishes itself from everything which is conceived through that concept].”¹¹¹

An example of this, which, appropriately enough, is easier to think through in terms of concrete instances than in the abstract, would be a word with multiple meanings or that could be interpreted in its context in multiple senses. He gives a number of amusing examples of this, such as an incompetent doctor who is described as standing like a Homeric hero among piles of the slain, or a boring preacher who, like the true shepherd spoken of in the Bible, alone stays awake looking after his flock as they sleep. These jokes exploit the ambiguities of implied meanings in commonplace phrases. Heroes are described as standing amongst piles of the slain, but the phrase itself does not actually specify who did the slaying. Shepherds are described as watching over their flock while they sleep, but it is not specified who put them to sleep. So there are multiple ways to read these stock phrases, and each of those readings could be considered to constitute a “Begriff [concept].”

111. Ibid.

Schopenhauer speaks of the “Begriff” as a general category to which a specific instance does and does not pertain. Now, it might not be clear how a phrase with at least two possible meanings constitute a general category and a specific instance, but I think we have to imagine that for Schopenhauer frequency of usage constitutes a hierarchy. So “standing amongst piles of the slain” is a general description which means “hero,” but is also used in particular satiric instances to mean something else. Although that might seem overly normative today, it does represent an important reality, which is that the association of ideas does create involuntary expectations in the perceiver, and humor plays deftly on these. If one hears the phrase “standing among piles of the slain” consistently in reference to heroes on the field of battle, hearing that phrase will create the involuntary expectation that it will be used to describe a hero. So even if all possible senses of the phrase are considered formally, even ethically equal, the joke is dependent on there being one predominant sense which will be expected by the audience.

In the 20th century, Freud became one of the most influential modern theorists of humor through his volume *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. Here again in the very title we see the difficulty of strictly demarcating the network of words and concepts related to the subject. The title in German is *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*, “Witz” meaning, as is not the case for any common equivalent term in English, both “wit” and “joke.” The work includes both an “Analytical Section” and a “Synthetic Section,” and, while the “synthesis” attempts to fold the significance and meaning of humor into Freud’s larger psychological theories, the analytical section presents a fairly versatile conception of humor as a form of communication. The two operant techniques of humor for Freud are “Reduktion” and

“Verschiebung,” “reduction” and “displacement,” and unlike the theories of the Greeks, Cicero, or Kant, this division captures the brevity characteristic of humor, and also suggests its similarity to poetry. “Reduction” essentially means condensation, the packing of multiple meanings into a single word, image, sound, etc. Puns are a prototypical example of this, sexual innuendo another. With reduction, the explosiveness of humor and laughter result from the suddenness and density of this style of communication. When concepts are linked so closely and implicitly, they become less explicit and orderly, and understanding becomes sudden and unpredictable. Rather than representing the reversal of understanding that Kant saw in humor, humor becomes a short-cut to understanding, a skipping over the intervening steps between one point and another.

In another sense Freud reconciles the views of the Greeks, Cicero and Kant, in that he divides wit into two categories, “harmless” and “tendentious,” which correspond to Cicero’s categories in that “harmless” wit is harmless insofar as it is verbal, based on the likenesses between words and sounds rather than their meaning, and in this sense is contentless. About this form of wit he claims that “mußten wir den Schluß ziehen, daß die Techniken des Witzes selbst Lustquellen sind [we must conclude that the techniques of wit are themselves sources of humor].”¹¹² “Tendentious” wit, on the other hand, is based on an idea and has an object. In both forms,

“es uns dann im Witz ein unverkennbares Vergnügen bereitet, durch den Gebrauch des nämlichen Wortes oder eines ihm ähnlichen aus dem einen Vorstellungskreis in einen andern entfernen zu gelangen...so ist dies Vergnügen wohl mit Recht auf die Ersparung an psychischem Aufwand zurückzufahren [there is in wit an unmistakable pleasure in, through the use of the same or a

112. Sigmund Freud, *Gesammelte Werke, sechster Band: Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*, S. Fischer Verlag, 1940, p. 133.

similar word, arriving at one conceptual circle from another, distant one...this pleasure is probably correctly to be traced back to the saving of psychological expenditure].”¹¹³

For Freud the meaning of the “psychological expenditure” is the effort expended on erecting and policing the borders of psychic repression, rather than simply the effort involved in searching for knowledge, as it is in Kant. The sense of relief that derives from humor is just as real in Freud as in Kant, but the action it derives from is different in kind. In Kant the relief came from simply collapsing at the foot of the barriers to the understanding, whereas in Freud it derives from circumventing the barriers of repression and arriving at the repressed by an alternate route. So innuendo, for example, by linking together both sexual and non-sexual meanings, allows one to relax from the strain of repressing the urge to talk about sexual matters without violating the taboo on doing so.

The Freudian notion of humor, while not in the main emphasizing the search for knowledge per se, is certainly cognitively-based, and even within the framework of the repression model possesses some curiously epistemological features. For example, Freud claims that

“Die Witzeslust aus solchem ‘Kurzschluß’ scheint auch um so größer zu sein, je fremder die beiden durch das gleiche Wort in Verbindung gebrachten Vorstellungskreise einander sind, je weiter ab sie von einander liegen, je größer also die Ersparung an Gedankenweg durch das technische Mittel des Witzes ausfällt [The pleasure at wit which arises from such a ‘short-circuit’ also appears to be greater, the more unlike the conceptual circles brought together in the same word are, the further apart from each other they lie, the greater in short the saving of effort along the road of thought through the technique of wit turns out to be].”¹¹⁴

113. Ibid., p. 134.

114. Ibid.

While it is not entirely explained why this should be important within the repression model, from an epistemological point of view, on the other hand, its significance is clear: such connections create a wider, more intricate pattern of knowledge. Sometimes the link is more superficial than others, and sometimes, as Freud and Cicero points out, it only consists in the multiple identities of a word or the similarity in sound between two different words, but there is no doubt that the human mind in general seeks out such connections at all levels.

One might also note that in a strange way Freud's theory of humor actually closely resembles Aristotle's notion of tragedy. Just as tragedy for Aristotle produces pathos, in which the audience releases its tension through the communal experience of fear and pity, so the comedic audience, for Freud, releases the burden of psychic repression through the release of involuntary laughter. And one can see thus that Freud allows for an aesthetic component to the experience of humor, for just as the audience of tragedy can feel a relief at the sight of the lamentable happenings on stage by virtue of the fact that they are not real, the comedic audience can laugh at the evocation of taboo subjects and the repressed because, due to the magic of innuendo, plays on words, and the other instruments of wit, the taboos are not actually violated and the barriers of repression remain in place, at least in some form.

One could also say that, in contrast to the increasing emphasis in modern theories of humor, starting with Kant, on humor as a product of disjunction or incongruity between concepts, in Freud it arises from the connection between them, or actually more precisely from one of the concepts (i.e. the taboo or repressed) being evoked, of which the other serves as a signifier. In fact, laughter is not even essentially a product of the specific nature of the

representation of the humorous object. That is to say, the energy behind laughter comes from the repressed itself, not the coded representation of it, although it is the representation that causes that energy to be expressed through laughter rather than in some more violent and chaotic form. Humor, in short, rather than creating the passion expressed in laughter, actually serves as a means of containing or disarming it.

More recently, Victor Raskin in *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* defined what is now referred to as the Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH). This theory represents an attempt at a more objective categorization of humor: so far from defining humor as itself an act of judgment, as in Plato and Aristotle, Raskin attempts to remove judgment from the evaluation of a text as humor, instead attempting to locate it in verifiable semantic elements. In short, the main hypothesis of the theory is that

“A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if... (i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts
(ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite... The two scripts with which some text is compatible... overlap fully or in part on this text.”¹¹⁵

This objectivity, however, is somewhat illusory. It seems simple enough to determine whether a text can be interpreted in two opposite senses simultaneously, and if so, to label it as a joke.

However, this procedure depends on the concept, imported from linguistics, of “scripts,” whose objectivity is more apparent than real. The linguistic “script” is essentially the web of concepts and associations that constitute the interpretation of the meaning of a text. Naturally, though, this concept implies an interpretive act. So this whole procedure for determining the existence of a

115. Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*, D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1985, p. 99.

joke seems to be a simple one of searching for and comparing the values of two discrete elements, but the prior act of determining the values of those discrete elements requires an act of interpretation. In addition, the opposition of the two scripts itself is a circular concept. Raskin groups them into a few larger and seemingly objectively opposite categories like real vs. unreal, normal vs. abnormal, etc. But again this perception of opposition is not self-evident, it requires an act of interpretation which is only valid in certain contexts. For example, a car on the road is real and a car still being designed is unreal, but one would not necessarily say that they are conceptually opposite. So the opposition between the scripts, which is supposed to define the text as humorous, risks being circularly defined as existing precisely when the text is perceived as humorous.

In addition, this definition of humor, by focusing only on the component parts, somewhat resembles the definition of an organism purely by reference to anatomy, a kind of definition which cannot distinguish corpses from living beings. To say that a joke can be interpreted in terms of two opposite scripts is misleading insofar as the effect of a joke often specifically depends on not interpreting ambiguities and plays on words in multiple ways at once, at least not at the same time. What seems to generally happen is that the audience of a joke abruptly moves from one frame of reference to another, and that this triggers the humor. Raskin in fact discusses this phenomenon, calling it a “semantic script-switch trigger,”¹¹⁶ but he seems to see it as primarily serving to reveal the multiple scripts, not as itself constituting the moment of humor. Hence the “semantic script-switch trigger” does not enter into the formal definition of a joke. And thus in turn the SSTH is at base atemporal: the opposition of the scripts is essential to the

116. Ibid., p. 114.

identity of the joke, but not the changing nature of their interaction in the audience's mind over time.

Unlike Kant's incongruity theory, the SSTH emphasizes the epistemological role of humor in the context of a non-linear notion of understanding. For Kant, understanding proceeds along a line from the expectation of knowledge to the fulfillment of that expectation. When that expectation is frustrated, the quest comes to nothing. That sudden, almost violent slackening of tension produces laughter. The SSTH, however, specifically locates humor in a zone of interpretive ambiguity. Here the Kantian binary opposition of knowledge and non-knowledge does not really hold. Laughter is the recognition of the multiple possible interpretations of a word or scenario. As such, humor does not possess the negative connotations from an epistemological point of view that it does in Kant. The positive value of humor for Kant, and Freud as well for that matter, is as a physical refreshment, a sparer of effort. In fact, in Kant this positive role results precisely from humor's uselessness as a source of knowledge, because it constitutes an interlude or respite from the search for it. In the SSTH, on the other hand, the knowledge value of humor is more neutral. It is not defined as a source of knowledge, partly because it defines humor not as a process but as a state: a word, statement or scenario that can be interpreted according to two opposite scripts. Now as this manifests in reality, the recognition of these multiple scripts is often accompanied by an "aha!" moment on the part of the audience in which the mind shifts from one possible script to another, but this is not part of the formal definition of a joke.

We can see in this progression over time an increasing emphasis on humor as closely connected with the act of apprehension and knowing. We can see an increasing tendency to view the perception of humor as a mental movement towards knowledge, which ultimately is repaid with frustration, or at least ambiguity. None of these theorists is willing to concede humor as a genuine act of knowledge. At best, it plays on the emotional process that attends the search for knowledge. And when we think about knowledge in, say, the Kantian sense, it is easy to see the validity of this view. Significant acts of understanding, such as, for example, major scientific discoveries, are rarely seen as humorous *per se*, though their discoverers and even first audiences may well laugh with delight at the first moment of comprehension. By contrast, it generally seems necessary to possess a basic understanding of a situation before it can be found funny. In all of these theories of humor, an element of judgment or weighing, which involves some pre-existing understanding or recognition of the concepts involved, is fundamental. Of course, all new knowledge involves some combination of previously familiar elements combined in an unfamiliar way, but nevertheless, speaking generally, humor relates more to the re-ordering or rearranging of concepts than the synthetic construction a new concept.

One important factor behind this difference is, paradoxically, that a genuinely new concept is perhaps not unfamiliar enough at the moment of its apprehension. Speed is clearly a crucial factor in humor, as humor generally involves a collision of concepts, and the force of that collision is largely determined by speed. For someone to arrive at a genuinely new idea, although the moment when it really comes together may be instantaneous, requires a good deal of prior concentrated thought about the relevant subject. Whereas humor relies on at least one unexpected

element, which, although unexpected given the context, must nonetheless be conceptually familiar enough to be apprehended and evaluated instantaneously.

Of course this does not mean that humor must be understood the instant it is spoken or read to produce an effect--the delayed pause before laughter as the audience struggles to puzzle their way through a joke is a staple of comedy. One can work out a joke even hours or days after it was uttered and find it funny. This makes it similar to the process of genuine intellectual discovery, and in a certain sense it is. There clearly has to be additional work in searching for connections or relationships between the elements of a humorous text for it to be “gotten” long after the fact. But this kind of thought must occur in a very particular way, namely not in the careful, deliberative way which is more characteristic of concept-building. If one attempts to parse humor this way one may well understand it without actually feeling it to be humorous. More often it is necessary to “run through” the joke at the pace and in the manner it was originally delivered in order to perceive its humorous qualities leap out. Humor requires a sense of lightness and fleetingness which the products of deliberative thought generally do not possess.

In the movie *Zero Effect* the Sherlock Holmes-like private investigator Daryl Zero explains his methods to the audience via voice-over: “A few words here about following people: people know they’re being followed when they turn around and see someone following them. They can’t tell they’re being followed if you get there first.” This is a very quiet example of humor, a subtle witticism encasing a serious point. It demonstrates an important point, though. While it is certainly possible to be funny without any element of wit, in a line like this the humor is tightly entwined with an epistemological component. Because, partly conditioned by the type

of detective movies that this film plays off of, audiences are likely to have some mental conception of what tailing a target entails: disguise, concealment, patience, etc., and would expect a successful private detective offering advice on the subject to give some tips on how to apply these principles, such as how to dress and how far back to follow. However, the detective instead reduces the situation down to extreme simplicity, in fact to a seeming redundancy. The line relies on the unexpectedness created by this very stereotype of cat-and-mouse games, and the repetition of words and phrases (“being followed,” “people”), underlines that simplicity.

However, what makes the statement witty is that that very unexpected simplicity forces a reevaluation of the whole framework of the scenario. In other words, the redundantly self-evident statement that a person knows they’re being followed when they see that they’re being followed might resemble a Kantian relaxation, the impulse towards knowledge going slack and disappearing into nothing. But in fact it forces the audience to consider the situation more broadly. Because the assumption in tailing someone generally seems to be that one must follow behind the target in order to observe them, and thus all the mental work goes into concealing one’s own presence. But tailing a target is not the goal in and of itself: observing where they go and what they do is. So if one knows where the target is going or, as in the movie, is in a position of command and can in fact tell them where to go, then one does not need to follow along behind them and risk being detected in order to observe them. One can instead find somewhere discreet at the destination and observe them there. And, as is implied in the scene playing under this voice-over, because of the unorthodoxy of this procedure the target will probably not be expecting it and thus not on the lookout for it. So the apparent mindlessness of the statement

about following is in fact a commentary on the mindlessness of following standard methods, while simultaneously pointing the way towards the possibility of doing things a different way.

As this example demonstrates, a joke or witticism frequently conveys a substantive idea, but this can easily be overlooked because it is generally not conveyed in a direct manner. The first sentence in the monologue above, for example, is not really the tautological idea that it appears to be: instead it is indirectly about the drawbacks of narrowly accepting a conventional procedure, and the corresponding benefits of choosing a more unconventional route to one's goal. But to state that as such would not be ridiculous and hence not funny. There are various nuances to this. For example, the contemporary comedian Norm Macdonald in recent years has become fond of intentionally employing hackneyed, old-fashioned, or anodyne jokes against expectation in his public appearances. In probably the most famous example, the 2008 Comedy Central roast of Bob Saget, instead of writing vulgar, insulting jokes like the other comedians, he copied down jokes from a 1950s book of jokes for retirement parties. This approach, which he later claimed was inspired by an imperative on the part of the producers to be "shocking," ironically skewered the very conventionality of delivering the requisite "shocking" content within this context. In other, the audience that tunes in to watch a Comedy Central roast is expecting exactly this kind of harsh, obscene humor,¹¹⁷ and thus delivering it is in fact the opposite of shocking. What Macdonald demonstrated (or at least the initially befuddled reaction to his jokes did) is that comedy must be unexpected to the audience but only in a certain way, or rather only within the boundaries of a general region of expectation, and that even "shocking"

117. Unless of course they're channel-surfing or substance-impaired and don't know who or what they're watching, which, granted, may comprise a substantial portion of Comedy Central's viewership.

comedy must be shocking in a certain way and about certain subject matter to be deemed acceptable by the audience. The audience and even the other comedians at the roast, not being privy to this line of thought, were at first confused and mostly silent. The comedians caught on fairly soon, and eventually much of the audience did as well, and the jokes started to draw laughter, but it was a slow and visibly consciously mediated process, and probably depended in part on an implicit trust in Macdonald's reputation as a fine comedian. All of which is to say that laughter, while in general a rather instinctive response to stimuli, is shaped by social expectation and conditioning, and is subject to group dynamics and, to a degree, to conscious thought and control. In fact the mechanisms of humor of Macdonald's delivery of "bad" jokes are not so different than to that of good jokes, only the primary incongruity has migrated from within the text of the joke to its context, to the mismatch between the joke and the environment, or between the material and the comedian's relation to it.

But again, it would be too simple to say that Macdonald exposes the conventionality and artifice of comedy by showing how unsuccessful comedy is when it truly surprises an audience by venturing outside of the realm of expectation. Because his anti-humor is not in fact really outside of the realm of conventional comedy. Some comics do specialize in true non sequiturs and dadaist provocations, but the jokes he delivered at the roast were in fact old-fashioned and toothless jokes which in many cases were recycled variations on jokes with a long history. So while Macdonald surprises his audience by violating their expectation-ridden desire for humor, he does so, in a further paradox, precisely by presenting them with humor which is overly-familiar and "safe," and thus has lost whatever spark it ever possessed. His technique is thus

recognizably a form of ironic kitsch, presenting his audience an antiquated caricature in return for their implicit expectations about humor.

This style of comedy clarifies a couple of underlying issues. Principally, it shows that humor is to an extent defined by social context, not only by an assessment of intrinsic quality. In other words, Macdonald's jokes are clearly demarcated as humorous even when no one finds them funny. Ultimately the jokes become a source of ironic laughter precisely because they target the gap that can exist between what is humorous and what is funny. This challenges the intuitive definition of humor that I offered at the beginning of the chapter, as that which provokes laughter. Ultimately this is the necessary foundation of the concept of humor, but, because of the subjective nature of the perception of humor, it is unable to embody it in every instance. While the audience's perception of humor must define it in the end, as a practical matter a work cannot merely be defined retroactively. In other words, performers and writers seek to create humor without knowing in advance whether audiences will react to it as intended. And sometimes their attempts fail. And Macdonald illustrates that there is ultimately no sure means of creating humor. A joke can fail precisely because it was successful in the past and is thus too familiar. Humor is always uncertain because it depends on surprise and is consequently always a leap into the unknown. So a joke can clearly, because of the recognizable elements of a joke (set-up, punchline, etc.), be defined as pertaining to the category of humor, even as it fails to accomplish the essence of humor (making people laugh).

But because of this familiarity, the unfamiliarity and surprise of Macdonald's technique has limits. His method is not like that of a true absurdist, like Andy Kaufman's, whose strange

antics and provocations were genuinely unrecognizable to much of his audience as comedy. Macdonald is dissecting the issue of recognizability in comedy rather than challenging it, like Kaufman. When Macdonald delivers a cheesy, antiquated joke, audiences can still laugh even though they do not find it funny. Why they do this is another matter. Probably everyone has had the experience of laughing at something they do not find funny, either because they were expecting something funny and do not want to admit their disappointment and lack of enjoyment, or because those around them are and they do not want to be left out or appear not to understand or appreciate the humor. Or, as previously suggested, maybe it becomes a second-order joke where the humor derives not from the content of the joke but from the incongruity between the delivery and the material, or even at the expense of the performer. Macdonald, who has spoken elsewhere of an interest in and even enjoyment of “bombing,” clearly heightened the laughing-at-not-with dynamic of the situation by leaving lengthy pauses after each joke, as if the punchlines were brilliant and he was leaving extra room for prolonged laughter. Instead, the silences were filled with scattered, tepid laughter. The effect was only diminished by the fact that he couldn’t (or perhaps he didn’t really want to) truly conceal his ironic enjoyment at this additional incongruity.

In any case, in a comedic performance that is presented as such, the audience understands the nature of what is being presented by them, and though confusion may surround the reason why it is being presented, the situation is still clearer than one of the performances where Kaufman would stand in front of the audience and read from a novel or stand silently, playing a record. There the audience did not, for the most part, understand what he was doing in any but

the most basic sense. To understand Kaufman's gestures, if they meant anything, would seem to require new concepts about comedy, and the lack of laughter they elicited thus testifies to the general indigestibility of synthetically new ideas in comedy. Macdonald's recital of hackneyed jokes, which draws at least some laughter, only tends to increase awareness of the context and nature of the performance. In short, comedy that provokes laughter generally tends to produce a new level of awareness rather than synthetically new ideas.

The essence of this distinction is that a new concept insofar as it is new, while composed of pre-existing elements is perceived as new unitary whole, whereas humor, with its implicit comparative judgment, requires that the separateness of the elements involved still be felt on a visceral level. The whole basis of humor insofar as it involves incongruity is that the elements do not fit together, so naturally they cannot truly merge in the creation of a synthetic concept. Of course sometimes comedic conceits become widely accepted as new concepts--the "catch-22" which we have discussed already would be an excellent example. But this merely suggests that humor and knowledge might be different stages in a single mental process rather than separate forms of perception. Upon first apprehension, "catch-22" exists primarily as a disjunction between logical, reasonable-sounding but totally unreconcilable premises. When blank absurdity is replaced by a mental contextualization of it as a symbol for how modern bureaucracies work, it becomes a piece of knowledge, but ceases to be humor, to the point where a reader of *Catch-22* today may in fact find the titular joke to be the least funny element in the novel, simply because of its familiarity.

The essential separateness and difference between two objects, which is essential to humor, is sometimes concealed by the fact that the most obvious element in a joke is often connecting two seemingly unrelated objects. Innuendo, double-entendres and the rest all use some element of similarity in shape, sound, etc. to link otherwise different objects. Because of this, it might seem that the essence of the joke is connection, not difference. But in fact that connection rarely results in a merging of the two objects--rather, it ropes them into proximity in order to make their incongruous juxtaposition all the more evident. This is where Freud's notion of humor as an energy-saving gesture seems to make the most sense. Linked together, the mind can flit back and forth between them and compare them with the rapidity which is essential to comedy.

To take a simplistic (and ever-popular) example, take the vast array of objects popular solely for their purported phallic properties. One of the striking things about this category is how the most popular examples, for example a cucumber or the Washington Monument, are really not particularly phallic. They are both long and slender, of course, but the likeness is rather meager compared with objects truly intended to look phallic, like a dildo. But the latter has a much more limited comedic potential precisely because its intense similarity means it really has little function outside of a sexual context. A cucumber or the Washington Monument can be viewed, discussed or touched in a perfectly innocent manner (though perhaps not when teenagers are present), and thus sexual meanings can be smuggled disjunctively into a variety of non-sexual contexts. Perhaps we can say, then, that difference is essential to comedy; similarity is not necessarily so, but it can serve as a form of proximity, which is certainly essential.

What is the significance of all of this for the discussion of the comic novel? The central point, in light of the collage of historical theories of humor mentioned above, is the *instantaneous evaluation* which is present in some form in all of them. A feeling of humor is at once an act of judgment, a form of knowing and a recognition of difference. All of these occur with an explosive instinctiveness. So humor not only possesses an underlying rapidity and brevity, but also an implicit analytical bent. This is perhaps why Cicero, for example, believed that comedy was not possible with respect to subjects about which the comic artist or audience feels too strongly. In other words, emotional investment impedes the perception of humor. And indeed, as has been discussed, an enlargement of awareness is characteristic of the perception of humor, and of course intense emotion tends to narrow or cloud ones' general level of awareness, even if it may sharpen it with regard to certain specific objects.

Thus, in turn, a certain detachment is also characteristic of comedy. This may seem strange, since laughter is such an intensely visceral response. However, humor frequently serves to create distance or separation between subject and object. In fact, the energy and violence contained in laughter may even serve to push them farther apart. This is particularly evident in harsh satires such as *Catch-22* and *Moskva-Petushki*, where both author and audience requires a heavy emotional anesthetization in order to liberate them enough from the violent and tyrannical systems which the novels describe in order to reduce those systems to the level of laughability. In other words, in order for them to be seen as absurd they must be reduced in size. This reduction occurs principally in the feelings of fear that they inspire. In other words, the terror of death and confinement must be diminished in order for the stupidity and nonsensicality underpinning

organized systems of death and confinement to become apparent. And the laughter that this reduction in size and fearfulness may itself serve to help inoculate the mind against backsliding into a feeling of intimidation before them.

As such, the comic novel tends to be implicitly rather than overtly analytical. Because of the importance of brevity and concision in humor, the analysis is largely indirect and implied, but the act of laughter in itself implies analysis and judgment. In Bakhtin and Lukács's theories of the novel, the novel is distinguished from poetry by its prosaic quality, by the preponderance of the analytical over the emotional, by detail, discursiveness and less rigid formal characteristics. However, comedy, with the slight detachment and hyper-awareness that it induces, primes its audience in advance for the kind of analytical mindset that does not require that every detail be spelled out. Of course, the degree of nuance is limited in comedy, because a string of laughter-provoking humorous moments basically represents a string of snap judgments. Emotional range too is limited by that detachment. Hence the phrase "comic relief," with the implied break from overly strong feelings, and the fact that while humor is present, evenly strongly present, in many narrative works, works seen to be principally defined by humor have been traditionally ghettoized into the genre of comedy. Even in Shakespeare's mixing of comic characters into historical and tragic plays, those characters, like Lear's fool or the porter from *Macbeth*, are isolated from the others in some way or explicitly marked as unimportant. When such characters presume to exercise importance and influence, like Sir John Falstaff, they become dangerous, and Prince Harry's imprisonment of Sir John at the end of *Henry IV* could be seen as one of the more drastic attempts to quarantine the contamination of the courtly milieu of tragedy and

history by the anarchy and lack of gravitas characteristic of comedy. And of course in this marginalization there are clear class implications, and (and sometimes racial ones as well--cf Caliban, not to mention the traditional at least perceived preponderance of black and Jewish performers in American comedy).

Yet in the 20th century this barrier has been erased. On the one hand, literature in the 20th century has seen the development of the concepts of witness and testimony as ethical imperatives, along with their shadow obverse, unspeakability. Thus, if an ethical obligation exists to record injustice and suffering, this belief is complemented by the idea that some sufferings simply transcend language and cannot be captured by it. So where in Shakespeare comedy was frequently employed as a necessary palliative to the grimness of tragedy before and after its occurrence, in the 20th century, when dealing with traumas on the scale of war and totalitarianism comedy may be seen to be necessary simply in order to bring them within the bounds of the utterable. In other words, these realities must be lightened simply in order to become speakable.

This is not to say that comic absurdity is constantly employed with respect to the historical tragedies in *Catch-22*, *Moskva-Petushki*, et al. As mentioned before, certain episodes in *Catch-22*, like the death of Snowden and the occupation of Rome, are described with little comedic affect. *Moskva-Petushki*, whose narrator literally dies within the walls of the Kremlin, could hardly be said to be unconcerned with socio-political realities, but it never engages with them directly, in whatever tone. *Le Sabotage amoureux* even makes a point of explaining why it does not deal more in the heavy realities circumscribing its milieu. But, where in Shakespeare

comedy served as a stabilizing agent, framing tragedy and placing limits on it, in these works comedy is the product of the displacement of tragedy, which fills the void created by its unspeakability.

Comedy only complements unspeakability, but by its very nature it also tends to respect and validate the concept. A certain kind of unspeakability in fact is intrinsic to comedy, with its frequent reliance on indirect communication, allusion and double meanings. To take *Catch-22*, for example, with its self-contradictory regulations, silly officers' names, and quasi-vaudeville routine set pieces, it tends to both exaggerate and soft-peddle the experience of war. When Milo Minderbinder attempts to use up his excess supplies of cotton by slipping them into the soldiers' food, for example, this functions as a commentary on the quality of war rations as well as on war profiteering, but not of course as an earnest attempt to describe the taste of that food or the experience of eating it. Of course this is one aspect of war where unspeakability as an emotional obstacle or ethical imperative would presumably not be relevant, but indirection is still of the essence for its comedic function. Because a straightforward description of soldiers' rations would not be a joke. It is precisely the implausibility on the literal level which is nonetheless justified by a certain not totally implausible comedic logic that makes for its effectiveness as a humorous exaggeration. Of course sometimes humor results from straightforward, direct statement or description--the afore-mentioned Norm Macdonald being a frequent exemplar. But that in itself usually occurs within a comedic context where an expectation of irony or sarcasm exists.

Comedy, with its inclination towards awareness over knowledge, has a long history of developing techniques for signifying realities without attempting to embody them, which

dovetails well with certain modern philosophical preoccupations. Of course all of the central works for my analysis are 20th century novels, and it would be misleading to suggest that comedy is some kind of timeless tradition which just happens to converge with certain strands of recent thought. The art form, and its practitioners, are of course themselves evolving in response to these ideas. These works update the old genre of the comic journey narrative, but with a difference. Many classic comic journey narratives, *Don Quijote*, *Tom Jones*, the picaresque novel, etc. present characters who may not have any particular destination, but their movement is defined by forward motion. While they may have no ultimate destination, they have many accidental destinations or stopping-points along the way. In Heller, Céline and Erofeev the protagonists are to varying degrees in flight from some dark reality behind them. Yossarian in *Catch-22* is most clearly so--the novel ends with him fleeing from a knife-wielding prostitute, and a fleeing soldier is even depicted on the first edition's cover. Bardamu flees jobs, responsibilities and the threat of death on three different continents before finally sinking into a job at a slum medical practice in Paris. Both Venichka's elliptical journeys around Moscow and his attempted train ride to Petushki can equally be seen as futile attempts to flee the ominous menace of the Kremlin. Nothomb's narrator is not really in flight, but only because the very boundaries of the narrative are set by the length of her stay in China, and within China there is nowhere to possibly run to outside of the walled diplomatic compound. So partly what allows the comedic lightness of tone in writing about war and dictatorship is the relative weightlessness of the characters' lives created by their own constant attempts to flee the unpleasant realities that define their situations. Yossarian's narrative does not linger on the atrocities occurring around

him because it follows him and he himself as a character basically consists of a sustained attempt to evade them. Venichka spends almost the whole novel on a train, which, while as emblematic a symbol of Soviet life as any, esconces him from its reality through the illusion of hope which all journeys partake of in some measure.

The comic novel is also, as has been previously mentioned, one governed by a sense of the future. The pay-off or punch line of a joke generally passes much more quickly than the set-up or lead-in. Extrapolated to the length of a novel, much more of the narrative will elapse in the lead-up to humor than in pay-off of it. Of course much that occurs even in the funniest novels is not specifically comedic, or even when it is it may not be classifiable according to the classic joke form. Nonetheless, we can see that anticipation as a state of being is a very important structural component of a comic novel and a major part of the experience of reading one. As such, the comic novel is almost uniquely oriented toward the future, not the future in general or some futuristic world or society, but to some coming moment which will repay the expectation of humor. And of course the future itself is in a way ultimately unspeakable because unknown. To be oriented towards the future is to be oriented towards the unspeakable, not unspeakable due to ethical concerns or the inadequacy of language, at least not necessarily, but unspeakable simply because it has not occurred yet and hence cannot be articulated, and once it is, the comedic audience no longer holds the same relationship to it--their anticipation has moved on to the next moment. It is similar to the distinction between the revolutionary and post-revolutionary state that we have discussed earlier, how a state ceases to be revolutionary even when the institutions and relations that emerge during the revolution remain the same, because they no longer exist in

the same context or hold the same meaning. They now represent a new order, rather than the dissolution and lack of order that prevails during the revolution itself.

But expectation in comedy must be considered in a certain way. On the one hand, comedy, like the horror and erotica genres, is predictable in that it is oriented around producing a specific, physical, semi-involuntary response, in this case laughter. Not that every comedic work is intended to be a knee-slapper, any more than the presence of an erotic element in art is always intended to lead directly to an orgasm, but laughter is the substrate or the foundation of the audience response to comedy. This association of humor with laughter in turn lends a sense of objectivity to the perception of humor. In other words, people will say “that’s funny” or “that’s just funny” with a confidence in the objectivity and self-evidence of that response, even if they did not actually physically laugh out loud. On the other hand, if comedy is in general quite predictable in terms of intended output, the specific response it intends to provoke, laughter (although of course that is not to say that it is only intended to provoke laughter), input must be unpredictable, because if a joke is known or guessed at in advance it will not be effective. In fact, in a sense it is the almost mechanical nature of the former that necessitates the latter. Because humor must strike so viscerally to be genuine, in order to cut through the mediation of conscious thought and reflection, it requires the force of unexpectedness.

The structuration of comedy towards the future tends to make all of present reality seem like a preparation or a lead-up. In this sense it is not surprising that Venichka never makes it to Petushki, and Yossarian never makes it to Sweden, and Bardamu does not in the end really succeed in escaping at all. Though their journeys are unconsummated, they are also unfinished,

meaning they could be taken up later and continued. Even some of Shakespeare's comedies employed not merely a *deus ex machina* device to resolve strands of the plot, but actually reach outside of the framework of the story itself to conclude with a purely formal structural resolution like a song, a "masque," or a direct address to the audience by one of the characters, in order to provide a tonal resolution. Endings are rarely happy, or funny, and thus a certain logic of comedy itself dictates indefinite prolongation of a story. The basic mood of comedy is anticipation, which inherently runs counter to resolution. Nothing can ever really be certain in comedy, because certainty precludes surprise. This extends to characterization, which will be the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Comedy and Character

In *The Irresponsible Self*, James Wood outlines a concept he identifies in certain comic works and which he calls “a kind of tragicomic stoicism which might best be called the comedy of forgiveness. This comedy can be distinguished--if a little roughly--from the comedy of correction. The latter is a way of laughing at; the former a way of laughing with.”¹¹⁸ This dichotomy is then associated with a chronological dichotomy: “Most comedy before the rise of the novel is Aristotelian in nature...modern tragicomedy, the comedy of forgiveness, is almost the inversion of the Aristotelian idea. It is almost entirely the creation of the modern novel.”¹¹⁹ The reason for this is that “it exchanges typology or stable knowledge for the uncertainty of incomplete knowledge.”¹²⁰ By the Aristotelian idea, he presumably means Aristotle’s notion in the *Poetics* that laughter in comedy ensues from the sight of the lowly, the unattractive or the contemptible. As we have discussed, for both Plato and Aristotle laughter does not represent an epistemological event, a coming to understanding or awareness of something, but rather the application of already existing understanding. This is what Wood means by the “stable knowledge” encoded in Aristotle’s conception of comedy.

By contrast, Wood offers a concept, or at least a category of comedy centered on characters that cannot be as readily apprehended and understood, or perhaps more than that a general attitude that other people cannot be fully or completely understood. What he calls the comedy of forgiveness is concentrated around “the irresponsible self,” the Bakhtinian notion that given the richness of reality and the limitations of our perspective we cannot ever fully know

118. James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel*, Picador, 2004, p. 6.

119. *Ibid.*, p. 7-8.

120. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

others, and because of that, cannot judge them. Their personalities always exceed our evaluative criteria. In light of the awareness of the limits of any one perspective, comedies of forgiveness offer sympathy rather than judgment, forgiveness rather than condemnation. The first example Wood gives of this type of comedy is a London poet in a pub who, upon expressing his lack of pleasure at drinking, is told: “Well, none of us *likes* it.”¹²¹ According to Wood, the important points concerning this witticism are three. First, comedy is created by a fairly standard reversal of expectations: “There is comedy in the inversion of the usual idea that drinking is fun and voluntary. [Here] drinking has become unpleasant but unavoidable, one of life’s burdens.” An additional inversion from the way in which “singular novelty is passed off as general wisdom...when it is almost the opposite of the truth.”¹²² In other words, the speaker treats this counter-intuitive proclamation as a truism that hardly need be uttered. Underneath lies in fact a layer of truth, “the grim truth of alcoholism, which of course is indeed a state in which drinkers may not much like alcohol but cannot release themselves from it.”¹²³ So read one way the statement sounds absurd, but read another it is more or less factual. Of course, by employing the collective “us,” the speaker is narrowing self-identification down to the hard-core drinkers who drink out of compulsion, and at the same time implicitly including his interlocutor in that category, and in this way instantly creates the impression of “an alternative community,” the habitual drinkers.

If any of these points were spelled out the humor would be lost. If the speaker explained who is meant by “us” or why one drinks if one does not enjoy it, it would lose the sense of wit

121. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

122. *Ibid.*

123. *Ibid.*

that ensues from a wealth of implication generated from such a brief statement, as well as the humorous incongruities. All of these aspects are germane to the techniques of humor that have previously been discussed, and none is dependent on the “forgiving” quality of the humor. The notion of forgiveness in a comedic work seems somewhat strange, even within the context of a Greek-influenced ethical value judgment-laden discussion of comedy. Of course, characters in a comedy are not real, and their transgressions, such as they are, are not directed against the audience, so it’s not entirely clear how forgiveness is to be offered. But even in this example, which is ostensibly taken from real life, it is not clear who is being forgiven and how. Is the pub habitué forgiving themselves for being an alcoholic? Their interlocutor for the same? While the reversal of expectations in this sentence is clear and apparent, to interpret it in terms of “forgiveness” or “sympathy” requires making a lot of assumptions about the attitudes and motives of the speakers. Wood contrasts the “comedy of forgiveness” with the “comedy of correction,” where comedy is used as an arm of morality by making sin and vice appear ridiculous and laughable. Although the speaker implicates himself in drinking compulsively, but no character in fiction is more self-implicating about excessive drinking than Marmeladov in *Crime and Punishment*, and his character was explicitly conceived for the sake of promoting temperance. True, Marmeladov did not joke about his alcoholism, but Wood has himself acknowledged that humor can be used to promote moralistic aims. So we see a strong contrast between the clear, immediately apprehensible nature of the joke, and the vagueness and elusiveness of the ethical interpretation of the joke. It might well be that it was offered in the pub in the forgiving spirit that Wood describes, but, especially given our previous discussion about

the suddenness with which the perception of humor manifests, it is hard to see this possibly forgiving spirit as substantially or distinctively contributing to the humorous effect. At least in isolation, the ethical interpretation of it says more about the listener's assumptions and values than the speaker's.

Another example of what Wood has in mind is a moment in *I Served the King of England* that he cites in his essay on Bohumil Hrabal in which the main character,

“who has become rich, is outraged to hear that the Communists have arrested all the millionaires in the country but have somehow overlooked him. Since he has always wanted nothing more than to be a millionaire, he goes to the police...to argue that he should be immediately taken in.”¹²⁴

This is a more clearly benign incongruity, since the character's greed and ambition take such an unusually self-sacrificing turn. Because he is acting ultimately from a selfish motive but at the same time not hurting anyone else and in fact sacrificing himself, he seems absurd rather than noble or depraved. But the incongruity/reversal would still be the same even were he acting from different motives. Granting the subjectivity of humor, it seems that we could perhaps say through analogy that the quantity of humor in the jokes that Wood cites is one thing, and the quality, whether satirical or sympathetic, is another.

Wood claims that in comedies of forgiveness “a sympathy that the reader has prepared is blocked by a comic occurrence, and transferred onto a matter of secondary importance...just because one's sympathy is blocked and transferred...it does not cease to be sympathy. On the contrary, sympathy is intensified by its blockage.”¹²⁵ But while Wood identifies this strain of

124. Ibid., p. 155.

125. Ibid., p. 15-16.

sympathy within the comic tradition, and even suggests a method by which comedy can serve to heighten that sympathy, he does not indicate this sympathy to be fundamental to comedy *per se*. In other words, sympathy is clearly not a necessary quality of all comedy, since there is an unsympathetic, “corrective” branch of comedy, nor clearly intrinsic to the humor even in “comedies of forgiveness.” He himself suggests as much when he writes that these novels “are softly witty but...may never elicit an actual laugh.”¹²⁶ Of course it may be said that this softening of humor itself constitutes the essence of comedy of forgiveness, which is a valid position to take. So long as it is understood that it is not some uniquely forgiving quality which produces laughter, but rather that it conditions the overall response, of which laughter is one part.

Wood sees the emergence of “comedy of forgiveness” as intrinsically connected with the rise of the novel, and embodies novelistic qualities not dissimilar from those theorized by Bakhtin and Lukács: the emphasis on individual detail rather than general types, understanding rather than judgment. One could say that the muting of jokes in favor of “realistic” detail is analogous to the priority of content over form that Lukács perceives in the novel in contrast to poetry. So in essence Wood is creating a genre out of the subset of comic novels that do not deviate fundamentally from the aesthetic of the non-comic novel. However, Wood himself implies that in order for the “comedy of forgiveness” to remain under the aegis of the realistic novel it has to mute and soften the comedy to the point where it is only just comic--the hybridized, borderline status of this sub-genre is suggested by the very term “tragicomedy.”

Clearly this distinction is meant to be invidious, as he contrasts these tragicomedies witheringly with “‘comic novels,’ novels which correspond to the man who comes up to you and

126. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

says, ‘Have you heard the one about...?’”¹²⁷ And indeed such a dichotomy is somewhat inevitable when comic novels are judged by the same standards of psychological roundedness and “realistic” detail as non-comic novels. But if the aesthetic criterion one employs towards an art form leads to a dismissal *en bloc* of a whole sub-category of that form, then that standard is not capacious enough to capture the full range of virtues of that form. *Catch-22*, for example, is clearly not intended to be either a realistic or a psychologically rounded portrait of its subjects. One could not positively assess the characteristics of lyric poetry by the narrative standards of, say, *The Iliad*, but a lyric poem is no less a poem than an epic is. Wood validates a certain type of comic novel, or novel with comic elements, by showing its ability to exemplify aesthetic values of the non-comic novel, but by delimiting this type of novel within the larger category of comic novels, he inadvertently shows the limited scope of these non-comic novelistic qualities within the genre of comedy.

Particularly essential for Wood is realism with respect to the depiction of character. In an essay on what he calls the trend of “hysterical realism” in contemporary novels full of exaggerated comic details, he objects not to the lack of surface realism per se, but claims instead that:

“these recent novels are full of *inhuman stories*...They are not stories in which people defy the laws of physics...they are stories which defy the laws of persuasion. This is what Aristotle means when he says that in storytelling a ‘convincing impossibility’ (a man levitating, say) is always preferable to ‘an unconvincing possibility’ (say, the possibility that a fundamentalist in London would continue to call itself KEVIN).”¹²⁸

127. Ibid., p. 5.

128. Ibid., p. 181.

This distinction seems to rest on the assumption that realism with respect to the external world is not essential, realism with respect to internal motivation is. But it is questionable whether Zadie Smith, the creator of this Kevin-titled fundamentalist organization, intended it to be “realistic” in the way that Wood demands. And absent such an intent, all this detail tells us is that we are not in a literary world of strict realism.

Wood’s view on the presentation of character seems premised in a general way on a view not unlike that attributed by Henry James, in his Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, to Turgenev: “I’m often accused of not having ‘story’ enough. I seem to myself to have as much as I need--to show my people, to exhibit their relations to each other; for that is all my measure.” The notion that the story should ultimately serve to reveal character has deep roots in the theatrical tradition behind the closed-universe novel. In the theater there can be no lyrical moments bereft of characters, nor an endless procession of new characters throughout. The characters in a play acquire an inherent centrality partly to the simple fact that they must be limited in number and always present. And these priorities have expanded beyond the theater. Even *The Odyssey* has been depreciated, dating back at least as far as Longinus, relative to *The Iliad* for its perceived emphasis on novelty and strangeness at the expense of portraying human character and conflict. But what if, instead of the environment of the novel serving to reveal characters’ personalities, the characters served to illustrate the environment, or in the case of the narrating voices, to create it?

In the case of novels like *Catch-22* and *Moskva-Petushki*, the degradation of individual personalities crushed by their environment is in fact one of the subjects of the narrative. To

criticize the characters of *Catch-22* for being depicted as depthless automatons would be simply to criticize the effect carefully cultivated by the novel itself. Wood sees “corrective” comedy as an outgrowth of a pre-modern belief in types and modes of character and behavior rather than true human uniqueness and individuality, and the ultimate goal of a conception as being the punishment and correction of individual foibles. But in these 20th century novels, where the individual is opposed to totalitarian power structures, the flatness and caricatured nature of the individual may not be a sign of revulsion at the individual but rather a depiction and a mark of the violence done to their personality. Satire sometimes attacks not individuals but the power structures that oppress them, and conversely, celebrations of individual humanity under such conditions may encourage complacency. As Brodsky writes in “Catastrophes in the Air,” on the subject of the dilemmas regarding the depiction of mass tragedy in 20th century Russian literature:

“No matter how devastating one’s indictment of the political system may be, its delivery always comes wrapped in the sprawling cadences of *fin de siècle* religious humanist rhetoric...The human being is always extolled, his innate goodness is always regarded as the guarantee of the ultimate defeat of evil. Resignation is always a virtue and a welcome subject, if only because of the infinity of its examples.”¹²⁹

This “*fin de siècle* religious humanist rhetoric” is, as he writes, left behind it

“a legacy...of justifying the existential order on the highest, preferably ecclesiastical, plane...ascribing to Divine Providence the most dismal occurrences and making them automatically subject to human forgiveness. The trouble with this otherwise appealing attitude is that it’s fully shared by the secret police as well.”¹³⁰

129. Brodsky, p. 274.

130. Ibid., p. 275.

Brodsky here makes two points. The first, which is not so different in its way from that of, say, the Frankfurt School, is that social realities and ideologies become encoded in registers and styles of language. The second is that the dominant style in mainstream 20th century Russian literature, at least up to the point at which he was writing, was shaped in particular by an ideology that encouraged quietude and non-resistance. Where similar virtues of calmness and reconciliation are seen by James Wood to be positive, where the assumption is that the social status quo is basically tolerable, under conditions like the Soviet regime this may function to support oppression. P.G. Wodehouse, the creator of mild English farces and comedies of manners, was criticized severely, after being captured by the Nazis during World War II, for consenting to make broadcasts for them in which, while he certainly did not propagandize overtly, he continued to apply his gentle sense of irony to describing wartime conditions, which under the circumstances appeared to exert a narcotizing effect over the audience. But the issue is not of his relative personal culpability relative to the Nazis, but rather the limitations of his aesthetic to deal with a world in which they rule.

Nor is this an exception exclusive to the totalitarian states: Heller and Céline show the presence of the absurd and monstrous to be equal in the wartime military and colonial spheres. Or slavery, as is discussed at length by Glenda Carpio in *Laughter Fit to Kill*, which examines various responses by black comic artists to the legacy of slavery in America. One of the work's central concerns, in fact, is the issue of exaggeration and caricature in comedy, specifically that of stereotypes. Naturally, stereotypes represent a particularly charged form of exaggeration and caricature, especially with respect to the race and history in America. The central issue for Carpio

is that, while demeaning stereotypes about slaves and their descendants undoubtedly originated in a hostile, oppressive discourse in the white community, they have by no means only been employed in that context. Just as with certain demeaning terms, they have entered into the black community and been appropriated by black people. The issue now, though, and Carpio's starting point, is that, as George Houston Bass observed in 1991:

“Many of the comic characters, comic devices, and forms of laughter that were sources of renewal and release within the black community before 1960 are now inhibited by the politics of race and gender. Forms of parody and self-parody which were once a way of dealing with stress and pain of a bad situation and finding a way to change it are now quite often viewed as assaults and insults.”¹³¹

Much of Carpio's work is an attempt at a more open-minded analysis of the use of stereotypes by black artists in producing comedy sympathetic to the victims of slavery and racism.

The artists' reasons for employing such stereotypes, and the function they are intended to serve in racial discourse, are ultimately enigmatic, especially in the non-verbal arts, of which Carpio discusses several examples. For example, she discusses at length a pastiche by the artist Robert Colescott of the famous Emanuel Leutze painting *George Washington Crossing the Delaware* entitled *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: A Page from American History*. In place of the heroic figures of Washington and his men in the Continental Army, Colescott fills the boat in his painting with an array of degrading minstrel show archetypes. They appear to be the obverse of the mythical figures of the original painting. The painting engages directly with distorted perceptions in a way that a realistic portrayal of African-Americans would

131. Glenda Carpio, *Laughter Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 21.

not. As we saw with Nothomb, realist conventions of art tend to assume that interpretation must be built upon the careful accumulation of detail. But Nothomb, guided by a more succinct comic aesthetic, recognizes that the countless details that every person experiences in everyday life by no means necessarily prevent them from falling into biased, one-sided, superficial interpretations of the reality that surrounds them. Quite the contrary. So when it comes to describing an extremely complex phenomenon like, say, Maoist China, rather than allowing her interpretation to be conditioned or even implicit in mountains of detail, she simply goes straight to the interpretation and leaves out the details.

Similarly, generations of Americans have encountered the complex humanity of black people and still allowed themselves to accept demeaning stereotypes. Colescott goes directly to that level of interpretation and depicts it rather than attempting to portray an underlying objective reality. What function this depiction serves, though, is by no means self-evident. Even some of the artists that Carpio discusses, like Richard Pryor and Dave Chappelle, have had second thoughts later in life about appropriating racist stereotypes and terminology, with significant repercussions on their subsequent careers. So we can say in sum that stereotypes cannot be presumed to possess any fixed *a priori* meaning, particularly when used in an ironic comic work, and that the meaning and context of that use may be fluid and change over time even for the creating artists.

But while the agendas of those employing stereotypes in humor are widely varying, that use seems to possess a persistent allure. Surely there must some other quality that helps to explain that constancy. While it is natural that socially conscious artists who employ stereotypes

in their work would wish to frame this usage in the context of, and even as motivated by a political project, at the same time, when, say, Dave Chappelle himself cannot decide whether this is serving progressive or reactionary ends, it seems likely that the philosophical explanation is to some extent an interpretation rather than the inspiration for the practice. And while at the time Carpio's book was published Chappelle had only recently left *Chappelle's Show* and gone on hiatus from comedy, he has since returned, and stereotypes still retain an important role in his new act.

To begin, it helps to remember that stereotypes are a sub-category of caricature, which are an eternal source of comedy. Stereotypes have the effect of reducing complex characters into a single unvarying characteristic. Whether complimentary or derogatory, they turn complexity into simplicity and eliminate individual agency. If Bergson is right that comedy ensues when life is rendered somehow mechanical, then one can see how it could be of manifest usefulness to a comic scenario to have characters reduced to a single dependable function, like parts of a machine. Carpio refers to Bergson several times in connection with people becoming things through comedy; for example, "rather than produce humor by emphasizing the mechanicalness of the body, as in Bergson's theory of humor, Pryor relies on the *elasticity* of his frame and his voice to conjure stereotypes,"¹³² or "Henry...changes between the suppleness of youth and the rigidity of old age...suggesting the image of a human being caught in a machine that accelerates the cycle of life and death."¹³³ However, she seems to be interpreting Bergson's theory according to an narrow conception of human physical bodies literally turning into machines. But that would

132. Ibid., p. 76.

133. Ibid., p. 56.

be an overly literal reading: a racial stereotype really is a machine that takes in the perception of a whole human being and converts it, with the efficiency of a computer program, into a simple pre-conceived notion. The stereotyped pimps on *Chappelle's Show* represent known quantities that can be plugged into various comedic formulae just as reliably as pickaniny characters in minstrel shows. The comedy results from the unpredictable combinations and juxtapositions that these known quantities can be put into. This has been a technique ever since the stock characters of the *commedia dell'arte*, and even before that, to ancient Rome and Greece and probably beyond. The politically charged nature of stereotypes should not obscure the underlying comedic principles that inform their use.

What stereotypes and caricatures offer within a comedic dynamic is the stability of a pre-digested concept, whose value and nature can be instantly apprehended, so that when put into comedic and unexpected comic scenarios the result, the juxtapositions and incongruities, will also be readily apprehensible. In fact, one could say that something untrue or misplaced has to exist at some level for comedic incongruity to manifest. Frequently in stereotype-based humor that untruth exists at the level of primary reality: the characters really do conform to the stereotype. Other times, the stereotype exists in characters' minds. Trickster stories, from *The Good Soldier Svejk* to the Brer' Rabbit stories popular amongst American slaves, which Carpio discusses, and much further back, frequently involve the trickster character both exploiting and undermining other characters' preconceptions of them by manipulating those perceptions consciously.

One of the most important and influential forms of the trickster archetype in the history of the Western novel is the picaresque novel. The picaresque novel is clearly an emanation of oral folk culture. Even the dialect in which the characters in the original Spanish picaresques speak was a spoken slang that did not previously exist in written culture, although of course these were not the first works to introduce slang into literary texts. When scholars or critics refer to *Don Quijote* as the first “true” novel, it is easy to forget to what an extent this claim is based on value judgment. *Lazarillo de Tormes* appeared decades before *Don Quijote*, to say nothing of long prose narratives from the pre-Renaissance or non-Western world. If then *Don Quijote* is taken to be the original prototype of the novel on aesthetic grounds, it should be no surprise if what are called novels in general tend to reflect its values and characteristics. The most immediately apparent characteristic of Don Quijote is how he defines himself as an individual against his environment by refusing to accept it, albeit in what may at least initially seem a crude and sweeping fashion. This refusal is manifest even on the material level of the armor and lance he carries through the peasant and commercial world that surrounds him. That attitude could not be more different from the heroes of picaresque novels, of whom Robert Alter writes, “the picaroon is not a rebel--either against society, or against the traditional body of faith by which society explains the world order...Indeed, his progress depends upon the stability of the social hierarchy.”¹³⁴ This condition goes so far that “the picaresque imagination is peculiarly an imagination that can make out nothing beyond the scope of the status quo.”¹³⁵ Thus, the *pícaro* becomes a kind of *reductio ab absurdum* of the ways of the world: after an initial period of

134. Robert Alter, *Rogue's Progress: Studies in the Picaresque Novel*, Harvard University Press, 1964, p. 5.

135. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

naïveté which is not so much innocent as simply inexperienced, the *pícaro* derives certain principles of how society actually operates and then applies them so unquestioningly and relentlessly as to become utterly materialistic and cynical. Alter sees another advantage, deriving from the picaresque novels' first-person narrative perspective, in the *pícaro*'s lack of critical stance toward social customs: "If the picaro rejected society or rebelled against it, if he took to the hills instead of the road, he would not be interested in society's workings or in its corruptions."¹³⁶ In other words, as the first-person narrator, the *pícaro* inadvertently satirizes society not only through his actions but through his observations, and so a certain attitude of acceptance, or at least awareness, is necessary in order to register that society's workings.

So one could say that the *pícaro* merges with his environment to the point of personifying it, dramatizing its customs and shortcomings. It is simply not part of the character or agenda of the *pícaros* to attempt to define themselves in opposition to social norms. Rather, Lazarillo de Tormes, Guzmán de Alfarache and el Buscón are all born outsiders, the children of criminals of dubious non-Spanish or non-Catholic ancestry who are desperately attempting to insert themselves into the flow of society. So many of the critical questions asked in the portrayal of character in novels today, such as how the character is individualized, how the character develops over time, and how the character is defined by inter-personal relationships, are simply less relevant to the concerns and aesthetic of the picaresque novel than they are to a story like *Don Quijote*. Whereas Don Quijote's extreme eccentricity and lack of acceptance of immediate reality has allowed him to be elevated to a universal emblem of imagination and individuality, and hence a fitting origin figure for the modern novel, the *pícaros* are quite the opposite. If their

136. Ibid., p. 15.

characters seem strange and overly malleable, it is because they are consummately pragmatic, able to detach the ends they wish to attain almost entirely from the means they go about obtaining them by, and thus slip from one persona and form of behavior in a strange chameleon-like way. However, perhaps even to discuss them in this way, as a stable character type, is somewhat misleading, based on the assumption that the personality of a narrative protagonist will be coherent and the basic generator of the incidents that happen in his or her story. To speak of the personality of the *pícaros* in this way may be to confuse cause and effect. We have to again consider comic technique, because both *Don Quijote* and the picaresque novels are comic works, though of course not necessarily only that, shaped around a steady flow of jokes and comic incidents. Comedy requires some sort of central dynamic that will produce a reliable output of funny moments. In *Don Quijote* it is the disjunctive relationship between Quijote's relationship to the world, where everything in the world becomes transmuted in his mind into some absurd chivalric analogue. When one then reads the *Novelas Ejemplares*, Cervantes's affinity for what would today be called "high-concept" comic premises becomes clear, whether it be a man that thinks he is made of glass, dogs that talk, or a man that goes mad and thinks he is living in a chivalric romance.

The picaresque novels, on the other hand, are not based on high-concept premises. The picaresque novels take the simple premise of a hard-luck orphan trying to make it in the world, and the comedy emerges only in the texture of the narrative. Whereas a high-concept premise serves to pre-define the comedic dynamics in a narrative world, giving a thrust and direction to the comedic incidents and thus hopefully making them easier to self-generate, the lack of such is

often intended to achieve the opposite result, to not define characters or their relationships in ways that would overly limit the range of incidents that can subsequently be constructed. In other words, the jokes in high-concept comedies are frequently “about” the premise, whereas this is much less true in comedies like the picaresque novels. Obviously one could easily construe this dichotomy too absolutely. Of course not every joke in *Don Quijote* is about the Don thinking he is a knight, and likewise there are a number of jokes in the picaresque novels about how poor the heroes are and how bad their luck is. And of course what constitutes a high-concept premise is itself a subjective determination. Yet the distinction itself is a widely held concept in comedy.

And seen in that light, Don Quijote’s relatively more realized character relative to the *pícaros* can appear in part and to an extent as simply a choice between two well-recognized and fundamental comedic strategies. By the same token, the relative blankness of the *pícaros* appears at least plausibly as a deliberate comic technique, rather than symptomatic of a primitive, pre-modern conception of human personality on the part of the authors. If the construction and presentation of a coherent personality is taken as a narrative goal, then the picaresque heroes may appear vague, *typical* rather than individual. But if their narratives are seen as in part collages or assemblages of pre-existing elements like comic anecdotes and sermons, the amorphousness of the *pícaros* may be seen to possess certain advantages. As Peter Dunn observes in *Spanish Picaresque Fiction*, even viewing the picaresque texts as “novels,” as cohesive narrative units, may create certain perceptual distortions. He posits that

“the narrative of *Lazarillo* can be separated into numerous episodes, events, anecdotes, jokes taken from the existing store of oral tradition as well as from...written collections of stories...the

protagonist himself is constructed in accordance with familiar folk-tale antecedents.”¹³⁷

This is not to say that *Lazarillo* is simply an anthology with a frame story. Obviously, by applying these “prefabricated units” to a single character the author meant to lend the work some kind of stability and cohesiveness. Nevertheless, it is certainly true that the narrative pattern by which *Lazarillo* moves around, arriving at a new location, having some kind of problem which he finally resolves and moves on elsewhere has a strongly episodic, iterative quality.

Guzmán de Alfarache and *El Buscón* are not as dramatically composed of found material, but they are quite collage-like in different ways. *Guzmán* is less imprinted with the tradition of humorous anecdotes than with the influence of the craze for printed sermons in Spain in that era. As Dunn writes, “*Guzmán* derives a great part of its success from Alemán’s unprecedented appropriation of the literature of confession, of spiritual meditation, and of moral exhortation.”¹³⁸ Since “even as *the* best-selling novel, *Guzmán* could not rival the popularity of devotional and homiletic literature,” as a consequence “the wit and eloquence of the sermons and meditations contributed to the book’s universal appeal.”¹³⁹ This is not to imply that the narrative is thus simply an attempt by a novelist to cash in on the thriving devotional genre, but that, as with *Lazarillo*, extrinsic elements are nested to a significant degree within a narrative structure loose and flexible enough to accommodate them. *Guzmán*’s story, unlike *Lazarillo*’s, evinces a clear trajectory and moral, but is still relatively generic compared to one like *Don Quijote*’s, and thus amenable to sermonizing that can be excerpted from its immediate context.

137. Peter N. Dunn, *Spanish Picaresque Fiction: A New Literary History*, Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 30.

138. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

139. *Ibid.*

As for *El Buscón*, Dunn interprets it as a collection of “episodes and adopted set pieces” which “enabled him to organize his stock of facetiae, his unrivaled genius for caricature, his unique facility for verbal wit, making his readers leap conceptually by contrapuntal wordplay rather than move them by causality and teleology.”¹⁴⁰ In other words, the narrative framework and characters in the novel simply serve as a vehicle to facilitate Quevedo’s collected witticisms. It may be true that Quevedo’s protagonist’s “self-destructive flippancy...contradicts any claims we may make for verisimilitude on the level of character,”¹⁴¹ there are other perspectives through which to view this than simply coherency of character. For example, one of the more notorious examples of seeming discontinuity in the novel is when Pablos announces a one point after suffering numerous humiliations that, despite no real previous inclinations of mischief or criminality, from thenceforth

“vine a resolverme de ser bellaco con los bellacos, y más, si pudiese, de todos. No sé si salí con ello, pero yo aseguro a vuesa merced que hice todas las diligencias posibles [I resolved in the company of rogues to be a rogue, and even outdo them, if possible. I don’t know if I succeeded, but I assure your honor that I made all possible efforts].”¹⁴²

Of course on the level of surface realism this conversion moment strains credulity, but the language, clearly parodic as it is of conversion narratives, suggests that is partly the point. This is essentially a parody of a conversion narrative, and thus implicitly a subversion of the devotional literature that *Guzmán* more respectfully appropriates. And what this parody shows is that, stripped of positive, wish-fulfillment associations, the arbitrary suddenness of a conversion

140. Ibid., p. 82.

141. Ibid., p. 82.

142. Francisco de Quevedo, *Historia de la Vida del Buscón, llamado Don Pablos, Ejemplo de Vagabundos, y Espejo de Fracasados*, Biblioteca Edaf, 2001, p. 71.

becomes more apparent. The parodic nature of the last sentence, the obliging unctuousness of the narrator's reassurances to "vuesa merced" clearly ironic. It would not really make sense to view this as a realistic depiction of an occurrence rather than as a critique of a literary genre.

Frequently in comedy a delicate balance exists: comedy cannot be entirely detached from reality, yet violation of expectations is necessary to generate comedic incongruities and juxtapositions. If "realism" generally means whatever one considers likely to happen in reality, then comedic events are almost of necessity unlikely, hence subject to the charge of lack of realism. In Pablos's conversion to roguery, the underlying idea of a naif discovering the advantages of sinfulness through observation and suffering is not at all far-fetched. That he makes this decision so abruptly is perhaps less so, but in addition to the humor of parodying Augustinian-style conversion, this device allows readers to see Pablos turning the tables on his former tormentors and the world at large with the relentlessness of a reprogrammed robot. This is what Bergson meant by the humor of people becoming somehow mechanical. And remember, too, the importance for a comedic audience of having the two comedically juxtaposed elements fresh and present in mind. Precisely the kind of gradual transition to vice that would allow Pablos to forget who he was and thus not be struck by the change as a violation of the coherence of his identity is precisely what would also make the comedic audience forget that disjunction and thus not see the humor in it. In other words, the psychological realism behind the joke may be what makes it significant, but it is its lack of realism that makes it funny.

At the end of the novel Pablos declares his intention to "pasarme a Indias...a ver si, mundando mundo y tierra, mejoraría mi suerte. Y fueme peor [travel to the Americas...to see if,

by changing my environment, my luck would improve. And it went worse for me].”¹⁴³ No hint has been previously made to suggest the intention of making such a significant life break, and the decision appears especially arbitrary in light of the fact that it represents the conclusion of the novel in the state it has been transmitted, since the promised continuation of Pablos’s adventures was never realized. On the other hand, leaving an area when his fortunes there have dried up is entirely consistent with Pablos’s methods throughout the novel, even though in this case the place being abandoned is the whole of Spain, and taking to the seas is actually a logical, if dramatic, continuation of his general trajectory, which begins in Segovia and finally sees him arrive in Seville. And the narrator is at pains to stress the overall continuity of the character’s life in other ways: “nunca mejora su estado quien muda solamente de lugar, y no de vida y costumbres [never has one improved one’s station who only changes one’s location, not one’s life and habits].”¹⁴⁴ A major theme of *El Buscón* as well as *Guzmán* and *Lazarillo* is the recurring hope of the *pícaros* that some external change in the scenery or their profession will bring about fundamental improvement in their life conditions, a hope which is continually frustrated. Yet *Guzmán* and *Lazarillo* at the end offer their heroes at least the possibility of change: Lazarillo lands in an ostensibly if dubiously happy domestic triangle with a wife and a priest in whose employ he works, and Guzmán, in making an apparently sincere confession of his past, at least plausibly suggests a lasting change of heart. It may be that the ending of *El Buscón*, by bluntly foreclosing any such possibility, is satirizing those earlier novels, and carrying its theme of the lack of change within apparent change to the bitter end.

143. Ibid., p. 202.

144. Ibid.

So in one sense the passage is quite consistent with the rest of the novel. In another, lack of consistency, or at least predictability, is once again a source of humor. It is clearly structured around the ironic contrast between the grand adventure of travel to the New World and the lack of change in the hero's fortunes. Suddenly revealing this voyage creates the sudden possibility of change and hope through abruptly linking the individual's narrative to an optimistic cultural narrative of time: the trans-oceanic voyage, which was supposed to offer unlimited opportunities to make one's fortune.¹⁴⁵ As quickly as the idea is introduced, it is cut down, deflated while still on the upswing by the sentence break and continuation "Y fueme peor [and it went worse]." The ironic effect is even more clearly signalled by the use of the neutral conjunction "y" instead of a more clearly contrastive one, which first of all suggests that the two sentences should in fact be one, and are artificially and dramatically separated by a period, and also that "fueme peor" should be an addition to the previous idea rather than a break from it. And in a larger sense it is: that Pablos's life worsened after a major change is consistent with his previous experiences. But as it appears in its immediate context it shows an attempt to create, through joke structure, a deflated expectation, even though only the general mood of the times, not the character's past life, could give any grounds for that expectation.

Because comparison is so central to comedy, characters in a joke or comedic situation tend to become relative terms, points in a dynamic rather than self-contained wholes. In Pablos's journey to the New World, the joke arises not from any understanding of his motives on a

145. Although really, by 1626, the year the novel was published, after more than a century of Spanish colonization of the New World which had probably gone to enrich English pirates more than anyone else, even the Americas had lost their promise for many. They probably represented more of a last shot for the desperate more than a genuine opportunity for fame and fortune.

personal level, but from the general cultural narrative of the possibility of uplift and self-reinvention through the colonial enterprise rubbing against a personal narrative of continued marginality and futility. The joke results from disorientation and violated expectations. Of the two elements in juxtaposition, one often serves to register, like a form of measurement, the deformation and eccentricity of the other. Thus in *Don Quijote* Cervantes practically glues Sancho Panza to the Don, to serve, among other things, as a sort of permanent “reaction shot” to the latter’s madness. In the picaresque novel, the protagonists are essentially solitary, so it is often the environment as a whole that serves as the other point in the comedic dynamic, and which registers the strangeness of the protagonist. Thus, at one point in *El Buscón*, it is the lack of change in Pablos’ environment that emphasizes the change in his behavior when he changes from honest man to rogue, and at another it is the (foreshadowed) change in setting, from Spain to the Americas, that emphasizes the lack of change in the hero’s fortunes. When he changes, his environment remains the same, and vice versa.

This dynamic is reflected and amplified in Céline, Heller, Erofeev and Nothomb through immersion in the narrative present. While characters’ past lives are referred to, they are rarely evoked in detail. In a sense they all, like Venichka, come into consciousness with the beginning of their stories. In this respect these novels go somewhat further than the original picaresques, which start from the beginning of their protagonists’ lives. In *Guzmán de Alfarache*, in fact, the narrator goes into considerable detail regarding his parents’ lives and meeting. The 20th century novels, by contrast, only present a certain in their protagonists’ lives, and for the most part they remain confined to within those limits. *Voyage*, for example, is a relentlessly forward-marching

narrative. It begins with Bardamu immersed in conversation with a friend, and within two pages he has shipped off to war with the army, with no trace of explanation or reference to his antecedent existence. Later Céline did write a sort of prequel, *Mort à credit*, detailing the early life of Bardamu, but this underlines the point, since that past only appears in the context of its own forward-marching narrative. Even personal relationships are mostly localized in place and time: for the most part Bardamu moves to an area, meets people there, and then eventually moves on, leaving them behind permanently, the main exception to this which proves the rule being Robinson.

It gradually becomes clear that Robinson is following, shadow-like, the same geographical and life trajectory as Bardamu, but their connection is rather nebulous initially. They first meet in a deserted town in no-man's-land during the war, but it is dark and Bardamu does not get a glimpse of Robinson. Later, when he travels to the isolated outpost in Africa that he is supposed to occupy, he at least notionally discovers that Robinson has served as his predecessor in the same post. Not having actually seen his face before, he wouldn't recognize him, and though at one point he exclaims "Comment vous appelez-vous? N'est-ce pas Robinson que vous venez de me dire? [What's your name? Isn't it Robinson that you just told me?],"¹⁴⁶ his interlocutor did not in fact say that in the text, though he does not respond in the negative to the question. Bardamu cannot connect the name to a memory, but later, in bed, suddenly "son souvenir je le saisis...le souvenir précisément de ce Robinson, l'homme de Noireur-sur-la-Lys,

146. Céline, p. 168.

lui, là-bas en Flandres [I seized the memory of him...the memory precisely of Robinson, the man from Noirceur-sur-la-Lys, in Flanders].”¹⁴⁷

However, it is at that moment, precisely, when the alleged Robinson deserts him and leaves the post, and so he is not able to gain confirmation for his supposition, at least until much later. As Bardamu’s path crosses with Robinson’s again and again during and after his travels, Robinson’s identity gradually seems to stabilize, like a memory that becomes clearer after being repeatedly recalled. Yet at the beginning nothing indubitably connects these shadowy figures whom Bardamu assumes to be all one. In effect Bardamu is performing in his memory the task of a novelist, attempting to connect scattered moments into one cohesive whole. This is the task that everyone has to perform in attempting to construct, out of individual memories scattered across time, a coherent identity for themselves and those that they know. Bardamu, by insisting on seeing a single figure in all of these shadowy encounters, converts, like Bakhtin’s Dostoevsky, space into time, turning the possession of his past, his memories, into an alien other in the present. Consequently, Robinson suffers the marks of time where Bardamu remains largely immune. Bardamu is injured during the war, suffers severe illness in Africa, professes his cowardice, desire to avoid death at all costs, and believes fearlessness to be insanity. Like Yossarian in *Catch-22*, he even attempts to wait out the duration of the war in a hospital, and later flees to Africa to escape it. However, he suffers no lasting physical effects of his adventures, where Robinson is injured, blinded and eventually shot to death. Robinson seems to absorb Bardamu’s past and future, like Dorian Grey’s portrait, leaving Bardamu as the indestructible but vacant eye of the narrative.

147. Ibid., 170.

In *Le Sabotage*, depthlessness of existence is conflated into a factual matter: the narrator naturally has little past because she is a very young girl. Some allusion is made to her family's previous stay in Japan, but this merely underlines the rupture and discontinuity: "There don't seem to be any colored soft drinks as one finds in Japan. All they sell is tea. 'China is a country where tea is drunk,' I say to myself." The definitional mode is pervasive in the text: the early citation of Wittgenstein does not appear coincidental. If dogmatic thinking created the Maoist society, the child's undogmatic thinking redefines everything, even while establishing new dogmas the future adult will be ruled by. Her narrative is like Maoism: everything is revolution and scarcity. She makes proclamation after proclamation, such as that a communist country is one full of electric fans, in which personal experience always takes priority over received knowledge, but that experience is without depth. On the other hand, her perspective is wholly based on immediate personal experience, whereas Maoism frequently defies experience entirely: "According to the Chinese newspapers, all sorts of edifying things were the case in Peking. None of them were verifiable." This passage is certainly not told from the perspective of the narrator at the time, as it is quite unlikely that she was reading the Chinese newspapers at age five, much less making ironic comments about them. Nevertheless, her perspective, in its chaotic lack of impulse control, mirrors the schizophrenia of government policy at the time. She calls servants her slaves, dismisses all boys as a lesser breed while declaring little girls the most perfect form of humanity, and declares war on another group of children in the diplomatic compound for the crime of being East German. If much of this seems like an oblique political satire it is probably because the small child's barely governed impulses are relatively more like large aggregations of

people, which may group themselves into institutions and parties, but have no true systems of higher-order control and coordination the way the body and mind for individual cells and thoughts.

Perhaps what is perceived as the coherency of individual personalities itself simply consists of the control mechanism, the self-repression of chaotic impulses. In *Le Sabotage* the narrator attempts at one point to make an impression on her beloved, Elena, by pretending to not care or be interested in her. However, when this self-control becomes too torturous to continue, she does an about-face and professes her continuing love. Of course, this is not a true change of heart: she admits to having maintained a pretense, when her feelings have in fact remained stable. But the feelings of Elena, who has been reduced to tears by the narrator's perceived indifference, immediately returns to her former coldness when informed that it has all been a ruse. And it's not certain that the narrator's passion, however abiding, would have lasted any longer, or even ignited in the first place, had it been requited from the start. In other words, the consistency and inconsistency of her attachment may just be that of a frustrated impulse. The influence of the intrinsically doomed affair between Julien Sorel and Mathilde in *Le Rouge et le noir* hangs heavily over this entire episode, with the lover who could not, and knew he could not, show the least bit of affection for his beloved lest she immediately lose interest in him. The narrator certainly seems to think something similar of Elena, claiming that she, like her namesake, Helen of Troy, had a need to be admired...And I think she needed to be loved. Not *to* love: that wasn't in her repertoire."

The same unconstrained impulsiveness is at the root of the narrator's comedic observations. Her basic mode is to define or characterize familiar objects and situations in an aslant way that, just as the first person that named all the things in the world was also granted sovereignty over them, takes possession of them by re-conceiving them, or rather takes possession of the interpretive framework that defines them. By doing so she refuses to subordinate herself to the established order of received interpretation. This possessiveness is also at the root of her relationship with Elena. She claims not to have had any friends before meeting Elena, because "What did I need friends for? They had no role to play in my existence. I was the center of the world: there was nothing they could do to make me more central." However when she does meet Elena, "henceforth, the center of the world was situated outside of me." This is in part due to the beauty of Elena, but what really seems attract the narrator is that Elena is even more confidently solipsistic than she, that "She always appeared to need nothing and no one," although she soon decides that in fact "only one thing counted for Elena: to be gazed at." In any case, "I also had to count for something in her eyes, which was not the case. I didn't interest her." Again the reference to the Wittgensteinian concept of existence as that which is the case. So the narrator loves Elena because she does not exist in her eyes, and only temporarily gains her affections by pretending that Elena does not exist in hers. Their relationship is governed by possessiveness, and possessiveness is also at the heart of the narrator's comic point of view.

In *Catch-22*, the narrative proceeds in a convoluted non-linear fashion, moving freely and suddenly between different characters and locations. Yet the narrative is strictly delimited within the sphere of the war, though that extends to an army base in the United States and to the

soldiers' vacation leaves in Italy. This creates the sense of the war as being its own autonomous temporal zone, not governed, as time generally is, by a unidirectional forward progression, but rather, like space, allowing for multi-directional movement, allowing points to be traversed and re-traversed in different directions. This is another form in which time is converted into space. The twisted chronology of *Catch-22* creates the sense that the characters are trapped, endlessly crossing or circle around certain events, always looping back to earlier moments, never able to reach the end of the war and move on. The novel's ending appears inconclusive: "Yossarian jumped. Nately's whore was hiding just outside the door. The knife came down, missing him by inches, and he took off."¹⁴⁸ In fact, for Yossarian this moment does represent the end of the war, as he is now fleeing it to neutral Sweden. The moment represents a deferred climax: nothing final has happened, though death has been eluded yet again. But when Yossarian leaves the camp it is as if he has crossed a boundary, and at that moment the narrative ends.

The characters' movement through space in the novel is equally erratic as their movement through narrative time. Take for example this passage:

"Yossarian ran right into the hospital, determined to remain there forever rather than fly one mission more than the thirty-two missions he had. Ten days after he changed his mind and came out, the colonel raised the missions to forty-five and Yossarian ran right back in, determined to remain in the hospital forever rather than fly one mission more than the six missions he had just flown."¹⁴⁹

Erratic behavior is to be distinguished here from inconsistent: Yossarian's movement's here are not really self-contradictory on the level of personal motivation, nor do they contradict motives attributed to him at other points. Nevertheless the flattened presentation of consciousness here

148. Heller, p. 463.

149. Ibid., p. 175.

renders his backwards and forwards oscillation enigmatic. Since his actions are presented as reflexive responses to outside stimuli rather than an ongoing, continuous thought process, we see only sudden impulse and change rather than the consistent pursuit of internal goals. Some of this is reflected irrationality: as the inscrutable bureaucratic machine constantly changes its demands and policies, even the rationally self-interested are reduced to pure reaction to evade its brunt. As Commissioner Jarry says on the show *Deadwood*: “Self-interest is immutable, but its dictates vary daily.” Yet even within this context, Yossarian’s behavior is spiked by the irrational. It is not explained, for example, why “ten days after he changed his mind,” any more than it is explained why he decides to sign the letters that he censors in the hospital “Washington Irving.”

Beyond any political or social point, this kind of unpredictability is of the essence of the humorous effect of the novel. For example, during one of his shore leaves Yossarian meets a girl who sleeps with him and then gives him her number while taunting him: “You’ll tear it up into little pieces the minute I’m gone and go walking away like a big shot because a tall, young, beautiful girl like me, Luciana, let you sleep with her and did not ask you for money.”¹⁵⁰ Though he demurs at the time, “The minute she was gone, Yossarian tore the slip of paper up and walked away in the other direction, feeling very much like a big shot because a beautiful young girl like Luciana had slept with him and did not ask for money.”¹⁵¹ However, the moment he returns to the other soldiers, he changes his mind and

“sprang up impetuously from his table and went running outside and back down the street toward the apartment in search of the tiny

150. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

151. *Ibid.*

bits of paper in the gutter, but they had all been flushed away by a street cleaner's hose."¹⁵²

While in its general outlines these shifting impulses could be explained by the unstable fluctuations of ego, the word-for-word repetition of phrases from one sentence to another is giveaway of a comic reversal. The conspicuousness of the structure perhaps renders this passage a bit mechanical, but it demonstrates why any kind of real insight into the character's behavior would run counter to the comedic effect.

It might be possible to interpret time itself as somehow askew in the novel, running backwards or sideways or bending. Coherent problems bifurcate via *Catch-22* into contradictory solutions, change or escape are impossible within the camp, effects seem to run contrary to causes, as when, after a soldier is killed by a low-flying plane and the pilot then flies into a mountain, "Colonel Cathcart was so upset by the deaths of Kid Sampson and McWatt that he raised the missions to sixty-five."¹⁵³ But if the text were really all, if this narrative universe were presumed to be its own self-contained universe with its own autonomous laws, with no necessary reference to anything outside, there would be no violated expectations. The humor in the text is the proof of this. A sentence like "Colonel Cathcart was so upset by the deaths of Kid Sampson and McWatt that he raised the missions to sixty-five" is only funny as a perverse violation of presumed universal norms of human interaction. Readers bring their own biased reading to the text, but the jokes within it also anticipate those biases and are specifically dependent on them.

In *Moskva-Petushki*, Venichka moves with great freedom in his narration across space and time from his train seat. Some of this is transparently invention; for example, while telling

152. Ibid.

153. Ibid., p. 350.

fellow-passengers some inscrutable lies about a purported trip across Europe, one of them remarks: “меня поражает та легкость, с какой ты преодолевали все государственные границы [it surprises me, the ease with which you overcame all national borders].”¹⁵⁴ To which Venichka replies:

“Да что же тут такого поразительного! И какие еще границы?! Гранитца нужна для того, чтобы не перепутать нации...по одному сторону границы говорят на русском и больше пьют, а по другую -- меньше пьют и говорят на нерусском [What’s so surprising about that? And what borders, anyway? A border is necessary in order to not get nations mixed up...On one side of the border they speak Russian and drink more, and on the other they drink less and speak non-Russian].”¹⁵⁵

This collapses the whole world down to personal dimensions, as is evident in the way “borders” are interpreted simply as the the border between Russia and the outside world, and the way the whole earth is classified according to two stereotypical essences of Russian culture, the Russian language and alcoholism. This is essentially solipsism represented as nationalism (though perhaps they are always linked). But this is not only a political commentary. Venichka’s train itself moves very freely across space and time. Most importantly, the movement through states of consciousness, from sleep to waking and back, lubricated by copious drinking, is very fluid, and when, and into what, Venichka is awaking or falling asleep is frequently unclear. Even in the passage above he is regaling an audience which is for the most part in a drunken stupor, indeterminately between sleep and waking.

States of lucid dreaming are important in some of the films of a contemporary of Erofeev’s, Andrei Tarkovksy, and sometimes even seem to be encouraged through lulling, slow-

154. Erofeev, p. 118.

155. Ibid., p. 119.

moving rhythms. The film *Nostalgia* even devotes a whole scene to character nodding off and then drifting into a dream state. Sleep is a constant theme in *Moskva-Petushki*--one concrete link to the French surrealists. Many of the inexplicable events in the narration can be interpreted in terms of sleep and dreaming. When Venichka awakens on the train to find that it is now dark and the train is headed the wrong direction, back to Moscow, he is initially confused and disoriented, but eventually appears to conclude that “я просто не доехал до девушки... ехал и не доехал... я просто проспал [I simply didn't make it to my girl... I went but didn't make it... I just overslept].”¹⁵⁶ Though whether that state can even be labeled sleep is debatable: as Venichka states at another moment,

“Что я делал в это мгновение -- засыпал или просыпался? Я не знаю, и откуда мне знать? ‘Есть бытие, но именем каким его назвать? -- ни сон оно, ни бденье [What was I doing at that moment, falling asleep or waking up? I don't know, and how could I know? ‘There's a state of being, but what name is there for it? It's neither a dream, nor wakefulness].”¹⁵⁷

This in-between state could be construed as Venichka's drunkenness, and in a sense it is. But could it not also represent the form of the narration? It stands between consciousness and unconsciousness. Full consciousness would be like third-person narration, mimetic and descriptive, where the mind and reality run parallel to each other and are connected firmly at intervals, like the rails on a railroad. The unconscious would be like a dream state or (ironically) like a stream of consciousness, a succession of thoughts and feelings, perhaps inspired by reality but not attempting to directly represent it.

156. Ibid., p. 180.

157. Ibid., p. 166-7.

In the middle lies Venichka's narration, seemingly artless and chaotic but in reality clearly orchestrated. In general the modernists tended to portray consciousness as a sequence rather than a direction, but in *Moskva-Petushki*, coming after the modernists, a sense of directionality is never absent. The frequent use of humor establishes a constant projecting-forward and recalling-backwards. And certain disjunctions in the text consistently imply the impossibility of the narration, at least as the record of a real life event. If the narration is supposed to be occurring in the present tense, how can it record the dreams and unconscious stupors of the narrator? And if a retroactively recounted narrative, how can Venichka be stabbed to death, or at any rate indefinite unconsciousness, at the end of it? Therefore it must be that, like Boris Vian's *L'Écume des jours*, "l'histoire est entièrement vraie, puisque je l'ai imaginée d'un bout à l'autre [the story is entirely true, since I made it up from one end to the other]."¹⁵⁸ The unreliable narrator has often been conceived as another epistemological obstacle or puzzle on the way to divining the truth of a story, but *Moskva-Petushki* represents a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of the concept.

In *Moskva-Petushki* characters and personalities are phantasmic, flickering uneasily in the border regions between waking and sleep, sobriety and intoxication. A stable notion of character and personality is itself a form of materialism, founded on a belief in unchanging essences. We can see how far *Moskva-Petushki* deviates from such a conception by comparison with a great predecessor journey tale told by an unreliable narrator which also narrates a trip that seems at first linear but proves in the end circular: *Heart of Darkness*. *Heart of Darkness* uses the ostensible destination point of the journey, Kurtz, like focusing beams, almost like the

158. Boris Vian, *L'Écume des jours*, Gallimard, 1947, p. 20.

converging parallax lines in a painting with a fixed perspective, to focus attention on Kurtz's character. In other words, Marlow has to make the long journey up the river to satisfy his curiosity about the nature of Kurtz, over the course of which that curiosity turns into an obsession. Even at that the interest he takes in Kurtz seems somewhat inexplicable. Nor is he alone. At the colonial Stations along the way all any of the Europeans seem to talk about, on the occasions when he overhears them, is Kurtz. As for he himself, he makes some feints of lack of interest in Kurtz: while waiting at the Central Station for a boat to take him up the river, he claims: "now and then I would give some thought to Kurtz. I wasn't very interested in him,"¹⁵⁹ but then, four paragraphs later, he admits "I was then rather excited at the prospect of meeting Kurtz very soon."¹⁶⁰ The first man at the station to speak to him in any detail about Kurtz refers to Kurtz as "a special being, as you ought to know."¹⁶¹ As Marlow immediately points out, there is no reason he "ought to know" about Kurtz, since he has just arrived in Africa, but the line is telling. The cosmic significance of Kurtz is constantly presumed in this manner. This is a recurrent feature of the narrative: characters from their perspective in the narrative present foreshadow the future significance of things and events in a way which shades into implausible foreknowledge. For example, shortly after disembarking on the coast, Marlow encounters a chain-gang of African prisoners, and thinks: "I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless

159. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, Norton & Company, 1988, p. 33.

160. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

161. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

folly.”¹⁶² So Kurtz is not the only object of this treatment, though he is the most prominent. Marlow’s attitude towards him almost seems like a parodic exaggeration of the uninvolved but interested narrator of Henry James. Marlow, with very little prompting, comes to seem primarily motivated in his vast journey into Africa by an ultimately abstract epistemological quest for understanding of the character of a stranger. No wonder the character of Kurtz seems so freighted with significance, when it is being used as the anchor point for the entire journey.

In *Moskva-Petushki*, by contrast, who or what is to be encountered at the end of the journey are shadowy and uncertain. To the extent that they are concretized, the details are manifestly ridiculous. Venichka is going to Petushki,

“где не умолкают птицы ни днем ни ночью, где ни зимой, ни летом не отцветает жасмин. Первородный грех...там никого не тяготит [where the birds don’t fall silent day or night, where jasmine fades neither in winter nor summer. Original sin...doesn’t burden anyone there].”¹⁶³

This being the case, no wonder Venichka never reaches it. The real place Petushki has dissolved into a utopia. As the phantasmagoric sphinx that appears before him taunts him, “Как известно, в Петушках нет пунктов А. Пунктов Ц тем более нет. Есть один толко пункты Б [As is well known, in Petushki there are no point A’s. In addition there are no point W’s. There are only point B’s].”¹⁶⁴ When the spatial points are so confused, uncertain and changeable, naturally the characters are also wavering and dream-like. Venichka encounters angels, demons, a sphinx, random historical figures, all entering and exiting uncertainly. As *Heart of Darkness* shows, people are coordinates as well, so naturally the lack of stability of spatial coordinates is a sign

162. Ibid., p. 20.

163. Erofeev, p. 41.

164. Ibid., p. 154.

and indication of the lack of stability of the human coordinates as well. The only true fixed coordinate is *Moskva-Petushki* is the Kremlin, which Venichka circles around in decreasing concentric circles rather than heading to directly, and so it is no surprise that he meets the end of his life as well as his journey within its walls. Because his life and journey are co-terminous. There are no stable points along the way of his trip because everything occurs within the fluid chaos of his consciousness, and his is a thoroughly lonely voice. But now we are getting into the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Comedy and Isolation

How does one attempt, in writing, to convey the presence of another, and why? Given that this attempt in fiction is generally a lie, why do it nonetheless? The fact that some narratives have plural authorship or incorporate polyglot texts within themselves does not really affect the central question, because these are still predicated on ventriloquizing the voice of another, themselves usually invented, and/or selecting and shaping a text written by another to fit it into one's own. Emmanuel Lévinas, in *Totalité et infini*, claims that a sense of "the Other" is necessary and at the heart of any ethical impulse, as well as any conception of responsibility and obligation. He believes that conceptions of the self in Western philosophy, all the way back to the pre-Socratic Greeks, have excessively put the personal self at the center of the universe, and modern philosophy has simply refined this impulse. Descartes' *cogito*, Kant's metaphysics, Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's conception of "Being" have all represented steps along the solipsistic path. All of these philosophers make the same basic claim: the self is fundamental in a way that the non-self is not, that thoughts and perceptions in and of themselves are certain in a way that the external realities that they represent, filtered as they are through those very thoughts and perceptions, are not. They all suggest that the very same mental architecture which permits perceptual access to the outside world also, paradoxically, isolate the perceiver from it, by imposing modes of representation on it which preclude direct access to whatever it is that lies outside of us.

To this, Levinas wants to add a radical sense of otherness even, in fact precisely because it fundamentally cannot be conceptualized. It is because the Other is radically different and

unknowable that one must respect its autonomy. For him this is the necessary root of ethics, because without this awareness one perceives everything and everyone as simply objects. However, Levinas does not truly contest the validity of the conclusions of what he refers to as Western “egoïsme,” as developed through Plato, Descartes, Heidegger, etc. This is the main substance of Derrida’s critique of Lévinas in “Violence et métaphysique.” Lévinas accuses Western philosophy of promoting the ego and unfettered freedom above ethics and a sense of responsibility founded upon the awareness of the other, but he never actually disputes the notion that one can never ultimately know anything other than one’s own thoughts and perceptions. Or rather, one cannot know anything except through the filter of one’s own thoughts and perceptions. In fact, he raises the barrier even higher between the Self and the Other. For him, the terms of thought and knowledge the Other is not itself a concept but a limit or ultimate point of knowledge. In other words, the solipsistic self may never be radically confronted with the limits of its own worldview. It can simply go on forming subjective impressions and conceptions of the world around it without resistance and develop what feels like a complete view of the universe. But the perceiver who is confronted with a totally alien Other is faced abruptly with the incompleteness of its own perspective through the realization of its inability to compass the existence of this other being.

Of course, at this point the nebulousness of the Other becomes problematic. It is not so much that another person or consciousness is claimed to be totally alien to the perceiver as that the concept of the Other (self-contradictory as that phrase may be) is intrinsically alien, that the other is Other insofar as it is alien to the perceiver. But if that Otherness cannot be perceived,

conceptualized, or understood in any way without sacrificing its own Otherness, without being assimilated as a concept in the mind of the perceiver, then on what grounds is the relationship with this Other supposed to be constituted, or even accorded any belief? This seems to be why Lévinas writes of this relation as being founded on “longing” (“désir”) for the Other. So basically the relationship to the Other has to be emotional, not rational. Crucially, longing is an emotion based on absence--the Other cannot be felt as an imminent reality, the sense of its existence is based on an emotion which is itself characterized by absence. However, Lévinas makes this emotional connection almost as problematic as conceptualizing the Other by insisting that the longing of which he speaks is very different from any particular longing one might feel for another person, whether it be for sex, companionship, support, or whatever else, which he classifies as “needs,” which can be filled, rather than as desire, which is always for that from which the self is separated, and which cannot be bridged or filled. This is why the notion of the Other for him can only be founded on a sense of “the infinite,” at the bottom of which is pretty clearly some sense of divinity, although that cannot not be explicitly said or thought without betraying its essence. It is on the basis of this relationship to the Other founded on an orientation towards the “infinite” that Lévinas distinguishes his conception from Martin Buber’s more specific and personal “I and You” model. Lévinas accuses Buber’s concept of lacking any defining essence--the Other is simply the other, it is not representative or significative of any greater reality, whereas for him it is an emanation of an infinite which, while it can only be conceived of negatively, and cannot conceptually form a “totality,” nevertheless “transcends” any specific subject or object. Obviously this entire discussion is confusing and paradoxical, partly

because the whole schema is linguistically impoverished in its abstraction, rattling around the same three or four metaphysical terms in countless variations and formulations, sometimes forcing the same concept to appear in both terms of an analogy, etc.

Ironically, for Lévinas language and “discourse” holds a special place in the apprehension of the Other. He refers to “le langage, source de toute signification [language, source of all meaning],”¹⁶⁵ and claims that “le langage ne joue pas à l’intérieur d’une conscience, il me vient d’autrui [language does not play within a consciousness, it comes to me from another].”¹⁶⁶

Lévinas has an analytic philosopher’s bias in favor of the explicit. In other words, when someone else speaks to me, while their words cannot represent or capture the Otherness (from my perspective) of the speaker, they are nevertheless a true emanation of that person’s Otherness, they emerge from that person’s subjective Otherness even as they are translated into neutral, objective linguistic symbols that can be apprehended by me. Of course that could be true of any perception I might have of that person, the expression on their face for example, or their actions, but for a metaphysician for whom reality ultimately boils down to axiomatic statements, the emanations of the Other which arrive already in that form are somehow less easy to be corrupted by the perceiver, or at least that corruption, should it occur, will be more obvious. In other words, I can misinterpret and misrepresent someone else’s facial expression, but in the translation from expression to words that betrayal of meaning may slip by unnoticed. But if I misconstrue their words that will involve changing their words into other words, a more obvious warping.

165. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l’extériorité*, Kluwer Academic, 1971, p. 293.

166. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

As a result, the words spoken by the Other are always unexpected, untimely. Because they originate from an unknowable source, their origin too is unknowable. When and how they are pronounced cannot be anticipated any more than their content or ultimate meaning. They only retroactively fit into a sequence. This may not immediately be recognized only because, as Derrida points out,

“en faisant du rapport à l’infiniment autre l’origine du langage...Lévinas se résout donc à trahir son intention dans son discours philosophique [in making the relation to the infinitely other the origin of language...Lévinas resolves therefore to betray his goal in his philosophical discourse].”¹⁶⁷

In short, the language Lévinas uses to describe his concepts cannot possibly do justice to their nature. This is not necessarily due to stylistic ineptness or oversight--Derrida believes that Lévinas is deliberately attempting to bring down the edifice of traditional metaphysics precisely while employing its idiom--but the ceaseless repetition of the same words and formulae create an impression of expectedness and sameness which are radically opposite to the nature of that which the concepts are supposed to signify. And it creates the impression that the awareness of Otherness leads to a paradoxical mental state that cannot be resolved. This may be why he refers to the state of innocence preceding this awareness as “enjoyment” (“jouissance”).

One need not accept Lévinas’s theological pretensions in order to feel that he is onto something here. Because even if the endless burrowing towards some solid trace of transcendental Otherness in the specific, individual other should appear fruitless, one might still appreciate that the attempt to generate the illusion of otherness in narrative represents a very similar impossibility. Writers endlessly attempt to reproduce the patterns of otherness even as, in

167. Jacques Derrida, *L’Écriture et la différence*, Éditions du Seuil, 1967, p. 224.

the act of appropriating them, they make them cease to be other. On the other hand, Lévinas is seeking to uncover a longing which he believes to lie at the bottom of existence. The search for it may be illusory, but it is not itself engaged in the production of illusion. While the act of creating otherness in fiction may be similarly impossible, it is also perpetuating a deliberately false impression, and the more strict the tenets of representationality, the deeper that falseness will be. Lévinas's language, by contrast, does not promote the sense that the Otherness it describes has been captured in prose, so in that sense the flat, abstract language actually serves to preserve the sense of the separation from the Other which he holds to be immutable. Fiction, on the other hand, far from leading the mind beyond its borders through an awareness of its own inadequacy, instead sells the illusion that self-transcendence has already been achieved. The fact that this is not spelled out or possibly even conceived consciously is precisely what allows it to have its effect: overt claims about the nature of representation would create an awareness, and self-awareness, which would immediately destroy the illusion.

Every intrusion of dialogue into subjective consciousness is in a sense atemporal. Time is perhaps not a subjective concept, but it is perceived subjectively, and the past is always a reconstruction of a jumble of memories in an individual mind, often influenced by the memories and opinions of others. The appearance of another's words is always ultimately unpredictable, violating the sequence of causes and effects continuously being constructed in the individual mind. Therefore the appearance of excessive synchronization of dialogue, implying the existence of some kind of plan unfolding through the individual voices, is bound to cast doubt on its authenticity, to make it appear monologic rather than dialogic. The presence of seemingly

orchestrated elements, like consistent rhythms developing over time, undermines the impression of the spontaneity and autonomy of the different voices in a dialogue. In other words, when characters are speaking to each other in heroic couplets, when rhymes span the gap between two characters' speech, when the end of a line of one character's speech completes a rhyme with a line from the other character's, it is quite hard to sustain the impression of a spontaneous free exchange between two separate minds. Considering one of the most famous practitioners of this still, Corneille, wrote a play entitled *The Theatrical Illusion*, it is somewhat ironic that this style, instead of the theatrical illusion of multiple voices in dialogue, instead points toward the actual situation, i.e. dialogue hatched in a single mind in advance and then put in the mouths of those that deliver the lines.

Much like heroic couplets, comedic joke structure generally also encodes a formal linear relationship between two parts of a text. Where there is a set-up, there must follow a pay-off. The elements that are deployed in that set-up must then be resolved in the pay-off. This structure is looser than a formal metrical or rhyme scheme, and there are of course many exceptions to it within the field of humor, both intentional and unintentional, but one can nonetheless see a general tendency towards codified temporal relationships which are somewhat at variance with informal speech. Time itself is to some extent a monologic quality. As we know, or at any rate as far as we know, there is no absolute time or universal temporal frame of reference in the universe. And although at the size, speed and distances between each other that human existences play out, issues of relativity are not physically perceptible, one can feel something of the relative nature of frames of reference through the subjective nature in which chronology is established in

the memory, in which past events are ordered retrospectively by the mind, and then subject to ceaseless revision as new information and the perspectives of others are received. The more individual perspectives are considered and the more deeply they are felt, the harder it becomes to establish a single temporal narrative. This is probably why Bakhtin considered Dostoevsky, his exemplar of multi-voiced narrative, to be an artist of “space” more than of time. Not that time is literally absent of course, but that in Dostoevsky it tends to appear in radically compressed fashion.

Bakhtin considers Goethe, by contrast, to be the novelistic exemplar of time, and this is intimately connected with the biographical concentration on the unfolding of single lives in novels such as the Wilhelm Meister sequence. Even the famous credo from *Faust*, “Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, den können wir erlösen [Whoever always strives to the utmost, we can save],” though it invokes external salvation, seems like an internalized process, the unfolding of a personality within itself. There is no indication that the nature of this striving, i.e. the effect that the striver has on the world, is of the essence, or that it is subject to the influence of the outside world, i.e. the effect that the world has on him/her. It even seems to me, though this may be going too far, that the “immer” to some extent negates the idea of a temporal period that precedes salvation. The vagueness of “immer” implies that for one who is “always” striving the quality that is needed to be saved is latent in every or any particular moment of their existence.

For Dostoevsky this could not pass. Too much change has to occur first before the sinner can be saved: suffering, repentance, grace. In *Crime and Punishment* the good impulses which could seed the growth of a future life of virtue exist, but it is not just that they have been

outweighed by the bad but that in their very expressions they have been perverted. Raskolnikov's desire to free his family of the burdens of poverty and his desire to enact greatness in himself, be they the true motives for his crime, among the motives, or simply rationalizations, all flow in his mind towards murder. Thus all of his "striving" gets him no closer to redemption, in fact it carries him away from it. The real difference between Raskolnikov and Faust is that Raskolnikov commits a true offence, and Faust does not. The phrase "to sell one's soul to the devil" has become a metaphor for sacrificing one's personal ethics for personal gain, and, as the story of Abraham and Isaac shows, even selling one's soul to God sometimes has required the same. But that should not distract from the fact that Faust does not commit his soul *through* committing a crime, he simply makes a formal transfer of it, like property. His drama is really a Rousseauian debate about freedom and personal autonomy disguised as a drama about ethics. Rousseau argues that one could not give away one's own freedom, because slavery represents an abnegation of precisely the personal volition upon which the legitimacy of voluntary enslavement would depend. For similar reasons, Faust never really is capable of giving away his soul.

This is emphatically not the story of *Crime and Punishment*, which is not about the revitalization and salvation of a man--though it points in that direction. There is an assumption when reading about Raskolnikov's capture, confession and deportation to Siberia, that all of that is leading towards, in fact in some sense constitutes, his redemption, but Dostoevsky rather clearly steers us away from that interpretation. He does invoke the prospect of such a fate in the last paragraph, but with an important proviso:

“Но тут уж начинается новая история, история постепенного обновления человека, история постепенного перерождения его, постепенного перехода из одного мира в другой, знакомства с новой, доселе совершенно неведомою действительностью. Это могло бы составить тему нового рассказа, -- но теперешний рассказ наш окончен [But here begins a new story, the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his gradual rebirth, the gradual crossing over from one world to another, to an acquaintance with the, with an until now completely unknown reality. This could comprise a new tale--but our current tale is finished].”¹⁶⁸

So we have not been witnessing the salvation of Raskolnikov, merely the prelude to it. Where Goethe depicts decades in the life of Faust, Dostoevsky only shows a glimmer, a moment in the life of Raskolnikov, albeit a crucial one.

For Raskolnikov salvation is not available at every moment, but only comes about through a long accumulation. It is not latent in the individual heart, but unfurls in a gradual process. The temporal compression in *Crime and Punishment* is a result of the fact that, except for the times when Raskolnikov loses consciousness, the narrative, like *Moskva-Petushki*, essentially adheres to a unity of time, that is to say that it follows the story moment-to-moment from beginning to end, not skipping over or eliding any significant period of time. This is in stark contrast to *Faust*, which not only skips from one moment to another over vast stretches of space and time, but Faust himself is physically transported over those huge stretches in a magical cloud with Mephistopheles. *Faust*, then, represents time in the long sense, time as it is viewed back into the past in memory and projected forward into the future in anticipation, disparate scattered moments picked out against the vast formless stretches of forgotten time that lie between them, whereas *Crime and Punishment* depicts a moving present tense, the sensation of the present

168. Fedor Dostoevskii, *Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, Eksmo, 2007, p. 587.

moment as it rolls forward. It includes all the details which are experienced but not retained, which fade away sometimes without even truly registering in the mind. These represent two experiences of time which are for the most part mutually exclusive: time can be apprehended in its scope or in its flow, but scarcely can they be done so together because the scope is simply too vast.

When people talk about time travel, I imagine they forget this disjunction, and form the idea out of a false analogy with travel through space. When you visit another country, it exists, and you can return to the place for which you have images in your memory and photos. Memories of particular events and memories seem the same, because they are held with some kind of continuity in the mind, even if that continuity in actuality consists of a constant re-constitution and reconstruction in the mind each time they are recalled. Nonetheless, they possess the illusion of still existing somewhere. And this holds true even for the historical past of which one does not possess personal memories. Ancient Greece, say, or the Mongolian Empire, through their framing in historical knowledge, in some sense seem as enduring as the landscapes in which they existed. And this is in the nature of memory, collective or individual. But in experiencing time in the present moment, one gets a sense of everything in the universe changing simultaneously, though in different ways and to more or less apparent degrees. To move back to some particular moment in the past would seem to involve not simply summoning up some an isolated moment, but in fact reversing all the changes in the universe that have occurred between then and now.

It's true that some support for the idea of time travel seems to exist in the realm of quantum physics, where for several decades the notion has existed, though never universally accepted, that individual subatomic particles might be able to move both forward and backward in time. This possibility was most seriously broached by Richard Feynman, who was deeply influenced by "the observation that positrons [positively charged particles] could be viewed as electrons [negatively charged particles] moving from the future to the past."¹⁶⁹ This is to say that the equations for representing the movement of the particle are time-symmetrical, they will work equally well whether the particle is represented as moving one direction in space and time, or as a particle of the opposite charge moving the other direction in space and time. So one could interpret the equations as representing an electron being released by an emitter and absorbed by a receiver some certain time later, or as a positron being released by the receiver and absorbed by the emitter some time earlier. Feynman eventually devised methods of describing the movement of particles which are greatly simplified by not presuming a particular directionality of time.¹⁷⁰

Attributing to subatomic particles the ability to move in more than one direction in time might solve other problematic areas in quantum physics, such as the famous multiple-slit experiments, where particles appear to act as waves rather than particles, passing through multiple slits at the same time and then interfering with each other on the other side. If the particle was moving both forward and backward in time, it could be in multiple locations at the same time while maintaining its unitary particle nature. This solution has not been widely accepted, because particles traveling in multiple directions in time has seemed even more

169. Victor J. Stenger, *Timeless Reality: Simplicity, Symmetry and Multiple Universes*, Prometheus Books, 2000, p. 175.

170. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

problematic for many physicists than the problems it would solve. I'm certainly not in a position to judge the merits of such a dispute. However, even if individual particles do travel backwards in time, the key word still seems to be *individual*. The arrow of time is not an illusion, it exists, even if it is not an absolute principle of the universe. It seems to be tied to the principle of increasing entropy, i.e. the principle that over time a system will tend to move towards a disordered equilibrium. In other words, it is not inconceivable that some macroscopic entity or process could reverse itself by means of all its constituent particles simultaneously reversing whatever movements they are in the middle of and returning to some previous position. But it is exceedingly unlikely. Imagine a star going supernova, then all the particles that compose it reversing course and reconstituting the star. As Victor Stenger, a proponent of the reversibility of time on the microscopic level, states:

“Irreversibility seems to hold true when there are many particles, while it is absent when there are only a few...The second law [of thermodynamics--which postulates the principle of increasing entropy] is a statistical asymmetry and not a deterministic law of particle behavior. The air in a room is not forbidden from emptying out when a door is opened, killing everyone inside. A broken glass can reassemble and a dead man can spring to life if randomly moving molecules just happen to move in the right direction. However, these events are extremely unlikely, since our macroworld is composed of huge numbers of particles.”¹⁷¹

Stenger is a strong proponent of the view that individual particles can move backward in time, that the unidirectionality of time is not absolute, but even he does not seem to leave much hope

171. Ibid., p. 91.

for backwards time travel on the macroscopic level.¹⁷² The notion is that the forward movement of time is essentially just the product of probability, of the accumulation of vast numbers of changes and movements that for the most part don't spontaneously reverse, certainly not in concert with each other. That naturally presumes that time itself is the sum of changes and movement in the universe, not some concrete medium or property, which is precisely what the apparent time-symmetry of quantum movement seems to mitigate against. To make the arrow of time into a concrete force or phenomenon would require adding it into the quantum models as an additional postulate.

In any case, even if time were reversible on the macroscopic scale this would *still* not constitute what is generally imagined by time travel. When one imagines traveling back to an earlier period in time, one imagines being there as one is now, not as one's molecules were at the time. In other words, the time traveler in some sense is supposed to be in some sense outside of the system which is going back to an earlier era. This model is essentially a literalization of the process of memory, where one is simultaneously viewing the past and detached from it, endowed with all the memories and information that have influenced one's existence since then. A difference exists between the past as such and past moments or a past present. The former is a function of humans' unique capacity as an information-accumulating and -preserving system. Not that humans are the only beings that preserve information, but the amount and intricacy of what is preserved are quite monumental. The past that was experienced, i.e. when the past was a rolling present, is gone. All that remains is the past of discreet moments and images. And these

172. Forward time travel seems considerably less problematic--in theory, it only requires creating a device that can reach a velocity close enough to the speed of light where time will pass considerably more slowly inside than in surrounding space.

can be revisited mentally, if not physically interacted with. The past undergoes a change when it becomes the past. What remains of it only exists to the extent that it is recognized as such by an observer, or as it remains in that observer's mind.

Obviously this is a major difference between the scattered time of memory and the rolling time of the present, in that there is no external corollary for memory. A narrative of the past is always more or less the product of a single perspective. Not a single person's perspective necessarily, but its coherency is forged out of a unification of facts and interpretations. Of course present experience is perceived through individual perspectives as well, but those are always subject to imposition by external events. Past events can be shaped in one's own mind to one's own whim, limited only by other people's differing memories. So time in being transmuted from present to past retreats into subjectivity. The linkage of scattered events across time in a historical or personal narrative is always dependent on an interpreting mind to do so. Whereas, conversely, novelistic attempts to recreate the sense of the present in narratives about the past, especially when they presented ostensibly as spoken narratives, often seem out of keeping with the nature of memory. Stories about the past, especially when they are not overtly fictional, become repositories of information, and when recounting them the first priority is generally to transmit that information. As such, atmospheric details rarely play a major role. I've never heard someone tell a personal story in which they exhaustively describe the furniture and appearance of the people in it, unless they were clearly weaving a yarn. If a baseball bat plays an important role in the events of the story the teller will probably mention it, and maybe even mention some rudimentary atmospheric details, like if one of the participants is very fat or aged. But in general

these are minor touches. Partly it is simply a matter of logistics: to tell a short sequence of events with novelistic detail would take several hours, and a lengthy sequence would likely take days. So it is not only a function of the richness of memory or lack thereof. But in any case an overabundance of detail can quickly start to appear as fabrication rather than recall.

Of course you might expect this sort of discussion to be leading up to a consideration of the relative verisimilitude of novelistic first-person narration, since aspects of the comic novel are after all the primary subject of this study. However, there's an assumption buried in the attempt to model novelistic narration or interpret it as modeled on oral storytelling, which is that a fixed point in time exists from which the story is narrated. In a non-fictional story of course such a point must exist, the point at which the teller is telling the story. But can we say that such a point exists in, say, *Moskva-Petushki*? It is narrated in a present tense which might seem at first a rhetorical device to convey a sense of immediacy or, worse, an illusion of accurate detail, but that is merely a variation on the same assumption. If the story is being told from a fixed point subsequent to the events that it relates then of course a present-tense narration must be a device or an illusion. And of course in a more basic sense it is. But as the narrator dies (or however one chooses to interpret his indefinite loss of consciousness) in the course of the novel (or poem), such a future fixed point of narration is not any more intuitively logical than a present-tense ongoing narration. Of course one could argue that that death invalidates any sort of discussion of realism, but that is the point: it undermines metaphysical assumptions about time and space throughout the text.

Voyage, *Le Sabotage*, and *Catch-22* are not really complicated in the same way: there are not the same kinds of self-contradictory elements planted to make a determination of the coordinates of the narrator impossible. But as Kandinsky writes in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, when the reproduction of objects “is considered [the] sole aim [of art]...The question ‘what?’ disappears from art; only the question ‘how?’ remains. By what method are these material objects to be reproduced?”, where by “what?” is meant “the internal truth which only art can divine, which only art can express by those means of expression which are hers alone.”¹⁷³ Of course time is not a “material object” per se, and in any case Kandinsky is primarily concerned with the visual arts, where the depiction of time is less central than in narrative arts, but the larger point, about the point at which a dedication to mimetic representation causes ultimate goals to recede in favor of means and techniques, remains applicable. So much of the discussion surrounding representation in art in any era concerns what art is not, how close it comes to capturing something in reality without itself being that thing. Kandinsky’s point is not simply to illustrate the dichotomy between art and reality as false, to show that a work of art is an object in reality as well, but to highlight the unique capabilities it possesses through its medium, which may not be present in any other facet of reality.

In a similar fashion, these novels make use of their medium. The linear progression of time is not followed merely for its own sake. Its forward movement is not merely a progression towards the future, but rather a spiritual direction. In them time may skip from era to era, passing over the important moments of change or transition in a life, as in *Voyage*, or be distilled down to

173. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M.T.H. Sadler, Dover Publications, Inc., 1977, p. 8-9.

the thinnest stream of individual moments and impressions, as in *Le Sabotage*, or be constantly interrupted by stuttering shifts to different times, places or perspectives, as in *Catch-22*, or move forward without passing through the major states of being along the way, as in *Moskva-Petushki*, where the narrator passes from life to death without suffering the loss of voice and consciousness that generally accompanies them and that he himself self-contradictorally avows. Narrative progression is at all times defined by a continuity of voice, single, monologic. This is true even in *Catch-22*, which lacks a first-person narrator and includes copious dialogue. For example, near the beginning of chapter 2:

“outside the hospital the war was still going on...And when Yossarian tried to remind people, they drew away from him and thought he was crazy. Even Clevinger...had told he was crazy the last time they had seen each other, which was just before Yossarian had fled into the hospital. Clevinger had stared at him with apoplectic rage and indignation and...had shouted, ‘You’re crazy!’”¹⁷⁴

Here the word crazy is repeated three times, spanning two different points in time, location and voice. It provides the link to a scene earlier in the novel’s chronology, and so in a sense justifies the flashback. It also records the movement in the passage from a general reflection to a specific instance. The first time “crazy” is used is as a non-specific claim about what “people” said, the second time as a description of what one character said at one specific moment, and the third time as a quotation of what the character actually said. The repetition is ironic in that there is no modulation of the diction to reflect the shift in perspective. One might expect two distinct voices, that of the narrator and an individual character, would not speak in exactly the same terms, and

174. Heller, p. 25.

even that the narrator's description might register a difference in the speech of "people" in general in contrast to that individual character's.

The irony of the repetition works on two possible fronts. On the one hand, expressions of the form "people say..." generally imply a large number of specific instances, whereas in this case the exact correspondence between what "people" thought (and, presumably, said), and what one particular person said might imply that Clevinger is in fact the sole example that the narrator has in mind. This irony, however, while it does effectively undercut the narrator in making a grandiose generalization, would also undercut, however, the caricature of the enlisted men as brainwashed to the point of insanity, by reducing the numbers who are incredulous at Yossarian for stating the obvious about their predicament. Another possibility, more in keeping with the themes of the novel, is the irony that arises from the fact that when a description of a specific incident follows a brief general characterization, as it does in this passage, this usually means greater richness and detail, whereas in this case we get simple repetition. Even just substituting another word for "crazy" would constitute an interpretive act on the part of the narrator, which would by itself would serve to give a fuller sense of what the narrator believes Clevinger intended to express. Instead we get a violation of what for many writers has become an instinctive rule of narrative, to vary wording and, more broadly, to always add variety.

Instead the narrator creates a feeling of awkwardness, of maladroitness with language in adding a seemingly useless extension, a reduplication without elaboration, a *mise-en-scène* that adds no new information to what has already been stated. In doing so Heller betrays the basic theatricality of the novel, the multiplication of personae, the illusion of multiple voices where

only one is at work. The unitary voice within the nominally distinct voices in the passage is not merely a commentary on the illusion of polyphony, since it adheres to a classic comedic structure of surprise. On the one hand, it surprises the reader by not adhering to the principles of elaboration and variety, but on the other hand it is familiar, since it is a repetition of what the reader has just read. In effect, like Norm Macdonald's roast jokes, it is surprising because it is more familiar than expected.

The singularity of the voice not only makes the joke work, it is also the thread connecting a digression into the past with the rest of the narrative. The word "crazy," repeated three times like an incantation, is also like a rhyme in that it provides a structural direction for the text even as it temporarily abandons the internal forward progression of events. In effect, the repetition retroactively creates a direction implied by the first appearance of the word, like a mile markers on the interstate, which record a steady increase in distance covered, even when the highway curves or changes direction. The repetition preserves a sense of linearity even as events move back into the past. This is a frequent technique in the novel, where are described in quick succession two events that may be distant in space and time, yet in another way are as close together as the repeated word or phrase that connects them. In the same way, I live in Boston and my best friend lives in Denver, but we both live on Marion Street.

This seems related to the central distinction which Wilhelm Worringer draws in *Abstraction and Empathy*, between art in which "Aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment. The value of a line, of a form consists for us in the value of the life that it holds for us. It holds its beauty only through our own vital feeling, which, in some mysterious manner, we

project into it,”¹⁷⁵ and art motivated by “the urge to abstraction,” which “is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world...We might describe this state as an immense spiritual dread of space.”¹⁷⁶ In contrast to this fear, the former kind of art, which Worringer characterizes as the art of empathy, is the product of “a happy...relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the world.”¹⁷⁷ Whatever the validity of Worringer’s view that this contrast represents the central cleavage between Western art and non-Western art, it is an interesting distinction. It’s not hard to see an attempt to provide an objective metaphysical corollary to traditional clichés about Western art as “humanistic” in contrast to non-Western art. Ironically, though, the contrast between “abstraction” and “empathy,” as is implied by the terms, depends on the psychological impulses behind the art associated with them rather than on metaphysical structure. Because art which causes a projection of the audience onto it is not clearly antithetical to art that attempts to detach aesthetic elements in the world from their surroundings, which is what Worringer means by “abstract” art. Both would seem to represent attempts to diminish the otherness of the non-self and in that sense are quite similar, although, as we have seen with Lévinas, an argument could be made that any attempt to interact with the non-self diminishes its otherness by establishing a connection to it, decreasing the distance between them.

In any case, the antithesis between “empathetic” and “abstract” art lies not in the style or the experience of it, in other words not in the art as a finished product, but in the impulse behind

175. Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock, International Universities Press, Inc., 1908, p. 14.

176. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

177. *Ibid.*

it. The first comes from a confident projection of the self onto the outside world, although the exact nature of this projection is left rather vague, whereas the second arises from a fearful attempt to tame the threatening outside world by dividing it into smaller and more manageable elements. For Worringer, since he is focused on visual art, the main neurosis is a terror of space, but one could imagine, in narrative art, the terror of time being equally prominent.

It's true that in all our four novels time is concentrated and distorted. They all occur across relatively narrow spans of time, except *Voyage*. In *Catch-22*, the lives of the soldiers are marked by a constant dread of death, but its actual palpability is undercut by the constant cutting between different scenes and time periods. Time is an element of narrative control in these novels: it is cut up, compressed, made to behave in odd ways. In that sense they are true heirs of the Dostoevsky of *Notes from the Underground*. As much as Bakhtin has made Dostoevsky synonymous with the concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia, he is equally inseparable from the history of the novel-as-deranged-monologue. Bakhtin makes little attempt to differentiate the earlier and later novel, seeming to see both as equally good examples of Dostoevsky's dialogism and multi-voicedness. And it is true that there is debate occurring in the monologues, the difference being that we actually hear that interlocutor in *Crime and Punishment* or *The Brothers Karamazov* and not in *Notes from the Underground*, where only one side is heard directly. But this distinction makes a major difference. A monologue in which a character is arguing with himself or some absent other possesses an unhinged, possibly comic character which is not inherent to a real debate between multiple people. It is the same absurdity as that of the man talking on the phone in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, who appears, to someone watching him through a

thick glass window, to be chattering insanely with himself. However, in *Notes from the Underground* there actually is no one on the other end of the line.

In general Dostoevsky's dialogism is closely connected to the resemblance of his later novels to philosophical dialogues. When only one side of the debate is recorded, however, the focus naturally shifts to the character and the warped inner reality of the speaker. The linear movement and shifts in that character's monologue become more evident than the lateral linkages with the absent other side, and as a result those shifts, absent a full context for them, seem more strange and arbitrary. As strange and random as the directions that real conversations often take are, in the absence of an actual conversational partner, those shifts and jumps appear as the arbitrary jumping around of the thoughts of the lone individual. *Notes from the Underground* represents an interesting middle point between *The Double*, which is all action ungoverned by theory, and the later novels, where certain philosophies are articulated by characters along with their actions. The first part of *Notes from the Underground* represents all theory with no action, though the second part contains elements reminiscent of both *The Double* and *Crime and Punishment*. It might seem strange to describe the narrative of a character as ineffective and flimsy as Golyadkin as being all action and no theory, and it's true that his movements are random and impulsive, the product of desires unfortified with tenacity or self-confidence. "Action" in this case is not meant in the same sense as that encoded in the phrase "man of action." Rather, Golyadkin's actions indicates a lack of focused thought governing his behavior.

Some of that absence is stylistic: for instance, in the course of the entire story the exact nature of Golyadkin's relationship and intentions with respect to Klara Olfusyevna is never elucidated, except to a degree in the letter which she supposedly writes to him, which is very likely a forgery. Of course, it doesn't seem that difficult to infer the essentials: clearly he possesses some kind of sentimental attachment to her--he doesn't keep turning up on her doorstep by pure accident, as insane as his prancing whirligigs through the streets of St. Petersburg on the way there may be. Nevertheless, significant context and clarifying information on characters' information is being emphatically suppressed. Similarly, Golyadkin's interactions with others, while often containing some nugget of substance to be discussed, slide by in such a haze of vacuous formalities and indecisive insinuations that they almost seem lobotomized, as if the decorative pleasantries and clumsy segues in each character's speech had been left in and the substance scooped out. For example, in Golyadkin's first conversation with his fellow clerk Setochkin, Golyadkin immediately tries to launch into the "matter" on his mind in the following manner:

“Я, видите ли, Антон Антонович, даже не знаю, как вам, то есть я хочу сказать, с которой стороны за это дело приняться, Антон Антонович... [I, you see, Anton Antonovich, don't even know how to put it to you, that is, I mean to say, from what angle to take on this matter, Anton Antonovich...].¹⁷⁸

Although Setochkin claims to not know what he is talking about, he himself nonetheless rambles along meaninglessly about it for a while:

“Что-с? Я вас... знаете ли... я, признаюсь вам, не так-то хорошо понимаю; вы... знаете, вы объяснитесь подробнее, в

178. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii v Tridtsati Tomakh: Tom Pervy: Bednye Lyudi, Povesti I Rasskazy, 1846-1847*, Izdatelst'vo "Nauka," 1972, p. 148.

каком отношении вы здесь затрудняетесь [What is it? I, well, you know, I confess I don't really understand. You know, you must explain in more detail in what respect you are having difficulty here]."¹⁷⁹

There actually is a concrete matter of importance to discuss underneath all this, namely the appearance and recent hiring of the double, and eventually Golyadkin is able to at least articulate that this is the “matter” he has in mind, but it is almost buried by inarticulacy, vacillating, hesitancy and pointlessly ornate phrasing. Here it is evident how even such a powerful external stimulus as the presence of the double is not able to do much to change or bring together the individual orbits of the characters in this world. On the one hand Golyadkin is driven into nearly a frenzy by it, but that energy is dispersed in random outbursts and endless prevarication. On the other hand, the other characters are barely roused out of their stupor. Like in Gogol's stories, even when the uncanny and surreal is occurring before their eyes, they still have to have it pointed out to them before they notice it.

Later on, Golyadkin bribes a couple of clerks to spy for him around the office, without ever really explaining to them what exactly it is he wants them to find out, and it's very likely that, despite his vague (and hypocritical) enthusiasm for intrigue, he has no idea what exactly he wants them to accomplish either. The clerks pretend to know what they are supposed to do and rush off to do it (after taking the money), but they seem so dull and venal as to genuinely not see any reason to genuinely inquire for what purpose this money is being given to them. As in Gogol and Kafka's stories, the strange and uncanny events that transpire simply illustrate people's superhuman impermeability to the outside world. But while Golyadkin is more intensely, though in his own way equally narrowly and self-interestedly, aware of the strangeness that has erupted

179. Ibid.

into his world, the reasons for the specific actions he undertakes throughout the narrative are equally as mysterious as the cause of the double's appearance. Even Major Kovalev's response to the loss of his nose is comprehensible, if unimpressive. He is not a mystery to himself or anyone else, even if certain parts of his face are. But Golyadkin's double is actually more normal than he is, which is saying something, considering it seems very much like a supernatural apparition or hallucinatory figment of his imagination. It simply does as a completely exteriorized creature would do in that bureaucratic environment, schmoozing and intriguing and winning favors, what Golyadkin himself would do if he were not continually undermined by his own self-consciousness, and what in fact he intermittently attempts to do, what he consoles himself for his incompetence at by pretending he is morally superior to. The asymmetries of energy in the story are fascinating: Golyadkin is a constant source of random spraying energy, which makes his colleagues uneasy because they are inert and torpid to the point of being inanimate objects, while only his double seems capable of constant, focused energy. If one subscribes to the theory of kundalini energy flows, Golyadkin is a mess. While he is possessed by intense energy flows, he might be one of the few characters in literature who appears blocked at every single major energy node (chakra). He is clearly in the grip of fear (1st chakra block), shame (3rd chakra) and inarticulacy (5th), and in the course of the narrative he succumbs to guilt (2nd), grief (4th) and delusionality (6th). All of which leads to, one can infer, a major lack of spiritual connectedness to the universe (7th chakra, the highest point on the body). With these points blocked, the flow of energy through his body has nothing to ground it and nowhere to go to, which only magnifies the intensity of its oscillations. Everything concrete in his life is effect: the causes are primordial and

unstated, buried in a psychic miasma. As philosophically explicit as Dostoevsky's later novels are, existential issues in *The Double*, and even some of the basic machinery of the plot, are almost defiantly unarticulated. And that inarticulacy is the source of the comic quality in *The Double* which seems absent in the late novels.¹⁸⁰ It's hard to find pathos in meaninglessness, which is why despite Golyadkin's painful self-consciousness, his spasmodic bursts of action possess a certain lightness, as he seems to act to stimuli by reflex, like an animal.

In *Notes from the Underground*, by contrast, the self-defeating protagonist has found his voice, though perhaps at the expense of everything else. That voice occupies an empty space, the "underground," hived off from all activity or other people. The separation between theory and action becomes a structural partition, between the first and second sections, and also a temporal rift, as the Underground Man withdraws into this disembodied voice state of the first part as a result of the the humiliation and shame of the actions he describes in the second part.

Golyadkin's attempts to rationalize his own social failings as principled are much more developed and sophisticated in the Underground Man. Unlike Golyadkin, the Underground Man does not seek to pass his total lack of ability to maintain a social existence as the virtues of an honest, simple son of the soil. Instead, he has discovered the perverse power of unflattering self-description. In part, of course, this functions as a satire on Rousseau's *Confessions*, and on the sadomasochistic cycle of ritual self-flagellation that it to some extent embodies. Particularly in one respect: one of the most persistent tropes of 18th century fiction, as has been mentioned earlier, is the denial of the fictionality of fiction. Fictional narratives are framed over and over as

180. Notwithstanding that in *Crime and Punishment* Dostoevsky repeatedly returns to the inexhaustible comic well of silly foreign accents.

overheard conversations, intercepted letters, etc. The author's recounting of the story must be presented under a plausible cover of factuality. Rousseau's claim that his *Confessions* are a form of private communication, not written with an eye on a reading public, is a corollary to that practice in that it responds to an implied skepticism regarding of the truthfulness of its literary genre by flatly denying its own nature. Fiction pretends to be fact, public statement pretends to be private confession.

It is not an accident that Dostoevsky conspicuously comments on both of these tropes in *Notes from the Underground*. In a note at the beginning of the text he explicitly avows the fictionality of the text, making instead (like Flaubert with his alleged phalanx of real-life Mme. Bovarys) a standard late-19th century claim to non-specific general narrative truth. Then at the end of the first section, Dostoevsky makes an explicit reference to Rousseau and what appears to be an elaborate mockery of him and the confessional genre:

“Гейне утверждает, что...Руссо...непременно налгал на себя в своей исповеди, и даже умышленно налгал, из тщеславия...Но Гейне судил о человеке, исповедовавшемся перед публикой. Я же пишу для одного себя и раз навсегда объявляю, что если я и пишу как бы обращаясь к читателям то единственно только для показу, потому что так мне легче писать. Тут форма, одна пустая форма, читателей же у меня никогда не будет [Heine claims, that...Rousseau...undoubtedly slandered himself in his *Confessions*, and even slandered himself deliberately, out of vanity...but Heine was judging a man making a public confession. I however am only writing for myself and once and for all I declare that if I write as I am addressing readers, it's only for show, because it's easier for me to write that way. It's just a style, an empty style, for I will never have readers].”¹⁸¹

181. “Zapiski iz podpol'ya,” p. 166.

The irony of this passage becomes clear to any reader familiar with the *Confessions*, since Rousseau makes the exact same claim for himself relative to St. Augustine, claiming that St. Augustine was insincere because his confessions were written for public consumption, and thus tried to present him in a favorable light, whereas he, Rousseau, is able to be sincere about his failings because he is not writing for the public. Yet the Underground Man, following Heine, suggests that Rousseau, in presenting himself in an excessively negative light, is just as calculating as St. Augustine. The Underground Man understands that all published memoirs are equally public, and that self-presentation is thus a function of the genre rather than any particular author. So his ironic parroting of Rousseau at Rousseau's expense should be a signal that he is not sincerely intending to perpetuate the ruse of confidential communication which is endemic to the confessional genre.

This passage occurs at the beginning of the text, preemptively negating any attempt to posit the Underground Man as authentic in contrast to Rousseau, the same way Rousseau does with respect to St. Augustine. In this sense the conclusion of *Notes from the Underground* is like *Moskva-Petushki*, sinking the fictionality of the narrative into the narrative structure. The author claims at the outset that the story is invented, but the conclusion guarantees that it is. Just as a real narrator cannot die at the end of his own story, since he has to still be alive to tell or write it, the narrator of a published story cannot have written a text with no readers. Since the Underground Man's lack of an audience is thus explicitly fictional, what this does is to shift its meaning, from authenticity to isolation. Rousseau brags about his lack of an audience as evidence of his sincerity, but the Underground Man's commensurate claim is rueful, even bitter.

It is not a badge of honor for him but a sign of his disgrace. In chakra terms, the Underground Man, unlike Golyadkin, has been able to open his throat and third eye, the seats of self-expression and reasoning, and, like the “ever more one-sided achievements” of modern geniuses described by Nietzsche, he has poured all his energy into them at the expense of all the other sources of power in his body, seeking to bolster them up to compensate for the weakness of the others. But these ending passages suggest that in fact he is still blocked even at those points, that he has found the voice to describe his condition but has no one to communicate it to. So instead of being a patently false metatextual ruse, as it is for Rousseau, the purported lack of an audience here adds extra poignancy to the Underground Man’s state, is in fact the final stone negating the hope for escape back into the world that his confession itself seemed to represent.

The form and the substance of the Underground Man’s confession are of a piece. His (self-)alleged deceit and disingenuousness at various points in the narrative are paradoxically important elements in his confession. It is important to the Underground Man to see himself and be seen not merely to be immoral but as mean, a failure and a liar, though at other moments he wants the exact opposite, because these traits represent self-isolating involutions of the psyche. Any one of his failings offer a hidden access point to his spirit, a potential connection with others based on sympathy. Instead he must be flawed at every point in order to repel such attention, to maintain his fanatical autonomy and freedom from the entanglements of human relations. Time and again an outward movement of his mind or heart bends back and takes an inward turn into hostility and spite. So the very quality that makes the Underground Man’s monologue somewhat comic, its self-contained quality, which veers unpredictably from one idea to the next as if he is

having a debate with himself, is also what makes it tragic. Because there is no redemption for the Underground Man: he remains underground, he is able to prevent himself from baring himself to the outside world and seeking forgiveness from it, and thus he remains entombed.

The distance and isolation that the Underground Man establishes through self-conscious alienation of others becomes hardened in Erofeev, Céline, et al into reserve and ironic coolness. It would be impossible for Dostoevsky heroes to remain indifferent enough for reserve, so they have to maintain and patrol their isolation through passionate self-abasement, but for the protagonists of the later novels that distance has become fixed in their personalities. That distance is also perhaps what allows for first-person narration, because that distance is also the distance of an observer and a chronicler. And this is also likely why Heller had to abandon the first-person point of view in *Catch-22*, whereas he resumed it in subsequent novels (including the later adventures of Yossarian): because Yossarian is an unwilling participant in the events, with his life constantly at stake, he cannot maintain the same distance and reserve.

In all of these novels the narrative comes encased within a single voice, including *Catch-22*, where, as we have seen, one character may not hold the floor, but all the characters tend to sound the same, and the distance from the events of the novels created by that self-contained narrative monologism affords them the sense of irony which is the basic source of humor. As Aldous Huxley said of Virginia Woolf, one of the great creators of the modern monologistic novel, “She sees with incredible clarity, but always as through a sheet of plate glass; she never touches anything.” But *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* are actually less monologistic in that narration slides back and forth between several characters. This

is natural, since these characters are encountering and interacting with each other, which creates intimacy and opens up their personal worlds to each other. But in these other novels additional barriers between narrative voice and environment resist contact. In *Moskva-Petushki* Venichka's extreme drunkenness first creates drinking-circle bonding with his fellow passengers, but eventually leads him into hallucination and unconsciousness. In *Le Sabotage* it is the distance between the long-ago childhood events and the detached adult present-day narrator which makes all secondary characters and voices fade into the background. In *Catch-22* it is the nebulous distance of the omniscient narrator, and in *Voyage* the severe misanthropy of Bardamu.

The comedy of all these monologistic narrators is intimately connected to their isolation, even if only the Underground Man explicitly acknowledges either the intention or the effect of making readers laugh, though characteristically he both avows and denies such an intention at different moments. After his opening salvo he interjects:

“Наверно, вы думаете, господа, что я вас смешить хочу? Ошиблись и в этом. Я вовсе не такой развеселый человек, как вам кажется или как вам, может быть, кажется [No doubt, gentlemen, you think I'm trying to make you laugh? In that you are mistaken. I am not at all the merry person that I seem like or perhaps seem like to you].”¹⁸²

Of course the real joke is that anyone could possibly mistake him for a merry person--the issue of joking vs. seriousness seems to be more a question of sincerity than humor per se. Having asserted his intention to live to old age immediately after claiming that to go on living past the age of 40 is “неприлично, пошло, безнравственно [indecent, vulgar, immoral],” and by subsequently claiming that he is not joking, he seems to be saying more that he is in earnest,

182. “Zapiski iz podpol'ya,” p. 135.

despite the paradox, rather than making a commentary about its humor value. Whether that plea is itself sincere is another matter.

He does, however, see himself as being perceived as simply performing in order to provide entertainment. At one point, ventriloquizing his possible audience, he says: “Вы уверяете, что скрежете зубами, и в то же время острите, чтоб нас рассмешить [You assure us that you are ganshing your teeth, and at the same time you crack jokes to make us laugh].”¹⁸³ And another point he goes so far as to ventriloquize the laughter itself: “Ха, ха, ха! да вы после этого и в зубной боли отыщете наслаждение!” -- всреикнете вы со смехом [Ha ha ha! After that you’ll find pleasure even in a toothache!” you’ll shout with laughter].”¹⁸⁴ Yet even here the issue of sincerity is important. From the point of view of the audience he sees, or claims he sees, some kind of contradiction or at least disjunction between the nastiness and hostility towards the world and a desire to please and entertain it, as well as one between pain and pleasure. And he presents the audience as laughing at the absurdity of the juxtaposition of these purported opposites.

So joking for the Underground Man is one way of dealing with the issue of sincerity and insincerity in his confessions. Yet it also possesses an element of entertainment, of connection with others. In effect, jokes have a dual nature, both of which the Underground Man makes use of. Firstly, they possess the quality of being pleasant or pleasing to an audience, even though they can be turned mockingly on that audience. Secondly, due to their lack of seriousness, they can almost always be used to retract a serious statement (“I was only joking”), and serious

183. Ibid., p. 164.

184. Ibid., p. 143.

statements are sometimes retracted under the pretext of having actually been jokes. Lack of sincerity, lack of seriousness and entertainment are all aligned in one ambiguous gesture of outreach. The Underground Man seems capable of great wit and humor, and yet his self-defined jokes aren't particularly funny. I don't think that that's an accident. I think that we're supposed to see the seams, and that these are the dying embers of the urge for connection with another that he stifles in his relationship with the young prostitute. He learns his lesson from that deeply disturbing contact with his own feelings of need for love. No more will he attempt to engage with someone from the the "above-ground" world without encasing it in a form, like a joke, which can be retracted and disavowed at any time. The joke, for the Underground Man, both creates a momentary bond with the reader and simultaneously breaks it. And this is both the great wonder of humor that we see in all these novels and its fatal flaw: it creates a momentary self-transcendence, but contains the seeds of its own destruction as well.

Jokes create an instant bond, a warmth between speaker and audience, but not intimacy. Their basic impersonality creates a dynamic that anyone can participate in, which makes them such a popular staple of conversation when two people are meeting for the first time, but also can become a limiting factor later, as they get to know each other more deeply. In addition, there is the lack of seriousness, the retractability of sentiment that the Underground Man finds so attractive in his scarred defensive mentality, a lack of seriousness which is practically incompatible with sincerity or earnestness. The joker is incapable of sincerely avowing their sentiments except in disguised form. For the most part the relationships between the protagonists and other characters in all these four novels are simply interaction of character with environment,

in other words defined and limited by the fact that the characters share a proximate physical space. It is no coincidence that the only one that somewhat transcends that is between the narrator and Elena in *Le Sabotage*, perhaps Baradamu's with Robinson, although the autonomy of Robinson's identity is questionable, and perhaps Venichka's with his absent daughter. The narrator of *Le Sabotage* has the kind of "love affair" with Elena seemingly inspired by that between Julien Sorel and Mathilde de la Mole in *The Red and the Black*, although the only precedent Nothomb acknowledges in the text is *The Iliad*. The love affair described by Stendhal consists of a fascination and attainment-oriented ambition which intrinsically cannot survive its own requital. Julien and Mathilde explicitly conceal their feelings for each other, having perceived that the surety of being loved will make the other lose all interest in them. The essence of the love is a narcissistic interest in how one stands in the eyes of the other. As the narrator claims of Elena: "Je pense qu'elle avait besoin d'être aimée. D'aimer, non: ce n'était pas dans ses cordes. A chacun sa spécialité [I think that she needed to be loved. To love, no: that wasn't in her fiber. To each their speciality]."185

So this relationship, in the narrator's eyes, is essentially a performance for an audience: her. At least this is the lesson she draws from it afterwards: "Merci à Elena, parce qu'elle m'a tout appris de l'amour [Thank you to Elena, because she taught me everything about love]."186 At first she tries to make use of this knowledge to reverse the terms of the relationship by feigning indifference, and thus rousing displays of emotion and even tears in Elena in an attempt to win back her devotion. However, like the Underground Man, she is unable prevent herself expressing

185. Nothomb, p. 112.

186. Ibid., p. 124.

the emotion inside her, and also like the Underground Man she seems to be specifically provoked by the emotions of the other person into torpedoing the relationship. The Underground Man heaps abuse on the girl after having opened his heart to her, and Nothomb's narrator confesses her unchanging love to Elena and even makes a point of telling her that if the narrator at any subsequent point professes indifference it will be an insincere ruse, and this confession loses Elena's interest permanently. Like the Underground Man, she comes to regret her self-destructive sincerity later, and in her narrative tone shows she has learned and applied Elena's lessons in her relationship to the audience, even if she was unable to employ them for long towards Elena herself. Because the witty narrator is rather similar to the teasing, mocking, permanently out of reach *femme fatale*. Like her, the joking narrator in general strives to conceal any sign that she is striving to please her audience, and exists in a state of permanent retraction and withdrawal. It's in the nature of wit to never fully stand behind one's statements. The Underground Man uses that property to keep people at arm's length, the narrator of *Le Sabotage*, having learned from Elena that all affection is subject to loss through boredom, uses humor to keep the audience interested.

In the case of Venichka, on the other hand, a similar defensive shield finds its objective corollary in his drinking. In other words, he too engages in a witty monologue that imposes a distance between him and the audience, but for him it can also be rooted in an objective physical cause, namely his drunkenness. Of course drunkenness is ultimately, at least at the beginning, a personal choice, so his withdrawal and isolation has roots in personal volition, but it doesn't end there, because intoxication, certainly at his level, is an effect that overwhelms its cause. And as charming as Venichka can be as a deranged raconteur, and as many friends as he makes on the

train in a short time, his story is also one of constantly being expelled and exiled. At the very beginning of the narrative he wakes up on the street, and is shortly after kicked out of the train station café for drunkenness and abusing the wait staff. He also later reveals that he was kicked out of a communal apartment he lived in on some mysterious grounds, but seemingly at root because his roommates considered him a supercilious snob. Later he is fired from his job as a cable-fitter for drunkenly accidentally publicizing the charts of the workers' drinking habits that he made. On the train itself he quickly finds a group of fellow travelers to drink and talk with, but eventually his escalating drunkenness causes him to pass out or drift into delusional visions until all the other passengers disappear. And then of course there is the murderous mob that chases him across Moscow to the Kremlin, and his separation from his child and the child's mother.

Not only is he frequently cast out socially, groups of people often circle around him ominously. First in the train station restaurant, where he finds “Надо мной -- две женщины и один мужчина, все трое в белом [Above me were two women and a man, all three in white].”¹⁸⁷ These ghostly figures “все трое подхватили меня под руки и через весь зал...проевели меня и вытолкнули на воздух [all three grabbed me under the arms and...led me across the entire station and threw me outside].”¹⁸⁸ And then he recalls when his roommates confronted him: “все четверо потихоньку меня обсаживают -- двое сели на стулья у изголовья, а двое в ногах. И смотрят мне в глаза...с упреком [all four quietly sat around me--two sat on chairs at the head of

187. Erofeev, p. 16.

188. Ibid.

my bed, and two at the foot. And they looked me reproachfully in the eye].”¹⁸⁹ Even among his traveling companions on the train, after enough of his drunken antics he finds himself “сжатый со всех сторон кольцом дурацких ухмылок [pressed on all sides by a circle of idiotic smirks],”¹⁹⁰ and he leaves their company. Then of course there is the ephemeral presence of angel voices all around him, which eventually turn into demons, demons literalized by the last, most important and most infernal circle, at the end of his journey when

“мне шли четверо... Я сразу их узнал, я не буду объяснять, кто эти четверо...А они подошли и меня обступили [four men came up to me... I recognized them at once, I won't say who they were...And they came up and surrounded me].”¹⁹¹

Maybe these four are acquaintances from his personal life, maybe they represent the four horsemen of the apocalypse, or perhaps Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. In any case, one of them informs him: “А вот так и попался! Больше никуда не поедешь [Well now you've been caught! And you won't be going anywhere anymore].”¹⁹²

So for Venichka it is not merely isolation, but isolation at the center of a hostile circle which is his characteristic position. And the most characteristic stance of the hostile circle is perhaps not so much the aggressive locking-of-eyes with the person at the center of the circle on the part of those in front of him or her, but the stare at his or her defenseless back on the part of those behind. When a circle forms around a person, those in the circle always start to feel the power of plurality over singularity, even when they are surrounding an idol or leader, and they can easily pull apart an object of veneration in a frenzy. This is the double-edged nature of the

189. Ibid., p. 27.

190. Ibid., p.145.

191. Ibid., p. 178-179.

192. Ibid.

relationship between society and the individual who dares to set themselves apart from it for any reason, and it seems to be that against which Venichka's roommates are instinctively reacting when they expel him from their company, even as they struggle mightily to articulate their objections, eventually settling on the claim that he thinks he is better than them because he prefers privacy when he relieves himself. And of course, at least since Dante circles have been associated with Hell, whereas their three-dimensional counterpart, spheres, pertain to Heaven. A circle has a connotation of imprisonment, since it is line of finite length that paradoxically never ends. When moving along a circle, one can move as much as one wants but will always return to the same spot, which is of course exactly what Venichka does.

In *Catch-22* Yossarian's isolation is effectively taxonomic: he is a person while everyone else in the novel is a cartoon. As mentioned before, Heller originally planned the novel as a first-person narrative, and the division intrinsic to first-person narratives between the interiority of one character (the narrator) and the reduction of everyone else to exterior forms is still clearly evident. However, because the novel is written in third-person form, Yossarian's isolation is no longer that of the narrative voice. His anomalousness is there to serve as a gauge, a measuring instrument for the insanity around him, which is registered through his reactions. The monologism of the narrative voice is of a somewhat different nature. If the single-voicedness of the other novels is symptom of the retreat of the central characters from the world (or their expulsion from and marginalization in it), the amorphous narrator of *Catch-22* goes the other direction, swallowing the voices and personalities of all the characters in the novel and tuning them to its farce-like rhythm and tone. For example, this description of Yossarian's pilot:

“Dobbs was almost as bad as Orr, who seemed happy as an undersized, grinning lark with his deranged and galvanic giggle and shivering warped buck teeth and who was sent along for a rest leave with Milo and Yossarian on the trip to Cairo for eggs when Milo bought cotton instead and took off at dawn for Istanbul with his plane packed to the gun turrets with exotic spiders and ripened red bananas.”¹⁹³

The narrator starts out describing Dobbs, then switches over with the briefest of transitions to the description of Yossarian’s tent-mate, Orr, and then into a brief recounting of a voyage they undertook for Milo Minderbinder. There is a clear undermining of hierarchy down to the syntactical level. Dobbs, as the initial subject of the sentence, would seem to be the head or center which everything else must be put in relation to, but the comparison between him and Orr is merely asserted, not explained, and then begins a tangent about the trip to Istanbul, rather than remaining focused on Orr, or at least hiving that description off into its own sentence or appositive phrase. It all seems deliberately plotted to thwart an answer to the question as to where the center of gravity of this sentence is. Is it Dobbs, the ostensible subject, Orr, the main character, or the trip to Istanbul, the seeming destination point?

In effect, the lack of order turns the passage into a list. Granted, the list here only contains two items, but it is the lack of hierarchy or structure that makes it like a list, not the number of items. Lists are chaotic and reductive, though they can be ordered with extrinsic aids like numbers or sub-headings. Things are placed in a nebulous relation to each other, precise coordinates in space and time replaced by primitive sequential proximity. Yet they are also indefinitely expandable, and thus possess a latent, potentially infinite aspect. To a greater or less degree the whole novel conforms to the logic of the list. Although *Catch-22* is far from the most fragmented

193. Heller, p. 238-239.

or disordered of narratives, its structure still depends heavily on the mind's tendency to see a logical order in any sequence. With linkages of physical or temporal proximity between succeeding episodes often weak or suppressed, language itself becomes the link. When a phrase repeated in two successive sentences describes different characters in drastically different locations without a conscious connection, it can be seen how the narrative voice is indispensable as a source of coherence. The list-maker in making a list creates a space defined by the maker by selecting that which appears on the list. The narrator of *Catch-22* similarly becomes the medium in which the events that it recounts transpire.

Bardamu in *Voyage* remains fairly cagey until the end of the novel, when his dying frenemy Robinson inspires the following thoughts:

“il n’y avait que moi...un Ferdinand bien véritable auquel il manquait ce qui ferait un homme plus grand que sa simple vie, l’amour de la vie des autres. De ça, j’en avais pas, ou vraiment si peu que c’était pas la peine de le montrer...j’étais malin...je ne retrouvais rien de ce qu’on a besoin pour crever, rien que des malices. Mon sentiment c’était comme un maison où on ne va qu’aux vacances [there was only me...a true Ferdinand who lacked that which could make a man greater than his own mere life, love for the lives of others. I didn’t have any of that, or at least, so little that it wasn’t worth showing...I was cunning...I couldn’t find any of what you need to croak, nothing but cunning. My feelings were like a house that you only go to on vacations].”¹⁹⁴

Here we see isolation as a pure effect of personality. Confronted with the sight of Robinson dying, the person to whom in the course of the novel he has been closest, and whom he most resembles, he realizes his own incapacity to care for another. And this very thought ironically demonstrates the swerve inwards, so that he becomes lost in his own existence and his own

194. Céline, p. 486.

problems, practically indifferent to the very person in front of him who provoked these thoughts. It is an involution of an involution, though a sadly appropriate tribute to Robinson, whose primary quality seemed to be the very impossibility of preventing his identity from eroding and seeping into Bardamu's.

Bardamu stresses his lack of feeling, and repeatedly describes himself as "cunning." As has been mentioned, comedy, certainly Céline's variety of wit at any rate, depends on emotional distance, detachment, and yet at the same time strives towards transcendent moments, connections and unexpected juxtapositions that broaden awareness and change one's perception of the universe. Yet here Bardamu locates self-transcendence, the capacity to become "plus grand que sa simple vie" through compassion and love for another. This suggests that ironic comedy is not the best route to self-transcendence. Of note too, paradoxically, is the elision between subject and object, between Bardamu and Robinson, when Bardamu claims "je ne retrouvais de ce qu'on a besoin **pour crever**" (emphasis mine). Ralph Manheim translates this as "I couldn't find any of what we need to help a man die," but in fact Bardamu only says "pour crever," i.e. "to die" or "to croak." In this context Manheim's interpretation makes more sense, but it seems like it might be an instance of over-rationalizing a text. Of course it could be that Bardamu is employing "crever" as a compact short-hand for the whole death-scene, and that he is still talking about comforting Robinson, but the simpler reading, as much of a non sequitur as it may seem, would be that by "to die" he means his own death, and that his mind has leaped to the idea that dying itself is an accomplishment of emotional involvement of which he is incapable.

This idea may seem strange, and on a literal level it is obviously untrue, but after all, Robinson's death is the result of a violent emotional clash between him and his mistress who he has been cheating on, and who consequently shoots him in the belly. In that sense, to die for Robinson has meant first to inspire that kind of passion, which Bardamu perhaps fears he has never been able to inspire in another. Further explanation along these lines is provided by something he expresses just before the preceding passage, when he is explaining the reason he has become "hard":

“Dans ces moments-là, c'est un peu gênant d'être devenu aussi pauvre et aussi dur qu'on est devenu. On manque de presque tout ce qu'il faudrait pour aider à mourir quelqu'un. On a plus guère en soi que des choses utiles pour la vie de tous les jours, la vie du confort, la vie à soi seulement, la vacherie...On l'a poussée la pitié au bout de l'intestin avec la merde. Elle est bien là qu'on se dit [In those moments it's a little embarrassing to have become as poor and hard as we've become. We lack almost everything it would take to help someone die. We have barely anything more in ourselves than what's useful for everyday life, a life of comfort, living for ourselves alone, viciousness...We've pushed pity to the bottom of our intestines with our shit. We tell ourselves that's a good place for it].”¹⁹⁵

Incidentally, here is where he actually says that he lacks what it takes to “help someone die” (“pour aider à mourir quelqu'un”). Here Bardamu suggests that he perhaps did not emerge from the womb an embittered cynic, that the course of his life has whittled away any more idealistic impulses, though his claim does not come rife with details (though Céline's follow-up novel, *Mort à crédit*, supplies a few). Like the Underground Man, he eschews sympathy for others, though out of fear of what is unclear, and unlike the Underground Man at a certain point he is startled by the realization that that conditioning has become second nature and he is actually

195. Ibid.

incapable of breaking free from his hard-boiled exterior, that the hard defensive shield has devoured the soft interior.

It's worthwhile paying attention to the distinction in the two passages between "what it would take" to help someone to die versus what it would take to die oneself, the distinction obscured by Manheim in translating them both with the same phrase. He is not wrong to see a connection between them, and translating them identically does create a more clear narrative line through the passage, but there is a leap being made here as well. Bardamu seems to be suggesting that *not only* does it take compassion to help someone die peacefully *but even* to die at all. In fact, not only is the second instance, "to die" ("pour crever"), not clearly another way of saying "to help someone die," but it even casts doubt on that phrase. Because "to help someone die" upon cursory reading seems to imply to die *peacefully*, but if compassion is needed to die, maybe compassion is needed even for someone else to die. So it might simply mean what it says, "to help someone die," period. Not necessarily, but the question is raised through the phrasing. In any case, the act of dying, which is associated with love for another, is cathartic, final, decisive, the opposite of mere continuation, of the digestive process to which the repressed consciousness consigns pity when it pushes it down into the intestines with the other shit, to eventually be flushed away, like the boats floating down the river in the novel's final image:

"le remorqueur a sifflé; son appel a passé le pont, encore une arche, une autre, l'écluse, un autre pont, loin, plus loin... Il appelait vers lui toutes les péniches du fleuve toutes, et la ville entière, et le ciel et la campagne et nous, tout qu'il emmenait, la Seine aussi, tout, qu'on n'en parle plus [the tugboat whistled; its call passed the bridge, another arch, another, the lock, another bridge, farther and farther... It called towards it all the barges on the river, and the whole city, and the sky, and the countryside, and us, everything that

it was carrying off, the Seine as well, everything of which we no longer speak].”¹⁹⁶

In this final passage of the novel Céline concentrates in one image the ongoingness of these novels, with which we have been concerned from the first chapter. One might assume, given its placement at the end of the novel and the somewhat tired feelings it describes, that this image refers to death. Certainly it's very common for rivers to be likened to the course of life, with their ending in the sea representing the end of life. But it is of note that no mention is made of the sea in this passage, and although, like *Moskva-Petushki*, the very last sentence self-referentially makes mention of its own ending, there does not seem to be any particular mention of an absolute end-point, other than what may be inferred from cultural cliché. Of course death is in the background of this scene, just as death is implicit in every human life, but in a somewhat different sense than one might expect. We have seen how Robinson's death Bardamu expresses a sense of exclusion. And in literal terms he is as healthy and seemingly far from death as ever at the novel's end. If anything, the foreboding feeling expressed in this passage, then, comes from the prospect of an indefinite prolongation, his continued purgatory-like drifting down the current of life. So far his life has carried him from one continent to another almost at random, without lasting connections or deep, rewarding relationships. The only constant thread in his life, other than himself, has been Robinson, who has just died. So it could well be imagined that some other tide of history might carry him off somewhere else in the world, and in his previous home he would be that “of which we no longer speak.”

Let it be remembered as well that humor and imagination have functioned throughout the narrative not just to ward off the fear of death, although that impulse is certainly present as well,

196. *Ibid.*, p. 493.

but to relieve the tedious continuity of life. It does do so in momentary flashes, but not enough to permanently transfigure his existence, as love and death do, or at least as he believes they do, and of which he feels himself incapable. And this is to varying degrees at the heart of the connection between monologuism, humor and the indefinite trajectories of these novels. In all of them, the intense sense of loneliness and isolation creates the need to break free of the self through the temporary release of humor, and much of the structure of the narratives is aimed at the lead-up to and anticipation of humor. But because humor is only a momentary release from the monotony of the self, none of the narratives have a true direction or shape. This is why their length and conclusions are somewhat undefined: faced with the impossibility of escaping from or transcending the self through the mechanisms of humor and irony, any conclusion or destination point will seem arbitrary, because it is the inevitability of self-continuation which is the overwhelming reality that must be grappled with. In all of these narratives the pressure of war and dictatorship, the fear of being killed or stripped of freedom, gives the struggle for survival and self-perpetuation an ethical purpose and validity, but it does not necessarily make it easy to deal with. The pathos of comedy in all of these works is that it does allow for an opening of the self to the universe, but only for a second before it closes up again. And in all cases the central characters, in their pursuit of the state of detachment and irony, shun more lasting human connections.

Conclusion

I started out on this project convinced of the need to vindicate the positive possibilities latent in humor, and by the end I'd come to focus on its limitations. I think originally humor held acute promise as a source of relief from the endless chain of repetitive thoughts. Those moments of weightlessness where preconceptions are suddenly thrown out and one's chain of thought is reorganized can become addictive. Eventually, I saw that humor can only take one so far along that path. One point I have tried to emphasize is that while no existing theory of humor is capable of encompassing all its kinds or aspects, they all encode a partial truth. Kant's belief that humor serves as a relief from the mind tediously locked in the search for truth holds an important truth. While humor may not represent a stable source of truth or knowledge in and of itself, as an auxiliary to other mental activities and pursuits, as the break from the ordinary and routine, it has always exerted a potent allure.

Ultimately the greatest strength and weakness of humor is its basic orientation towards the future. It is not an art of commemoration or contentment. It is an art of being toward the future. It is an art of anticipation, of discontent, of hope. It shatters reality and then vanishes. The actual moment of humor is such a portion of the experience of hearing a joke or funny anecdote, temporally speaking at any rate, that it is almost a negation of itself. As such it is a source of consolation for those subjected to an oppressive present. It is like a backdoor to the future, which can be enjoyed in advance. Conversely, a constant dissatisfaction exists in the experience of humor. Jokes create a concrete relationship between past, present and future. Until the punchline arrives, everything is a set-up. It turns narrative into a puzzle which can not be comprehended or

explained until the final moment. Just because sometimes the punchline can be anticipated in advance does not really change anything. Humor only functions when its epiphanies are arrived at at their own pace and rhythm. A joke perceived too soon or too late is not funny. The state of anticipation fostered by the expectation is antithetical to being-in-and-of-itself, of a contented relationship with imminent reality. By contrast, humor bears certain affinities to eschatology. There is always a promise of a future revelation, of a final understanding which will not only explain but also validate that which has come before.

This well perhaps seem strange given the common perception that humor is inherently profane, that it desecrates the sacred wherever it touches it. And perhaps this is true insofar as humor often somehow diminishes its objects, and also given its emotional detachment, analytical quality and tendency towards tiny climaxes at regular intervals (the jokes), rather than leading up to one or a few big cathartic moments. But it is perhaps a first step in spiritual awakening: although it can be abused and used for cruel and insensitive purposes, it lifts the mind above the humdrum and everyday, makes it alert and aware of larger patterns and structures visible in our lives.

This is not to argue for humor as a tool for stealth religious indoctrination, but merely that it can be a first step, accessible (more or less) to all, of longer-term, more stable spiritual energies. It was in that spirit that I argued that humor can create an instant bond between two people, but that at a certain point it cannot go any further, that it discourages intimacy or sharing, beyond a certain point at least. Not that humor is necessarily incompatible with a warm and forgiving attitude towards individuals--James Wood has demonstrated that. But sometimes the

mind needs to be detached from its surroundings, be jolted into a more objective attitude towards them and a critical detachment that can preserve its autonomy. This is especially true where propaganda and a pervasive atmosphere of deceit puts one's sense of the truth constantly under assault. This is where humor serves a truly valiant function through satire, caricature and ridicule.

This is also where an orientation towards the future, towards the promise of release, will be especially appealing. The hope of some future moment that will cause everything now to make sense will predominate over the enjoyment of life now. Humor is almost like a record of that future, and therefore strongly attractive to those for whom current reality is perceived as intolerable. Not a prophetic description of the future, which in any case would simply amount to treating the future like the past, only with the tenses changed. No, as I have argued, humor is awareness, not knowledge. Humor does not grant knowledge of the future like Nostradamus. Instead it creates an awareness of the future, of coming moments, of the unexpected, and above all that the future represents change.

As Multatuli wrote in *Max Havelaar*, describing his own approach to describing colonial depredations in the Dutch East India Colony :

“Vervloekt, dat verontwaardiging en droefheid zo vaak moeten kleden in 't lappenpak van de satire! Vervloekt, dat een traan, om begrepen te worden, moet verzeld gaan van gegryns! Of is 't de schuld myner onbredevenheid, dat ik geen woorden vind om de diepte te peilen van de wonde die er kankert aan ons staatsbestuur, zonder myn styl te zoeken by *Figaro* of *Polichinel* [Curses, that indignation and sorrow must so often dress in the motley of satire! Curses, that a tear, in order to be understood, must be accompanied by a grin! Or is it the fault of lack of skill on my part, that I can find no words to probe the depth of the wound that festers on our

administration without looking for my style in *Figaro* or
Punch]?”¹⁹⁷

This would be the counter-narrative to the efficacy of humor in taking on intolerable situations. It is an indictment of the failings of a public for whom suffering by itself is not enough to hold their attention without the enticement of entertainment. I think it is important to note that Multatuli's public, at least at that time, were not the victims of colonialism, except in the sense that all of humanity is the victim. Were the natives of the colony the ones crafting humor to console themselves for the plight his attitude might be quite different. It is particularly the fact that he has to sing and dance, so to speak, for the perpetrators enough to trick them into paying attention to his portrayal of the situation that seems to particularly enrage him. Yet nevertheless he still employed comedy, as an expedient or perhaps simply because that is what he was best at. In the end we see, which is what I wanted to create an awareness of from the beginning, that comedy is a tool and a technique, not, or at least not only, a philosophy or an idea, and while I have attempted to elucidate certain possibilities and realities within the realm of humor, its reality is ultimately manifold.

197. Multatuli, *Max Havelaar, of De Koffiveilingen de Nederlandse Handelsmaaschappy*, Athenaeum, 2009, p. 181.

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