



# The Comic Sphere: Readings in Dickens, Joyce and Lerner

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The Comic Sphere: Readings in Dickens, Joyce and Lerner

a dissertation presented

by

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to

The Department of English

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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The Comic Sphere: Readings in Dickens, Joyce and Lerner

ABSTRACT

By connecting prevailing theories of postmodernism to a synthetic, transhistorical conception of the comic, this dissertation argues that comedy has become western, postmodern culture's dominant aesthetic mode. Precisely because the techniques of the comic have been hijacked for the ideological purposes of distraction and escapism, the dissertation proposes an idea it calls the comic sphere, which gathers together the positive aesthetic, historical and social functions — particularly the liberatory function — of comedy as well as its tropes. The idea of the comic sphere also encapsulates the connection of comic art to the making of art full stop — that is, to play and to *poesis* itself. The comic sphere names the fictional space of play in which comic art invites us to participate and out of which art comes. By placing three novels — one Victorian and historical (Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*), one a modernist classic (James Joyce's *Ulysses*) and one a contemporary comic novel (Ben Lerner's *10:04*) — within the definition of the comic sphere, the dissertation argues for the importance of reading with and for comedy now.

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## INTRODUCTION

See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,  
Some fragment from his dream of human life,  
Shaped by himself with newly learned art...  
—Wordsworth, “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Early Childhood”

... Hope attracts, radiates as a point, to which one wants to be near, from which one wants to measure.  
—John Berger, *Portraits*

To find it, to find the right thing, for which it is worthy to live, to be organized, and to have time: that is why we go, why we cut new, metaphysically constitutive paths, summon what is not, build into the blue, and build ourselves into the blue, and there seek the true, the real, where the merely factual disappears — *incipit vita nova*.  
—Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*

There is a time, before we born — if someone asks, this is where I’ll be.  
—Talking Heads, “Naïve Melody”

### 1. THE COMIC SPHERE

In the standard Liddell and Scott Greek lexicon, the majusculed entry for the verb ΠΟΙΕΩ — *poieo*, “to make, produce, execute, esp. of works of art” — takes up about half a page, with the exception of a small cluster of impertinent, minisculed entries with seemingly no relation to ΠΟΙΕΩ at all. The first such interloper is ποιή, *poie*, a noun most common in Ionic Greek and whose meaning is given, with admirable brevity, as “grass.” Just below appears ποιήεις, *poieis*, “grassy, rich in grass”; the next entry is for the familiar ποιήμα, *poema*, “a poetical work, or poem.”<sup>1</sup> A subsequent diminutive, ποιμάτιον, *poemation*, “a little poem,” appears just above another interloper, the adjective ποιρός, *poiros*, “grassy,” which in its turn is followed up by more words stemming from the grand ΠΟΙΕΩ, first among them another word of

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<sup>1</sup> “ΠΟΙΕΩ,” *A Lexicon, Abridged from Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 568.

some significance to the poet and the scholar: ποίησις, “a making: a forming, creating” — poesis itself. Woven through and surrounding the terms of and for making we find these few little patches of cheerful green stuff.

If scholars are charged first and foremost with acts of definition, of glossary, let this fortuitous snippet of dictionary stand as the tentative demarcation of the shining territory after which this dissertation and the three writers discussed in its pages seek. The arguments, terms, and examples herein presented focus on the comic as a literary mode, but they all reach back to a relationship between the emergence of form from the unformed, of art from matter — that is, poesis — and an organic or vital resilience, an integrative (and often perverse or paradoxical) renewal that precedes but still informs our ordinary definitions of the comic. The hopeful traces left by this relationship in art and literature — the tropes of May morning, green and blue and dawning — belong to what I shall call the comic sphere.

Green or golden, haven, island, garden, immanent utopia — call it the flag of a disposition, or an earthly paradise, for it surfaces in all these tropological guises and is exhausted by none of them — the comic sphere appears in Whitman’s metaphorization of poems as leaves and an older pun of “leaves” as pages, which first appears, at least in English, in 900 CE.<sup>2</sup> It is older than the *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates describes writing as the planting of seeds in a “garden of letters” intended only for recreation and for pleasure, in 360 BCE. It is older than the Mosaic description of the third day of creation as recorded in 1450 BCE, which in 1265 CE Thomas Aquinas will call the day of formation, when the dry land emerges from the waters and the “green herb,” “its garment and its adornment” appears. It is younger, even, than the Websafe

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<sup>2</sup> “leaf, n.1.” *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, September 2015). Last accessed 9 November 2015.

color #003300, “green like a forest, green like a tree...” and which prompts us, in the doubly punning formulation of the blogger Haley Mlotek, to “feel free to renew.”<sup>3</sup>

The comic sphere is both a set of recognizable tropes and the origin — the fictional or invisible origin, vanishingly small and indescribably large — of those characteristics included in comedy as described under the “mythos of spring” in Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*: happy endings, social expansiveness, an emphasis on large casts and comic types. The comic sphere encapsulates Frye’s conception as well as every possible conception and example of the comic on all scales, from the redoubling of syllables in Dante’s *Commedia Divina* to the redoubling of roles in our contemporary film comedy, in which actors transform their given names into walking puns of the sort already familiar from Shakespeare and before him Aristophanes and before Aristophanes the first festive celebrations of human life. The comic sphere bears the same positive relation to nature, pleasure, the social, and the body, as our standard literary critical notions of comedy or the comic; it also bears the same negative relation to time and history. Indeed it could be said to be the imaginary origin of those relations, which are not fixed but which can nonetheless be gently categorized across the breadth of western literature.

But why would we want to gently categorize anything across the breadth of western literature? Since at least since the publication of *Middlemarch*, literary scholars have been leery of keys to all mythologies (though Casaubon, one might note, was not a real person and has been dead for some time); literary scholarship as a profession remains segmented by historical

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<sup>3</sup> The Internet art project Websafe 2K16 assigned CMYK colors to Mlotek and 215 other writers, including the author of this dissertation. See [www.websafe.org](http://www.websafe.org).

specialization. In the last decade the historicist paradigm, however, has met with increasing challenge.<sup>4</sup> This dissertation's project is not to dismiss history, or to reinscribe a master narrative, or to forget the lessons of deconstruction and the linguistic turn.<sup>5</sup> I do not think I am Northrop Frye. But I do venture a *telos*, or a sort of principle wish identical to that of the material herein studied — the preservation of life and the mutual liberation of all beings. The comic wanders sideways toward that end, ceaselessly deconstructing and subverting necessity itself. I hope to present a trans-historical idea through which careful examination of local phenomena — historical *and* formal — can be used to make new knowledge relevant to our present.

Whether Old or New, comedy offers a perfect opportunity for such a project, for a “fertilizing generalization,” to borrow a fitting phrase.<sup>6</sup> The comic is as old as human society. We still live with it — and indeed I think it would be fair to say we now live *in* it, or in some bad, pallid version thereof, in a late-phase capitalist bubble of distraction and ideologically-driven positivity. And there is something in the very structure or system of the comic that suggests it is thinkable as both a dispersion and a point, as both limitless, a- or anti-historical atmosphere and as specific, local and historically specific shape. Frye points out that of “the total *mythos* of comedy... only a very small part is ordinarily presented.”<sup>7</sup> I extend his observation to

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<sup>4</sup> Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), xi.

<sup>5</sup> Including the suggestion that postmodern literature is constitutionally ludic — a well-worked terrain still isolated from the comedy of other periods. See Jan Welsh Hokensen, *The Idea of Comedy: History, Theory, Critique* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), esp. Chapter 5: “The Interlude of Postmodernist Conceptions,” 173-204.

<sup>6</sup> Brander Matthews, “A plea for definitions,” in *The Independent*, Vol. 64 (New York: Independent Publications, 1908), 492.

<sup>7</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 171.

point out that whenever it appears, the comic sphere shows us only a small part of itself — which is also all of itself: the very idea of the comic sphere allows us to emphasize continuity through historical change *and vice versa*.

Like Wordsworth’s tree, the comic sphere is “of many, one” — “a uniform hieroglyphic, sprouting alike in broad zones and in narrow zones.” It can compress itself into a vanishingly tiny whole — a single joke, a single laugh, a single ebullient Joycean syllable — or expand to the size of a planet — the planet Earth, we might say, looking forward to the surprisingly comic literature of climate change as essayed by Ben Lerner. And across these different scales we would be able to discern a surprising similarity: a shared naivety and novelty, the marks of greenness and newness, optimism and rebirth. Indeed, tropes and techniques that pertain to the comic sphere comic make a hash of our usual distinction between not just the large and the small but between parts and wholes; the very simplicity of the comic sphere contains an incalculable complexity ( — which may go some way toward reassuring critics that it violates none of our usual prohibitions on totality. As Caroline Levine points out, after a certain amount of handwringing, that “one effective strategy for curtailing the powerful of harmfully totalizing and unifying wholes is nothing other than to advance *more wholes*.”<sup>8</sup>)

The comic sphere’s relationship to paradox — rather, the constitutive part that paradox plays in the generation of the comic, and its rejection of binaries like “big” and “small,” “part” and “whole,” “beginning” and “end” — is discussed at greater length in the following chapters. For now, it is worth asserting that the idea of the comic sphere gathers together without obliterating the specific differences between all we know and all we can ask about the family of texts, techniques, writers and ideas we call comic. (“Family” is precisely the correct dead

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<sup>8</sup> Caroline Levine, *Forms*, 46.

metaphor; while Wittgensteinian “family resemblance” is used to justify a great deal of otherwise untenable argument, in this case I think would be merited.) Each of the writers herein discussed — Charles Dickens, James Joyce, and Ben Lerner — presents a particular comic vision. But in each writer the comic sphere is present, or rather, each text belongs to the comic sphere.

Each text examined in the following pages both figures internally and operates as a kind of shifting manifold, a ground of possibility, utopian in impulse and figured or staged in its most general form as a constantly self-integrating, self-enlarging present that bears a surprising and strong relation to the origin of art — and which surfaces, constantly, the tropes we relate with the comic: greenness, blueness, goldness; innocence original or regained, the body, animal and vegetable nature, laughter, nonsense (which is young language), pleasure, and safe encounters with the hitherto frightening (that is, scenes of learning). When it appears in literature, in whatever period and in whatever medium, the comic sphere breathes youth and hope. Its imaginary topography is a threshold space — a frontier, the pasture, the stage, an island or the stars — whose borders are rendered permeable by ritual procedure, which is turn traceable back to play — and which, I think, we might have less trouble understanding as the origin of art.

This space is already familiar to us from James Frazer’s descriptions of the green world and C. L. Barber’s description of Shakespeare’s festive comedy, but it appears again and again beyond and before these touchstones.<sup>9,10</sup> It abides in the country as opposed to the city, as described by Raymond Williams, who locates one of its mythical, pre-Christian beginnings in

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<sup>9</sup> James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).



Hesiod's Golden Age: "remote and free from evil and grief... when we were given "all good things, for the fruitful earth unforced bare them fruit abundantly."<sup>11</sup> It is the space of "illusion" or "play-space" in Donald Winnicott's *Playing and Reality*; it is Huizinga's "speel-ruimte," also usually translated as "play-space."<sup>12,13</sup> It is what the philosopher James Carse calls an "infinite game," played only so that it can be constantly expanded, and taking the rules themselves as the material for play — and it is therefore, like the stage, like the green world, the formalization of possibility itself. It is a garden, and a park, and an orchard, the space of recreation and representation; it reminds us that nature itself is full of blessed innocuous impertinences, dissensions and surprise. In a world of apples and oranges, the comic sphere is bananas; it is always the arrival of a beneficent stranger or an unheralded third; it is the poet or the Puck thirdwheeling it in the lovers' bower. In order to affirm, it negates, to the best of its ability, our expectations for what can be and what is. It — and it never hurts to repeat this; I will repeat it often — is the font and the borne of art.

As I hope to show, the very structure of the post-post-modern world — including though not limited to the increasing virtuality of everyday life, that is our many theorizations of it as unreal or timeless or syncretic — suggests we should remember how to see the comic sphere.<sup>14</sup> This is especially true when we are most tempted to despair, or when hope — a constitutive

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<sup>11</sup> Raymond Williams, *The City and the Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 14.

<sup>12</sup> Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> "All play moves and has its being in play-spaces." John Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (London: Routledge, 2008) 17.

<sup>14</sup> I think primarily of Geoffrey Hartmann's "cultural supermarket" and Jean Baudrillard's "desert of the real"; this phenomenon is discussed, albeit it briefly, later in this dissertation.

emotion of the comic — seems weakest or about to fold under the pressure of a culture of fear. We must draw a bright circle around that which matters most when we are surrounded by the straitening anxieties of, for instance, rising nationalism or the collapse of humane intellectual inquiry. Serious times sometimes call for unserious measures. “Possibility is not a luxury,” as Judith Butler writes; “it is as crucial as bread.”<sup>15</sup>

In some ways, I hope to draw attention to the comic sphere merely by giving it a new name. I hope that accounting for the fictional whence of comic — and perhaps of *all* — art, the comic sphere will enable a broadly comparative perspective. In Lerner’s novel, for instance, the comic sphere appears in secular guise, mediated again and again but still and always recognizable. If we were to ask ourselves for further contemporary examples, we could see that it abides, too, in the lapsed pastoral ethos of the Hollywood rom com, and the off-kilter, technologized interstellar edens of recent science fiction.<sup>16</sup> In other words, if we think with the comic, if we were to gift ourselves a concept as ample as the comic sphere — an imaginative though not actual reference point for thinking the togetherness of texts — we could begin to reconsider deeper literary and culture structures, including the structures of myth.

We could say, for example, that American cartoon slapstick harkens back to the western mythic structure of green world ritual — of, in Fraser’s phrasing, the “pretense of the putting of the king’s proxy to death,”

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<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), 29.

<sup>16</sup> See Darko Suvin, *Defined By a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction, and Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), in which Suvin theorizes sci fi as a genre whose historical function is precisely to stage the transcendence of its context, to initiate a “readiness for new forms of reality” and especially for the advancement of collective life.

... when once kings, who had hitherto been bound to die a violent death at the end of a term of years conceived the happy thought of dying by deputy.<sup>17</sup>

A “happy thought” indeed — here Fraser’s language underlines the comic switch from fate and doom to fortune and survival. An unkillable figure emerges from his own sacrifice, absurdly unharmed, no longer a king but a trickster, a coyote bearing on his back the anvil that has just crushed him while twinkle-toeing off. We could see that this figure is like that of *Sunset Boulevard*’s Joe Gillis, who glibly, laughingly narrates his own death from some unspecified, heterodiegetic afterworld, or — as we shall see — like Dickens’s slapstick trickster Sydney Carton, who acquires similarly miraculous powers of retrospective narration despite having his head removed from his body.

Nor do we have to believe Fraser’s claims or trust overmuch in the unreflecting anthropology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to take advantage of the permissiveness, the structured openness of the comic sphere. We could begin to elaborate new theories of character: In the instant the king is replaced with a *representation*, his unreal substitute troubles the boundary between the living and the dead, the factual and the fictional, guilt and innocence, the profane and the sacred: he generates a liminal space — a comic sphere — between them. In this space, we would meet, among others, the fundamentally comic philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s vision of the student, the artist, the idiot, the cartoon, and the clown: of all these personifications of empty sets. Not only do such characters remind us of the ethical stance implied in all representation — remind us of that deep sacrificial logic that produces unreal figures who step in for the living at the moment of death<sup>18</sup> — but as characters they are *blessedly* without what we think of as a person’s proper

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<sup>17</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 56. My italics.

<sup>18</sup> By contrast, Jacques Derrida presents the now-classic formulation of the tragic view of representation — that is, of scapegoating — disseminated by most critics: the city “reconstitutes

content: not moral subjects or implied personalities but unwitting utopians, always something and somewhere else.

Indeed the paths toward a theory of comic character suggested by the comic sphere are multiple, and echoic, with ramifications into ethics and politics I hope to trace as the occasion presents itself. It may become possible, from time to time, to re-describe the comic sphere as reaching past the bounds of liberal-progressive ethics. The comic sphere circumvents what we think of as “identity” — which we must never forget is constructed and policed primarily by the State — in favor of a ceaseless novelty; without assuming that any of its inhabitants are autonomous liberal subjects, it forwards an idea of collective humanity in which each person is figured, very like a cartoon or caricature, as what Agamben describes as a sort of singular

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its unity... by violently excluding from its territory the representative of an external threat or aggression.” — But what if we remembered that representation, the substitution of the symbolic for the concrete, was a certain kind of humane survival? In the *Poetics*, Aristotle repeats a curious derivation of the word “comedy,” that given by the Megarians:

The outlying villages, they say, are by them called κομᾶι, but by the Athenians δεμῖ: and they assume that Comedians were so named not from κομαζειν to revel,” but because they wandered “from village to village,” κατα κομας, having been excluded contemptuously from the city.

The Megarians accept the idea that contemptuous exclusion — theirs, presumably — forced the comedians from the city, they *claim that for that very reason they invented comedy*. Contemptuous exclusion, a marginal existence, becomes a boon: in a quintessentially comic outcome, outcasts — at least within the imaginative world of the Megarians’ etymology — become coveted producers of culture. If we are to fixate on contemptuous exclusions, we miss their comic reversals. We lose sight of that gift the comic sphere represents: it *undoes* those exclusions. It shows up the excluders while consecrating the excluded. Important to note, too, is that “κομᾶι” gives us our word “community,” and “common,” and “commons”: that world about which we must care precisely because we live in it together. We should hear this word — v — when we use the word comic, since the comic has always been a generator of collectivity, and of community. There is no disproving that the two words κομαζειν and κομᾶι, the verb for revels and the word for the village, for the country; they meet, certainly, after long flows of translation, in our ideas of the pastoral, the festive, and the green world.

oscillation between the universal and the particular.<sup>19</sup> Indeed very like a cartoon, each person becomes *exemplary* of herself. These strange sorts of non-persons — or personas — could be said to personify *representation itself*, in all senses of that term (in the aesthetic and in the political; in the etymologically wise sense involving theatrical masks). Unsurprisingly, this conception of the human — which does not need the liberal subject — depends on figuring the abeyance of time: comic persons abide in the timeless present of art.

For the moment, however, we could say that the protagonists of the comic sphere are precisely those characters who ought not to be protagonists, at least not in the flat, harsh light of realism. They are not just artists, writers, holy fools and saints: they are thinking bodies and feeling brains: all sorts of minor characters who have been thrust into leading roles, singularities brought down to earth and the common earth animated, brought up into the light. This includes the three *eirons* who center the novels discussed in the following pages: Dickens's talented, dissolute trickster Sydney Carton, "an amazingly good jackal"; Joyce's Stephen Daedalus, "a jester at the court of his master, indulged and disesteemed" — and Lerner's Ben, a doofus, a "particularly precocious author" who "can't handle the formal complexity of the bedtime story" (*Tale of Two Cities* 90; *Ulysses* 2.4; *10:04* 76).

Other constitutive characteristics of the comic sphere and the avenues they open for literary criticism could be easily listed, if inconclusively, and never exhaustively. Foremost among these characteristics would be this: in the comic sphere as in play — for comedy is the formalization of play itself, pure Fiction, in which what seems necessary is never so for long. Gently, surprisingly, whatever we were most certain obtained is vanished. Necessity itself cannot

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<sup>19</sup> See "Example," in Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 10 - 10.1.

be allowed to remain, but is instead pushed away from the edges of the comic sphere as it expands or ejected from it as it contracts. In a specific if paradoxical sense, then, it can only follow that (as is especially true of Ben Lerner's work) the comic's narrative procedure is paratactic, digressive, and often prophetic; its key gestures are joining and pointing, zeugma and deictic, those means by which a plot is sustained and new elements are revealed within or integrated into it. Any sense of an ending is staged only so that it can be overcome.

By the same token, we could begin to understand why the comic sphere's language is pun, which is to say babel, language as it learns to speak itself, or languages as they learn to speak each other. Keeping in mind the comic sphere's stance against the necessary in the guise of the literal, we could say that comic language (for instance, Joyce's language) emerges at precisely that (mythic) point where nonsense flips into sense and vice versa: it seeks the moment where semantic arbitrariness is born, when language is as yet pluripotent. The comic produces linguistic forms in which contrary meanings are held together — in which, we could say, they have not yet been perfectly distinguished, or in which they have been reunited in innocence. If, in many of our classic accounts, wordplay connotes a kind of decadence, language in a state of excess, we can say that when it pertains to the comic sphere the pun pulls its user through that decadence and out the other side, back into play. (As a protolinguistic act, laughter may operate similarly, showing us the syllable in its emergence from sound. At the very least, we know it invokes a space of play on top of — or in and through — the putative real.)<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Behavioral biological and linguistic approaches to the comic and to laughter are usually grouped under "humor studies" and are not frequently cited in literary criticism. However, the insight that laughter invokes and sustains a space of play should be of interest to anyone who studies poesis or the phenomenology of aesthetic experience. See Robert Provine, *Laughter* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

Moreover, all the foregoing approximations of dialectic as device, narrative structure, or place can serve as character or prop as well as setting: all the comic sphere's constitutive tropes and techniques can be derived from and reintegrated back into one another. The name of the game is over-determination. The game of cards with which Sydney engages Barsad in *A Tale of Two Cities* gives him his name, Carton, and vice versa; just as the many tropes of *The Odyssey* form the chapter structure, all of which are mutually inextricable from one another, and the characterological structure, and the metaphysical armature of *Ulysses* all at once; just as in *10:04* the figure of the suitably many-armed octopus operates as a symbol for a truly collective society, and a reification of Ben's Marfan syndrome, and a collapse of the ontological distinction between human and animal. In all three instances, this technique would be better described as a kind of running joke than as a motif or a system of imagery. In each case, they generate an excess of meanings, an inexplicable wealth of causations and of effects.

In a comic text — which may, finally, may be those texts that come closest in their asymptotic approach to that quality we call literary — there is no single reason why any one thing is so: when we feel some gap, some discrepancy in any of the comic's structures, that is, to paraphrase Zupančič, because the incongruity fundamental to the comic always involves a surplus, an *en plus*.<sup>21</sup> Many literary and/or dramatic forms — indeed some critics would argue that they *all* — include some kind of gap, or discrepancy. But if the discrepancy involved in the tragic is negative (we never get what we desire, but rather something different, something less), then the discrepancy involved in the comic is positive. It lies “not in the fact that satisfaction can never really meet demand, but rather that the demand can never really meet (some unexpectedly produced, surplus) satisfaction.” Zupančič explicitly recalls the Lacanian definition of

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<sup>21</sup> Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 130-131.

jouissance; we might also recall Barthes's use of the term, which is one way of defining literary art itself — the fundamental joyfulness of reading — but suffice to say for now that in the comic, misfortune, lack or trouble are either held at infinite bay or reversed into fortune, wealth, and unlikely success.<sup>22</sup>

Among its other characteristics, then, the comic sphere is not (and cannot be) exhausted by description or a list. We could say, however, that its cultural, social, and psychological function is to stage renewal and making, to soothe and encourage, to proliferate form (forms of life and forms of language, which Wittgenstein reminds us are the same) and meaning despite epistemological negation, suffering, necessity and ontological uncertainty, which is to say all sources of fear, including fear in its strongest forms, terror (fear which destroys thought) and despair (fear which is achieved by thought). Its concomitant affects are pleasure, joy, and the complex affect attendant on the making of meaning, or rather our intuitive discovery and rediscovery of the means to make meaning, or in fact to make anything at all, to bring anything into being and thus demonstrate an increased degree of freedom: that is, the full range of tones and subtones we arrange under the word “happiness.”<sup>23</sup>

The comic sphere's willful unreality — what I will call, in various ways, its virtuality, its experience-able nonexistence — is its efficacy, simply because the comic sphere is the province of life generated in defiance of the fact that all human and non-human animals — all living beings, including the green world itself — must die. There can be pretense otherwise, there can

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<sup>22</sup> Interestingly for any study of the depersonalizing effects of the comic, Barthes's description of the “profound ridiculousness” of literature as “at once sublime and comic” — comes in “The Death of the Author.” See Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 146.

<sup>23</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I begin to track the relationship between intellectual activity and pleasure, particularly the relationship between puzzles, jokes, and metaphors.



be game and prayer and theology against the felt only-onceness which is human life, but no factual and final denial: this is why the comic sphere is *never real*. Laughter always marks the attempt to express some conquest over death, failure, isolation, and atomization — even in its most pathologized instances. As Arendt wrote of Eichmann, even the man who says he will “leap laughing into his grave” after killing five million people laughs because he needs consolation and belonging. Eichmann’s last words strike Arendt for their “grotesque silliness” — in his last seconds on Earth, he is like Micawber.<sup>24</sup> He generates clichés with such fluency because he is in fact, a character out of an impossibly grim slapstick: he struck Arendt as “silly” precisely because he had rendered himself impermeable to the thought of his own death.<sup>25</sup>

## 2. ON COMIC THEORY

If the comic sphere provides an Archimedean point — always unreal — from which to observe the ramification of whichever of its own aspects or qualities into the world as comedy and opens up every comic text to one another, it does the same for every comic theory. My own wavering paradigm seeks in no way to compete with existing theories of the comic, but rather to gently open them up to one another. Bergson, for example, reads the comic as an encrustation of the mechanical on the living — a historically specific reemergence of the vitality always already associated with comic making; his theory of the *élan vital*, which lies beneath those mechanical encrustations and is liberated by laughter — and it should remind us of the green world, of that

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<sup>24</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 252.

<sup>25</sup> An interesting connection here might be a reading of Freud’s analysis of gallows humor in “Humor,” *Standard Edition* Vol. XXI (Hogarth Press, London, 1961), 161-6.

illusory preserve of newness within us.<sup>26</sup> Immanuel Kant, pure brain, was surprisingly attuned to the bodily quality of laughter; his theory is always already a theory of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, just as Bakhtin could easily be read as explaining the first jokes in the human record, all of which lampoon the human appetite for food and sex.<sup>27</sup> Even Descartes's retrospectively fantastical investigation of laughter as the rush of blood to the lungs or Kant's bizarre description of the same as the healthy oscillation of the guts are exemplary of the comic as vivification, of humor as vitality.

If all the theoretical accounts of comedy — even the best and most moving, Freud's, in which he posits a parental relation between a joke's teller and her audience, and comes extremely close to describing the lowest and highest function of all manifestations of the comic sphere, to comfort and soothe us when we are most afraid — even if all those accounts are incomplete on their own, if they seem to all miss some point or another, then for love of them a point must be invented that is so large that its perspective enfolds them all. If most theorization of comedy is a kind of algebra — in which a single function of humor, whether social or political or aesthetic, is totted up, within the confines of a given historical period — then the comic sphere is something like the arrival of calculus, which allows for the summation of a complex, changing system comprised of infinitesimally small and infinitely large, equal and self-similar — though not necessarily identical — parts.

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<sup>26</sup> Bergson, *Laughter* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

<sup>27</sup> Kant's theorization comes in *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 196-203. The description of early jokes I owe to correspondence with Brian D. Farrell, Professor of Organismic and Evolutionary Biology, Harvard University.

Unsurprisingly, the following pages do not pursue a refutation of the common claim that comedy isn't worth theorizing or has not been well-theorized in the past. It *has*.<sup>28</sup> Rather — and because the comic sphere is understood to transcend and undergird all theories of comedy — one proper use of the idea of the comic sphere would be to indicate the relationships between theories and to then ask what the *final* purpose of that aggregate conceptual framework might be, that is: why we make and need the comic sphere itself. Recent attempts to theorize the comic are unsatisfying, often because they stop so far short of *any* universalizing tendency besides that which seems to reflect the undialectical idea that all comedy is context-dependent. (Tragedy, we should note, is also context dependent, in that it's hard to predict what will make any person cry — but that doesn't seem to have prevented a single scholar from theorizing about it.)

For that same reason, no effort is made to re-theorize the Hobbesian and later the Bergsonian concept that comedy serves primarily to demonstrate our superiority over others or to shame; Hobbes's is an undialectical half-idea, better understood as a description of tragedy (or the tragedy with which all comedy begins) than of comedy.<sup>29</sup> Plato writes that comic characters are those who do not know themselves, and therefore are worthy of scorn; revising Plato, Aristotle characterizes comedy as “an imitation of people who are worse than average.” Anxiety may lie at the heart of all comic art; as it proceeds, comedy may muddle or disturb just as much as it clarifies, as Sianne Ngai and Lauren Berlant have pointed out much more recently.<sup>30</sup> But the

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<sup>28</sup> Franco Moretti makes this point, magnificently and rather selfishly, on the way to justify his own work as a theorist of tragedy. See “Kindergarten” in *Signs Taken for Wonders* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 156.

<sup>29</sup> Hobbes's major writings on laughter are included in John Morreall: *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1987), 19-21.

<sup>30</sup> See Berlant and Ngai, “Comedy Has Issues,” in *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017), 233-249.

final function of the comic and the comic sphere is the *dissolution* of that anxiety, induced by some form of incongruity, social, cognitive, or formal, usually arbitrary and oppressive on any number of levels.

No comic theory that does not reach toward an egalitarian utopianism could not be called properly comic; the same is true of the comic art encapsulated by the comic sphere. The comic sphere attempts to find and dismantle all arbitrary principles, including the constructed hierarchies of race, class and gender, in favor of mutual freedom. “Games function first to test individual ethics”; the same is true in the accretion of games into language and art and the accretion of language and art into shared culture — that is, the same is true of all the poetic activities I source in the comic.<sup>31</sup> Stand-up comedians abide by a principle they call “punching up”: the targets of ridicule must be *more powerful* than the comedian making fun of them. Good stand-up must be subversive, or it ceases to be comedy; as the British comedian Stewart Lee once remarked: “You’re punching down... [but] who could be on a stage, crowing about their victory and ridiculing those less fortunate than them without any sense of irony, shame, or self-knowledge? That’s not a stand-up comedian. That’s just a ----.”<sup>32</sup>

Certainly there are many possible objections to my description of the comic as subversive, or egalitarian, or necessarily involving any kind of egalitarianism. (I am not, it

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<sup>31</sup> This paraphrase of Huizinga belongs to Betsy McCormick in “Remembering the Game: Debating the *Legend’s* Women” in *The Legend of Good Women: Context and Reception*, Caroline Collette, ed. (Rochester, New York: D.S. Brewer, 2012), 107.

<sup>32</sup> Stewart Lee, “Where are all the right wing comedians,” *The New Statesman*, 16 April 2013. <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/04/where-are-all-right-wing-stand-ups>. Lee, it should be noted, is white; he states explicitly that he takes his own sense of comedy as tool of social struggle from black stand-up Chris Rock — who has recently been the subject of wide public scorn for his neutral stance regarding the election of right-wing president Donald Trump. In other words, to say that comedians must not punch down is not to say that they possess any *a priori* moral or ethical perfection.

should be clear, talking about tragic co-optations of comic technique: satire, scorn, certain forms of ritual insult.) Aristotle himself, however, offers at least some productive way past these claims. He continues: “[these imitations’] badness, however, is not of every kind... it may be defined as a mistake or unseemliness that is not painful or destructive.”<sup>33</sup> Here we hear, again, the echoes of invulnerability, even of innocence inherent to the logic of comic representation (and perhaps finally of the substitutions made possible by representation). Worse than average — but only by dint of a “mistake,” an “unseemliness.” Freud asserts that humor has about it “something fine and elevating,” “the ego’s victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer.”<sup>34</sup>

In a truly comic text — that is, within the comic sphere — a comic character’s laughable egoism renders her not just persistent but something like invincible. The suggestion is, of course, that a comic vision would offer a more humane vision of life, not in its reality but in its aspiration, something like the Pelagian heresy of which Joyce was so fond.<sup>35</sup> The comic sphere upholds the “joy we have in observing that we cannot be hurt,” as Descartes writes, anticipating Freud, Agamben, Kant, Bergson and Zupančič but also more recent theorists and scholars like Glenda Carpio as well as Berlant and Ngai.<sup>36</sup> The same is true of insights from behavioral

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<sup>33</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 5.1449a.

<sup>34</sup> Freud, “Humor,” *Standard Edition of the Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Norton, 1990), 161-6.

<sup>35</sup> The anti-hamartiological Irish saint Pelagius suggested that there was no such thing as original sin. Like Aristotle’s work on comedy, Pelagius’s writings have mostly been lost and are known primarily through vigorous refutations undertaken after his death.

<sup>36</sup> Descartes is quoted in Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, 23. See Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) and Sianne Ngai, “The Zany Science,” in *Our Aesthetic Categories* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 174-242.

biology and linguistics, including what is known, tellingly, as the “benign violation theory,” which could easily be understood as a recapitulation of the incongruity theory advanced by Schopenhauer and Hazlitt, which could in turn be understood as an abstraction of the relief theories advanced by Freud and others, in which relief is required precisely by the strain of encountering incongruity in various psychological, cognitive, social, or emotional forms.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed a further word may be necessary, given the porous, echoic nature of comic theory. Almost all comic theory recapitulates in one way or another the definition of the word “incongruity.” But simply because comedy has not produced a wide array of truly original descriptions does not mean, however, that it is *resistant* to thought, as is sometimes claimed. Kirby Olson writes that “every instance of humor is something new in the world, and thus it cannot be defined in advance,” but that generalization about the impossibility of generalizing across humor’s “every instance” holds its sense for about two seconds before it reveals itself as an absurdity. Instead the “comic” seems to belong to those words that are still philosophized and theorized about precisely because they are in some way constitutive to thought. “Life,” “experience,” “love”; these are the fundamentals of philosophy. Perhaps we ought to think about them more, not less.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See “Benign Violation Theory,” in *Psychological Science*, No. 21, Vol. 8, 1141-1149.

<sup>38</sup> That thinking itself is comic is a touchstone among comic theorists; many other writers and philosophers, including Aristotle, link puzzling and pleasure directly. “To learn easily is naturally pleasant to all people, and words signify something, so whatever words create knowledge in us are the pleasantest.” See Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1410b. Edgar Allen Poe: “The mental features discoursed of as the analytical, are, in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis. We appreciate them only in their effects. We know of them, among other things, *that they are always to their possessor, when inordinately possessed, a source of the liveliest enjoyment.*”

Not least because comic theory and comic forms themselves are so echoic, because they seem to press toward a cross-cultural, species-wide mode, comic theorists must address themselves both to the comic formal instantiations and its final contribution to human life: this task, I hope, is more readily possible if we use the idea of the comic sphere to focus our critical attention without losing some more universal impulse or ground for the comic. Indeed it becomes difficult to identify the space shared by comic theory and not discern in it an almost impossibly funny — or perhaps impossibly beautiful — fact about the human: we persist in spite of, perhaps by dint of overcoming without effacing our own ugliness. “Any possible human redemption requires us first to face what’s dreadful, what we want to deny,” wrote David Foster Wallace — without specifying what the second step might be and with very little seeming confidence that we might take one. (Here we might feel the finally tragic nature of Wallace’s outlook, his disqualification from the ranks of the comic novelists.)

But we must take such a step; perhaps now more than ever we must look for examples of radical oneness, populist not in its vulgarity or its anti-intellectualism but in its playful egalitarianism. In 2006, the comic artist and writer — perhaps best known for his work in concrete comedy, including the Nike Ghost Costume — David Robbins made a short comic film called “Maybe it takes an artist to know an artist,” in which he interviewed his personal trainer as if the man were a great master of oils. Perfectly sincere in mood, the film dares the viewer to laugh at the putatively marginal figure Robbins chooses to place at its center. And yet before a minute has passed the felt accuracy of Robbins’s claim becomes undeniable. His joke is not at the expense of the trainer; the joke is on anyone who thought the trainer couldn’t be an artist. “Maybe it takes an artist” replaces our expectation of what an artist should be — a special person, a person possessed of cultural capital, education, taste — with the revelation that the

world is art and every person in it an artist. “Sometimes it just feels good,” says the trainer, “making life” — declaring himself just as much a comic artist as the comic artist who recognized him in film.

Robbins’s point is that anyone can make art: anyone can live in it. It may be an almost unbearable simplification to put things this way, but the comic sphere — every one of its incarnations, including its most elaborate iterations — including, for instance, the *Commedia Divina* — underlines this idea in its own particular idiom. Each person begins innocent and may preserve that innocence throughout their lives, or regain it through the finally beneficent embarrassments and levelings involved in humor. The comic sphere allows us, if we squint inside our minds, to catch a glimpse of the no-time and no-place in and of which many artists and many works of art seem to believe art is made, when form becomes itself. It shows us why such a fiercely negative thinker as Adorno, so little disposed to May mornings, could find himself admitting that in advance of its works all art is lighthearted, that the instant when artifice appears, and sets itself against nothingness — that is, poesis — is a comic act.<sup>39</sup>

### 3. COMIC READINGS FOR A COMIC AGE

In addition to its invention or reinvention of the comic sphere — a trans-historical proposition — this dissertation knows its own trans-historical impulses to be historically specific. Because it belongs to a certain time and wants to be of a certain use, too — or at least to meet certain conditions of readability — this dissertation’s structure is chronological. A reading

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<sup>39</sup> Theodor Adorno, “Is Art Lighthearted?” in *Notes to Literature* Vol 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann; trans. Shierry Weber Nichol森 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 247-253.



of a novelist from the form's 19<sup>th</sup>-century or classic phase, Charles Dickens, proves that even historical and generally tragic works of art can be productively understood as comic. The second chapter offers a reading of an enthusiastic modernist, James Joyce, that seeks to reverse our received understanding both of a particular novel and of a particular novelist, bringing forward Joyce's connection of love to comedy and to poesis and examining in particular "Penelope." These readings are followed by a longer reading of our best contemporary comic writer, Ben Lerner.

The periodizations presented in the following pages are blatantly hypostatic; indeed the idea of periodization itself now possesses a rich and complex critical literature.<sup>40</sup> But the periodizations on which I rely also furnish at least some structure. Charles Dickens's *raison d'être* was not to eventually produce Ben Lerner, nor is Lerner positioned as the culmination of almost two centuries of British and American writing. But I believe these three writers can be linked to some fruitful end, if only to show us how much comic writers share despite their specific historical circumstances, including a generally negative relationship to historicity itself.

One way to consider the chapters here arranged might be that it draws a faint line leading to a large point: the chapter about Ben Lerner is the longest here included. But any point on that line could have been dilated equally, and the point itself reduced back into a line whose full flourishing could be found in, for instance, Dante or early Proust, or in Hardy, when the comic sphere is glimpsed and then rejected — or seemingly rejected:

“Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess?”

“Yes.”

“All like ours?”

“I don't know; but I think so. They sometimes seem to be like the apples on our stubborn-tree. Most of them splendid and sound—a few blighted.”

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<sup>40</sup> See Rita Felski, “Context Stinks!”, *New Literary History* 42 (2011), 573-591. Felski's works cited approaches a substantial critical biography on the topic of periodization.

“Which do we live on—a splendid one or a blighted one?”

“A blighted one.”

“’Tis very unlucky that we didn't pitch on a sound one, when there were so many more of 'em!”

“Yes.”<sup>41</sup>

The tragic tone of Tess's “yes” might distract us from the idea that her resignation depends on a different, foregone conclusion. The passage is one of the most memorable in the novel not because we learn our world is blighted but because at the same time we are reminded that there are other worlds that are “splendid and sound.” Behind every negation is a higher affirmation, including the affirmation of the need for negation itself: that splendid world that Tess imagines is a vision of the comic sphere.

Frye already makes the passing point that speculative fiction is a branching off of the mythos of comedy. His thought is easy to tease out: the exploration of new worlds — new “frontiers” — parodies the tragic collapse of a single one. Anamnestic, the comic sphere returns when we least expect it, remade, in new and historically specific garb: Witness the rigorously silly comic hero Captain Kirk, who tells us, just after quoting Sydney Carton's impossibly posthumous prophecy from *A Tale of Two Cities*: “I feel young” — a (rightfully) uncanny example of the transfer of the comic sphere across genres, historical context and media.<sup>42</sup>

Witness Shakespeare's punning, redundant, comical Sonnet 15: “And all in war with Time for love of you / As he takes from you, I engraft you new.”<sup>43</sup>

My reading of Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* treats that historical novel as a comedy in order to refresh its critical reception. I advance the idea that “serious” art can be read

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Tess of The D'Urbervilles* (London: MacMillan, 1912), 33.

<sup>42</sup> *The Wrath of Khan*, Nicholas Meyer, director, 1982.

<sup>43</sup> William Shakespeare, *Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

unseriously, for its comic tendencies, and I begin with Dickens because the Victorian period isn't thought to be funny.<sup>44</sup> By contrast with the massive amount of tragic thinking produced on the continent in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, however, Englishness seems to have served as a kind of festive suburb to the continental grim: in its time it was a version of the comic sphere.<sup>45</sup> Dickens figures the comic sphere as “a beautiful city, and a brilliant people, rising from this abyss” and places that speech as posthumous prophecy in the mouth of the trickster Sydney Carton. The novel's structure disturbs our received critical ideas about its gravitas, or its failure to live up to the gravitas we expect of it.

*Ulysses* stands in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a kind of organizing principle, just as the jar that Wallace Stevens places on a hill in Tennessee organizes all that stands around it, like the dry land emerging from the water; the same is true of its place in this dissertation insofar as it anchors the historical line of inquiry which extends through to the present. I assume that there is some worth in advancing a comic version of the modernist project, since the 20<sup>th</sup> century has also been understood not to be funny, or at least this is true of the phase of the 20<sup>th</sup> century surrounding the First and Second World Wars. Joyce's search for an unwasted land shares the ravishing, cock-eyed optimism of Ernst Bloch's *The Idea of Utopia*; Joyce was also quite clear that he felt that “the comic was the perfect manner in art.”<sup>46</sup> I examine, specifically, how Molly Bloom's soliloquy — which is, among other things, an extended parabasis in the ancient comic

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<sup>44</sup> Bakhtin, for instance, singles out the 19<sup>th</sup> century as “having forgotten the carnival, the comedy of death — the funniness of life being that it is bound to death.” Mikhail Bahktin, *Rabelais and his World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 57.

<sup>45</sup> See Franco Moretti, “Serious Century,” in *The Novel*, Vol. 2 (Princeton University Press, 2003), 363-400.

<sup>46</sup> Joyce's long discussion of comedy as opposed to tragedy is found in the Paris notebook and will be examined in the second chapter of this dissertation.

tradition — *makes love* where there was nothing. “There is many a true thing spoken in jest there is a flower that bloometh,” thinks she, in a perfect passing and perfectly punning and paradoxical invocation of the comic sphere.

In its turn, *10:04* will be read for its explicit hostility to clock time (a tendency it shares with both *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Ulysses*). Since we are contemporary to Lerner, we could list dozens of historical reasons for the rise of comic literature in the last ten years. We might say that everything is comic — bleakly comic — now that the world is never dark, now that financial speculation has brought every corner of the earth into the global moneyflow and the lights of the market are never off. If the comic is the mode by which we combat fear, and if our primary conscious, culture-wide, western-post-industrial fear is of darkness, then we might now be said to live inside the comic sphere, locked within a parade of images, with no darkness any longer visible. Literary and cultural theorists have much to say on the subject; perhaps most lucidly — though he are is certainly not alone in so writing — Geoffrey Hartmann holds that:

... a liberation not of men and women, but of images, has created a *theatrum mundi* in which the distance between past and present, culture and culture, truth and superstition is suspended by a quasi-divine synchronism.<sup>47</sup>

But perhaps the most important reason for thinking with the comic sphere is that if the world has become comic, it is a bad, pallid version of the comic, which has lost its sense of the worth of negation and which seeks solely to tranquilize. Sylvanshine, the aptly named protagonist of Wallace’s last novel, *The Pale King*, summons up precisely that pallid, pre-commodified notion of the comic sphere to calm his anxiety, early in the novel. Sylvanshine reminds himself of one particularly “effective concentration device”:

... a soothing and low-pressure outdoor scene, either imagined or from memory, which was even more effective if the scene compromised or included a pond lake

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<sup>47</sup> Geoffrey Hartmann, *The Fate of Reading* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 104.

brook or stream, as water had been proving to have a calming and centering effect on the involuntary nervous system.<sup>48</sup>

A soothing and low-pressure outdoor scene could not be any closer to the reserve or preserve of greenness that is the comic sphere in its most comic tropological form. Here it is negative, and an emblem of escapism. Comedy has of course always been accused of escapism, but late-phase capitalism requires escapism to function; it depends on the constant anaesthetization and distraction of its subjects and the substitution of the unreal for the real. Wallace, elsewhere evokes the societal atomization constituent of our time, our central tragedy:

But so very much private watching of customized screens behind drawn curtains in the dreamy familiarity of home. A floating no-space world of personal spectation. Whole new millennial era... Total freedom, privacy, choice.<sup>49</sup>

A “whole new millennial era”: entertainment enfolds each subject in aloneness. This is, we might say, a tragic version of the comic sphere, a world in which we are each, in Mark Greif’s phrase, “deliberately suspended in the most colorful and intense instants” but live in utter isolation.<sup>50</sup>

Greif describes the transmutation of the comic into a sad simulacrum of its full self: accident, immediacy, outcome — all of which are or should be structured into and connected by the comic as a means of encouraging friendship, community, and the staging of shared aesthetic experience — are hijacked. Instead, “accident is precipitated; immediacy is studied; fate is forced” — a *mode* is perverted from a form of life into a form almost of living death. This dissertation seeks to identify and envelope, to neutralize and break open precisely this isolation. If we live bombarded by comic effect, and as Zupančič describes, under “the imperative of

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<sup>48</sup> David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (New York: Hachette, 2012), 14.

<sup>49</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Hachette, 1996), 620.

<sup>50</sup> Mark Greif, *Against Everything* (New York: Pantheon, 2016), 94.

happiness, positive thinking, and cheerfulness,” perhaps a heightened sense of tragedy is not — or not the only thing — that we need. We need *better comic art*, and better means of identifying, evaluating, and analyzing it. The tropes and tones of the comic sphere may help us recognize and reclaim that deliberate suspension, that studied immediacy. Without understanding and witnessing the ugliness at the heart of every joke, what we take for comedy has no ability to testify to the violence the world does to itself and to us.

Still the objection must be met that this dissertation relies to some degree on the idea that there is no mixture of comedy and tragedy that is not finally either comic or tragic, despite the lively critical back and forth that began with Aristotle and has continued all the way through the medieval period to the present. (More granular classifications of forms of comedy and of tragedy are *useful*, undeniably so, but the impulse of this dissertation is synthetic, not anatomical.) “Modern” forms of comedy considered more mature or privileged by a cultivated, generally liberal sense of culture — primarily tragicomedy, but also “bad-girl comedy,” “wince comedy,” “bite-sized romantic comedy” and all the rest of the phrases that now occur in the ever-finer generic distinctions required by the cultural marketplace — are comedy. Or, to be more accurate, they may be called comedy but pertain only to the comic sphere in so far as they forward the immanent transcendence of necessity and fear.<sup>51</sup>

Even a story in which nothing happens is for that reason a *comedy* in which nothing happens: as adumbrations of the worth of *nothing* not as void but as a shine added to the world, as an infinitesimal distancing of the world away from itself and into form. We simply have no literary historical conception of a tragedy in which nothing happens. An uneventful story like *Tristram Shandy* — a prosaic story, an introduction that never quite goes anywhere — belongs to

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<sup>51</sup> Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 7.

the digressive version of the comic: it is a shaggy dog tale, a form of narrative that avoids event because it seeks to extend itself endlessly. (*Don Quixote*, for example, only becomes a tragedy when it ends with Quixote's death.) The comic is a generally paratactic procedure: more telling, more worlds, more characters, more forms of real unreality, more little versions of itself. More survival, more story, more life.

All irony is finally either tragic or comic, a point that requires no overlong explanation: if an irony is bottomless, it is comic — it becomes a formalization of form itself, of our estrangement from the literal. Andre Breton's *humour noir*, for instance, which mixes comic structure with shock and pathos — with certain effects and affects of the tragic — is comedy; it is, despite its apparent grimness, one of the strongest affirmations of *form*, not of content.<sup>52</sup> It is, as Frye writes of Old Comedy, a contest with absurdity in which absurdity wins, and which therefore rebukes necessity most sharply. It is not a coincidence that *humour noir* arose at the same moment as Sartre's absurdist (and humane) philosophy, or that it flourished for instance in the American 20<sup>th</sup> century at a time of great uncertainty, in the most aesthetically sophisticated postmodern novels, those of Pynchon and Wallace.

There is, however, a moment in our multiple futures in which we could imagine tragedy and comedy fusing: sometimes this is taken to be the most "mature" form of the comic.<sup>53</sup> But I would suggest that we would not want to live in it. If we were to imagine a world in which

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<sup>52</sup> Mark McGurl positions American 20<sup>th</sup>-century black comedy as perched on the border of nihilism; this form of comedy reminds us that, "subject to the laws of nature," [the human] *will* fall into every imaginable form of error," a form of anti-realist pessimism opposed to the realist comedies of the Anglo-American novel. But unkillng error stopped short of despair or death *is* comic — is an optimistic, even an ameliorative account of human life. See "Gigantic Realism: The Rise of the Novel and the Comedy of Scale" in *Critical Inquiry* Vol.43 (Winter 2017), 405.

<sup>53</sup> See James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self* (New York: Picador, 2005), especially Wood's introduction.

comedy and tragedy reached a final balance, human life would lose its aspiration, its sense of upward spiral, of approximation to flight. We should simply be thrown back into a theatrics of crisis, doom without catharsis, an interminable fall without incident — for we do have a word for a tragedy in which nothing finally happens: it is “boring.” History may be tragic (“history is what hurts,” in one very famous accidental generic categorization).<sup>54</sup> By contrast, the comic grounds us; it re-interests us in the world at the same moment it offers us spirit, pleasure, uplift and art.

In each chapter of this dissertation and in each moment in history appear different assemblages of comic technique, structure, and form. Dickens, for example, will deploy throughout *A Tale of Two Cities* a form of folk punning that eventually, outside the novel. Molly Bloom’s joke-sewn, bawdy soliloquy is quintessentially comic in that it links, effortfully, comic artifice to a “post-dated innocence”: it shows us the comic as a ceaseless work of reinvestment of meaning into the meaningless. And we could say that Lerner turns himself into a comic character. The biographical self, the author “Ben Lerner” is absented in the same moment that the character “Ben Lerner” — doofy, self-defeating, majestically comical — emerges on the page. Lerner presents himself as a caricature, which is a comic gesture, a gesture of welcoming and a perceptible social sweetness: a kind of making room in the text for any stranger who seeks a home in it (including the reader).

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<sup>54</sup> “History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its “ruses” turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention.” Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 100.



But we could still — outside of literary time — arrange the units of the comic sphere in order of size, just as it is possible to arrange the component parts of a fractal according to size or to fit within one another the various iterations of a matryoshka doll:

The laugh—the pun—the joke—the bit—the sketch—the comedy—art itself—  
utopia—the comic sphere.

Each instance listed above shares a homological structure. Laughter does the proto-linguistic and social work of asserting continuity, proto-community, and play (all of which are relatively appositional terms) across distance or distances, including the distance between self and other.

In its turn, the pun performs the same yoking of unlikeness, identifying sameness within difference and recuperating it as pleasurable instead of frightening. A sign-system on which we depend flickers suddenly; some breakdown in it is presaged. But a pun indicates a short circuit within language's semantic orders that does *not* induce a system-wide failure. Relief, recognition, welcome, goodwill, the dissolution of fear into a feeling of pleasurable novelty: all operate equally, and in tiny, almost imperceptible tandem when we play on words. Here, too, we see the closeness of punning and wordplay to metaphor itself: new, effective, artful forms come into the world. Witness also, in semantic hyper-miniature, the border-crossing impulse often personified in the comic sphere as the trickster or the stranger and who appears, at least in Dickens, Joyce, and Lerner, simply as the artist.

A joke stretches a pun out into time, and repeats its same structure: an impertinence or an incongruity — even a threatening or frightening one — is shown to be of surprising pertinence. In a knock-knock joke, this is the encounter between Self and Other. Our jealous guarding of the door — “Who's there?” — is followed by whatever response of whichever trickster, by whatever stranger on the other side and who, at least within the space of the joke (that is, within the learning space of play), will not hurt us but instead make us laugh, who subvert whatever norms

and therefore provide cultural enrichment. From joke we could jump to the level of culture, or return to the comic play. Every comedy begins with a tragedy — with a dreaded event. But every comedy enfold a tragedy and reveals the putative atomization of the tragic to produce a series of complex, ever-changing wholes within wholes whose surprising and constructive interconnection offers us, at least according to Joyce, the greatest possible joy.<sup>55</sup>

All the approximations or examples or precipitations of the comic sphere to follow will be discerned in prose. Prose seems most viable for the investigations performed in this dissertation because it *hides* its formalism, its claims to artfulness. (Ben Lerner “pretends to be a novelist, since that’s working well for [him] for now.”<sup>56</sup>) Finding exemplary islands adrift in a sea of prose is more difficult than finding them in the predisposed intensities of poetry. “Everything in this life is at the time absolutely insignificant and infinitely meaningful,” wrote Adorno, in a series of lectures on metaphysics later quoted by Agamben in *Idea Della Prosa*. If the incongruity between meaningful- and meaningless-ness is the central problem of human life, it is also the central problem of the reader and the critic of prose. A great deal could be said about exemplarity and its relationship to representation and to the comic; here I will say only that I have chosen the novel — and these three formally sophisticated novels, all of which contain metatextual reflections on the conventions of novel writing — for precisely this reason, because any novel’s textual cruxes are less obvious, the perfections of its form too often overlooked.

We might begin to suspect that the novel’s long survival as a genre has been due to its fundamentally comic form. As Bakhtin insists, its omnivorous appetite can engulf any material, any voice, any language and render it at once hapless (meaningless) and happy (meaningful).

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<sup>56</sup> Ben Lerner, Stratis Haviaras reading, Harvard University, November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

The novel brings all the odd ones in, including poetry. As much as we, following Erich Auerbach, understand the novel to be the prime narrative vessel of “representations of everyday life in which that life is treated seriously,” it in fact marries the marvelous and the probable; its central (comic) incongruity consists in its marriage of that which cannot be and that which is.<sup>57</sup> Artistic prose, if one wants to call it that, seems to be generated at precisely the intersection of metaphor and metonymy. It encapsulates the joyous oscillation, the back and forth between the individual and the universal, the real and the unreal out of which the virtual and virtuous comic is made, its constant scampering to and from the lighthearted, green no-place of art.

## INSTAURATION

Something further must be said about my Liddell and Scott, however, before I bring this introduction to a close. This dissertation begins with an example that is not an example — that is neither literary nor art and appears to be merely a happy accident. But comedy’s work is to recuperate chance as pattern, nonsense as pleasure; it is the comic that cherishes the irrelevant, the impertinent and the seemingly disjunctive: these categories live and breathe together within what I call the comic sphere. And I should say there is a deeper, if still a somewhat fuzzy or funny connection between *poieo*, ΠΟΙΕΩ, *poesis* and *poie*, ποιή, grass: the Comic poets used to pun on a short form of the former word — so that it sounded very like the latter — to mean the expression of political goodwill. Peace, art, nature, making; all are inter-relatable and long inter-related terms.

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<sup>57</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) and “Recognition and Detection,” *Critical Inquiry* (1974), 105.

In its concrete instantiations, comedy depends detecting detected within — without effacing — the variety that always serves as its ground: it is within us, as a faculty, as well as outside us, in the art we have made, and it ramifies into politics as it ramifies into aesthetics and on into any number of disciplinary languages and spaces. It is a ceaseless leveling, indeed an ontological leveling: its dominant physiological effect — laughter — signals mutual presence in a space of play, a phenomenon universal among humans but by no means exclusive to the human animal. (Dogs, dolphins, and rats all laugh.) The comic sphere also insists on the participation of the earthly, the vital and the material — however grassy, however seemingly low — in all making. In this way it represents the subversive, ineradicable, radical expression of a spreading underground. This rootedness, this interest in life as occurs on and below ground, is precisely what keeps art evergreen. The root must be everywhere present, wrote Goethe in his botanical studies: in every cell of the plant was its original oneness: he wrote, too, speaking of undergrounds, that there is little final difference between a root and a leaf.<sup>58</sup> Subversion and inclusion, ending and beginning: all are part of beginning again:

The grasslands, under the first touch of spring, sway and ripple like the sea, so that wading through them, swimming at times through the chest-high grass heads, is more like floating than walking, with no landmark as far as the eye can see. Above, an immensity of blue sky, and only the smallest, far-off clouds as ceiling.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Wilhelm Friedrich Goethe, “Leaf and Root,” in *Scientific Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 101-102.

<sup>59</sup> David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life* (New York: Vintage International, 1978), 171.

## CHAPTER 1

### Historical Novel as Comic Novel: Charles Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” (3).<sup>60</sup>

Almost any person with a standard American high school education would recognize that sentence, could either complete it once it was begun or rattle it off in its entirety. It would be hard not to revel in those firm Anglosaxon monosyllables, that drop from the highest hyperbole to the lowest, that proudly unadorned passive, a passive which — along with the sentence's magnificently restricted vocabulary and the subtle muscle of its hexameter, iambic with the first and fourth foot inverted in parallel — both disguises and enforces the superlative drama with which *A Tale of Two Cities* unfolds.

Safe or safe enough to say, too, that for a wide swath of the culture-consuming public that sentence simply *is* Charles Dickens, that it has become not simply a synecdoche for the *Tale* but a metonym for the historical and also the realist novel in general, for its voice, for its grand but also unpretentious prose style. Call this the retrospective oracular, or *style direct libre* — it's also the style a novel assumes when a narrator feels free enough to assert vast paradoxes about the specific worth of epochs in a language at once so plain and so abstract as to make third-person omniscience feel like a relatively insufficient term. J. Hillis Miller claims this form of language

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<sup>60</sup> All subsequent citations from the novel are from *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2007) and will appear in text, as parentheticals.

was invented by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel; it might be just as true to say that we yearn for it still.<sup>61</sup> When our contemporary fictionists — I use Trollope’s word in order to include screen- and television writers — want to invoke a conflict of the highest possible moral and metaphysical stakes they have somebody declaim something or other about the best and worst of times. In the last five years, at least one mega blockbuster (*Batman: The Dark Knight Rises*) and at least one wildly popular web television series (*House of Cards*) have imported Dickens’s phrases verbatim, along with other less celebrated chunklets of that author’s celebrated and most serious novel.

Indeed we are still so drawn to this solemn version of the realist and the Dickensian—as if it were a great well of aesthetic and moral gravity—that a good joke at the expense of those qualities forms the center of perhaps the funniest network television episode of all time. In Episode 11, Season 4 of *The Simpsons*, the much-lauded “Last Exit to Springfield,” bumbling everyman Homer Simpson stumbles into the union presidency of the local nuclear power plant.<sup>62</sup> He pays a visit to the mansion of millionaire plant owner C. Montgomery Burns, who attempts to convince him not to advocate for a dental plan for plant workers by taking him on a tour of his home and making a great show of false friendliness and hospitality. Along the way, the two encounter a small, strange room: therein confined are a thousand monkeys chained to a thousand typewriters, all smoking cigarettes and typing furiously. Odds are, Mr. Burns explains to Homer, that the monkeys will eventually turn out the greatest novel of all time. He pulls a sheet of paper

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<sup>61</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 63.

<sup>62</sup> “Last Exit to Springfield,” directed by Mark Kirkland and written by Jay Kogen and Wallace Wolodarsky. “Last Exit” is considered one of the show’s best episodes and first aired March 11, 1993.

from a nearby machine and reads out its opening as its author—one of the monkeys—calmly observes him, a cigarette held in one cocked hand. “Let’s see...” says Mr. Burns, “*It was the best of times, it was the blurst of times!*” He balls up the page. “You stupid monkey!” says he, tossing the page. The monkey shrieks as it bounces off its head.

For our purposes, it doesn’t matter whether the scene strikes us as funny. The point is rather that our received understanding of Dickens’s finest phraseology — that famous beginning with which we began — has so firmly congealed that it can serve as grounds for parody in the cultural mainstream. Dickens’s voice, or the rhetoric we take to be Dickens broadly speaking, can only be sounded in super-exaggerated tones; to switch metaphors, our picture of a *Tale* is caricature, intentional (as in the case of *The Simpsons*) or un- (as in the case of *House of Cards*, in which the novel is read during a weird and ultimately murderous encounter with a call girl). The former of course presumes the latter, but of the two it is the former — willful parody of a super-serious subject — to which this dissertation is least opposed. The chapter to follow will argue not that Dickens needs to be treated with the proper reverence for the products of a wise past, but that comedy abides in or even defines *A Tale of Two Cities* itself. The book’s relationship to comedy — its deployment of parody, its fathomless punning, the plot architecture Dickens builds into and out of that punning, its classic comic characters, and the dramatic and symbolic logic of the novel’s happy ending — together form its significance for our contemporary moment.

Though accounts of Dickens’ comedy are many, the comic aspects of *this* novel are consistently overlooked in Dickens criticism. Moreover, they may help us treat it as something other than the author’s least successful novel. In his own attempt to defend a *Tale*, Robert Alter notes that Dickens’s critics tend to seize on it as “a transparent revelation of his general

weakness as a novelist.”<sup>63</sup> Lukács is amusingly merciless: “...even with a writer of Dickens’s rank the weaknesses of his petty bourgeois humanism and idealism are more obvious and obtrusive in his historical novel on the French Revolution (*Tale of Two Cities*) than in his social novels.”<sup>64</sup> Lukács’s argument, which spans only a page or two of *The Historical Novel*, could be easily paraphrased as *Don’t we all wish he hadn’t written that*.<sup>65</sup> Dickens’s contemporaries, too, seem to have disliked it: its serialization in *All the Year Round* the *Tale* was either “ignored or attacked, for lack of humour and a plot hard to follow,” as summarized by Claire Tomalin.<sup>66</sup>

It seems almost too obvious to say that Dickens began his career writing comedy, and wrote comedy all his life, compulsively, weirdly and sometimes almost unsussably, often with such total indecorousness that his jokes — linguistic and structural — could hide in plain sight. But such is the case with the *Tale*. As we shall see, this approach — call it a strong misreading, for now — not only dissolves a number of critical complaints about the text but illuminates the stylistic and formal excellence of a work whose generic tag seems to have kept us from attending to those categories. As a historical novel, or a historical romance, or a tragedy in prose, or as social commentary, or even as a work of realism, *A Tale of Two Cities* fails; its popular

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<sup>63</sup> Robert Alter, “The Demons of History in Dickens’s *Tale*,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* Vol 2. No. 2 (1969), 135-142. Richard Maxwell, the editor of the Penguin *Tale of Two Cities* provides perhaps the best notes as to Dickens’s labors were we to want to understand his work as an attempt to document history.

<sup>64</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Austin: University of Texas Press: 1999), 243.

<sup>65</sup> Lukács’s reading is both political and formal. Dickens’s “abstract-moral attitude towards concrete social-moral phenomena... becomes here an essential defect in the entire composition.” *Ibid*.

<sup>66</sup> Claire Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 308.



reputation, its famous title and its opening flourish obscure how very frequently it is brought in for a drubbing by anyone who sits down and reads it.<sup>67</sup>

It is true, however, that any person interested in even the first few pages of a dissertation chapter about Charles Dickens may already know that the twelve-word sentence that opens this chapter does not exist. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” may be the sentence that so-to-speak exists for people who don’t have the time or the inclination to read *A Tale of Two Cities*, who don’t remember much of it after they’ve read or who know that they can’t have a masked Christian Bale spout a whole paragraph of Dickens in their movie, fine actor though he is. Imagine any Batman delivering this:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of foolishness, it was the age of wisdom, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. (3)

That is the first sentence of *A Tale of Two Cities* — not two but fourteen anaphoric independent clauses whose pendulous periodicity is pinched off by an em dash two-thirds of the way down the sentence’s length, just ahead of a bored or a wearied “in short,” after which that voice of third-person omniscience becomes even wearier, more intent on satire, on undermining and ridiculing its own terms.

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<sup>67</sup> The exception here is Garrett Stewart’s reading of the novel’s ending in *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

After the em dash, the narrative voice sets up a qualified semantic instead of a perfect syntactical parallel; instead of pairs of adjectives aligned alongside each other (e.g. best and worst), the sentence aligns two significances — two spans of time — the present and the past. The “present period” resembles the past in one particular: its fondness for hyperbole as espoused by “some of the noisiest authorities” — moral and social commentators, newspaper headlines and pamphlet titles, general expoundings from and thumpings of various pulpits, textual and otherwise. What should be clear by this point is that the narrator — this powerful third-person omniscient narrator — is strikingly blasé about *itself*.

By the time the sentence hits the redoubled cliché of “the spring of hope” and “the winter of despair,” its language begins to peel back from its content, to reveal itself as a deployment of empty phrasing. The central meaning of this sentence is that its terms are meaningless, that to say that any time period is the best or the worst is, for lack of a better word, silly. The structuring oppositions that seemed so important to the present period are un-dramatically dismissed. The tense dialectic conjuncts of belief and incredulity, Light and Darkness, hope and despair terminate in a shrugging disjunct. For good, *or* for evil, whichever: either could be the case, and neither would be particularly interesting. So much for the best and worst of times.

The opening of *A Tale of Two Cities* is a marvel of unforced complexity: it both lures in readers with a seemingly confident display of muscular omniscience and then launches a jointly stylistic and social critique of the very lure it offers them (society is ill because the language in which it speaks about itself is ill, and vice versa). It should also trouble our received understanding of the novel it opens and reveal to us something of the latter’s virtuosity. Even Alter describes that sentence as “fixing the contradictions of the age in an emphatic series of formally balanced contrasts,” as if Dickens endorsed the validity of any single one of those

contradictions and weren't instead lambasting the very tendency of the age to let its discourse lapse into lazily exaggerated contrast.<sup>68</sup> That tendency furnishes the object of his satire. In a certain sense, it is ringingly funny that we have failed to learn anything from Dickens, that we continue to accept the bombast, the meaningless hyperbole he lampoons as a meaningful way to speak about history, politics, and our place in the world.

The exception — or seeming exception — to the many critics who misread the novel's opening is Hilary Schor, who notices that the novel's "claims to a mimetic or social realism seem undercut immediately by its satiric opening," though she leaves her reading there.<sup>69</sup> Over the next several pages, as I attempt to tease out what else might be funny about the *Tale* — and in what ways — I will continue to pay what I hope is a closer attention to the novel's language and form. I suspect that the usual tools, especially close reading, will continue offer us some return on our interpretive efforts, be that reward only the usual fruit of exercising enduring aesthetic care (for me, that is joy). It should be noted that I do not care about Dickens's explicit intentions, though I afford myself the imaginative and intellectual liberty of addressing Dickens as a writer. My hope is that a capacious and counterintuitive premise derived from a single but singularly significant artifact will lead to open thinking and — not least — pleasure.

Most critics split Dickens' career into two, sometimes three phases, from the early scenes, sketches and picaresques — *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837) and *Sketches By Boz* (1837-1838) — to the middle novels: *Nicholas Nicholby* (1837-1838) through *Dombey and Son*

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<sup>68</sup> Alter, "Demons of History," 137.

<sup>69</sup> "Novels of the 1850s: *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, *A Tale of Two Cities*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 73.

(1847-1848). The later, mature works begin with the first installment of *David Copperfield* in 1849 and culminate in 1865 with the last installment of *Our Mutual Friend*. Treatments of Dickens as a comic writer are restrained to the first phase: *Pickwick*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Dombey*. By contrast, *Bleak House*, *Our Mutual Friend*, the late works, are the novels one is supposed to read, in order to savor the writer in all his complicated majesty. It is the late Dickens from which the mature reader is to learn two lessons: 1) the moral virtue of attending to the socially and economically marginalized, the imprisoned, the poor, the elderly and the unlearned and 2) the ethical tenets of interconnectedness writ through his systems of character and plot, through all the various systems of relation his novels espouse and the complications they introduce into our notions of distance and significance, the near and the far.

Within this framework, *A Tale of Two Cities* stands out as decidedly strange. Violent, murky, bombastic and ponderous when it wasn't snoozily domestic or treacly, for many readers the novel's ambitious historical and geographical range only emphasized the disorganized contrivance of its plot structure and its failed attempt to venture outside the smog of England and the occasional country town. The book indulges a fast forward of five years, another fast forward of nine years, and a long flashback to a buried crime: all serve to confuse the reader and to underline the novel's many contrivances, its lack of rich characterization and its reliance on canned sentiment. Nor do the *Tale*'s ringing Victorian platitudes about love and family irritate the less for the novel's expanded purview. Take, for instance, the deadbeat lawyer Sydney Carton's speech to the golden-haired Lucie Manette: he admits he loves her but knows that she will marry the aristocratic Charles Darnay, whose later imprisonment by Revolutionaries in Paris forms, among a great deal of other complication, the novel's primary conflict.

As he confronts Lucie, Carton produces an uncharacteristically drippy advertisement for bourgeois life:

The time will come, the time will not be long in coming, when new ties will be formed about you — ties that will bind you yet more tenderly and strongly to the home you so adorn — the dearest ties that will ever grace and gladden you.  
(3328)

The closing phrase there — “grace and gladden” — is dreck of a kind Dickens might have lampooned in anyone else; here it furnishes what should be a crucial moment in the emotional logic of the story.<sup>70</sup>

But we have already seen that Dickens’s proclamations are not always as ponderous or self-assured as we might assume. Even Carton, here so pious, clues us in to the larger comedy of the *Tale*, as the central sacrificial figure of its comic conclusion; his tone — “The time will come, the time will not be long in coming” — is as prophetic as it is sentimental. Carton sounds very like a Puck with a plan, as if he already knows the end to which all this scaffolding will be put, the final destination of all this elaborate racing about England and Revolutionary France. His foreknowledge contradicts any notion of the text as a realistic depiction of history—which should be vivid and unpredictable and singular — and instead points toward a comic significance both immanent in the doings of all the novels’ characters — Lucie; Carton; Darnay Lucie’s father, the heroic Dr. Manette, imprisoned in Paris for 18 years; the banker Jarvis Lorry; the minor characters Jerry Cruncher and Miss Pross — and transcendent, in that its significance is derived by reference to an a-temporal, Christian afterlife outside of the world and time.

Almost as if it were written by Carton — who is usually a drunk, and often a sarcastic one — a muffled derision guides the whole of a *Tale*’s first chapter, from its blunt caricatures of

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<sup>70</sup> Later in the novel, for instance, the phrase “infinite jingle and jangle” is launched at the courtroom orators of the Old Bailey (39).

the royal heads of England and France in 1775 to its sketches of English highway robbers and its fleet and biting depiction of the “humane achievements” that proceed the Terror. Far more and far less than the usual scene-setting, that chapter — called “The Period” — even seems to pun on its own title, pointing vigorously toward the ridiculous, faux-oratorical phraseology of its opening sentence.

But why? Richard Maxwell, the editor of the Penguin *Tale*, indicates that Dickens was deeply interested in the historical novel as written by Thomas Carlyle and other contemporaries (Dickens wrote as much in his letters, and corresponded with Carlyle) and that he suffered badly under what he felt was the need to compress or condense massive swaths of time into “teaspoons” (Dickens’s word). We could say that the grinding work of wringing narrative from two decades of tumultuous event forces the novel toward comedy as a means of radical compression, or that Dickens fell back on those tools of comic condensation — caricature, satire, parody — most familiar to him in order to manage a compositional task that threatened to overwhelm him.

Either formulation helps us understand why the unmanageable granularity of history suddenly disappears from a supposedly historical account, to be replaced by the “Woodsman, Fate” and the “Farmer, Death,” with a nameless “king with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face on the throne of England” and a king with a large jaw and a queen with a fair face on the throne of France” (953). Dickens seems to have so much to say about the period that he can’t say anything with a straight face. He takes advantage of allegory because it packs doubled meaning into a single narrative world, expanding its symbolic range. And while allegory isn’t ordinarily understood to produce laughter or amusement, much of the novel’s allegory slips into satire — as

with that king and queen — the novel also makes clear that it understands allegory and comedy as kin.<sup>71</sup>

In an early chapter a giant cask has burst outside a Paris wine shop belonging to the Defarges that will become the site of a great deal of revolutionary conspiracy. The neighborhood's residents descend on the wine split in the street in a spirit of desperate revelry. One figure attracts the narrator's attention:

Those who had been greedy with the staves of the cask, had acquired a tigerish smear about the mouth; and one tall joker so besmirched, his head more out of a long squalid bag of a nightcap than in it, scrawled upon a wall with his finger dipped in muddy wine-lees — BLOOD. (1374)

The joker condenses all he sees before him into a joke that is also an accurate prediction of the violence of the Terror: "The time was to come, when that wine too would be spilled on the street-stones, and when the stain of it would be red upon many there." The narrator is disdainful of the figure, but he nonetheless improvises an allegory, one as accurate and loaded with significance as any offered up by the narrator.

For Dickens and for the *Tale*, joke-making and allegory are similar forms. It is also worth indicating — or indicating again — that these techniques produce or contain involuted forms, doublings and duplications, radical compressions. "All his other tales have been tales of one city," writes Chesterton; Dickens turns to the reduplications and redoubled abstractions of comedy to squeeze in two.<sup>72</sup> Parody like that of the novel's opening sentence creates a new text from an original whose form, content or both remains contained, legible within it despite or through an attempt to deride or dismiss it; the same could be said of satire. One could continue

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<sup>71</sup> All these forms are both mimetic and formal; they build a world and draw attention to their own linguistic particularity.

<sup>72</sup> Introduction to *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: Dutton, 1906), iv.

listing in this way, or one could simply say, as Meredith did, that it is the work of comedy to achieve brevity through diversion: “Comedy... condenses whole sections of the book in a sentence, volumes in a character.”<sup>73</sup>

## 5. THE NOVEL

One might nonetheless ask why we could call the *Tale* a comic novel or a comedy *tout court*. All novels are parodic, supposedly, or even comic: they speak the vulgar, polyvocal narrative real against a vanished ideal, against lyric forms, against song. This is what makes them “low” forms, comic in the stylistic or linguistic sense Boccaccio indicates in his famous gloss on the *Divine Comedy*.<sup>74</sup> The novel is also the literary form most interested in contingency (as opposed to fate), in the social (as opposed to the symbolic), in common humanity (as opposed to gods and heroes); thus does Northrop Frye group “most comedy” and “realistic fiction” in the same, low mimetic mode. What we do find in the *Tale*’s opening sentence is another injunction to pay attention to what David Gervais calls Dickens’s “wavering style.”<sup>75</sup> Slight reconfigurations of grammar and tone, the bending of decorum, the use of parody and especially

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<sup>73</sup> *The Egoist: A Comedy in Narrative* (Boston: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1898), 3.

<sup>74</sup> “...di questa commedia, id est istius operis, quod auctor vocavit comoediam non tam ratione materiae, quam styli vulgaris humilis.”

<sup>75</sup> “Dickens’s Comic Speech: Inventing the Self,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* (Vol 25, 1995), 128.



punning as a form of telegraphy or condensation — this playfulness, this wordplay miniaturizes the *Tale*'s larger structures.<sup>76</sup>

The *Tale*'s second chapter — to take what is closest to hand — is a run of puns so thoroughly integrated into its choreography as to suggest that the chapter couldn't exist without them. A kind of unwritten decorum suggests that pun-hunting is in poor taste, that the pun-hunter flirts with nonsense and the arbitrary, with the opposite of thought as we usually understand it, but the characters' progress as they ride over Shooter's Hill are driven by punnery; the two are coeval, even co-constitutive.<sup>77</sup> The banker Jarvis Lorry has been sent to Paris on an urgent errand and is traveling by mail coach when suddenly the vehicle is halted by the noise of a horse and rider in the distance. The puns are easy enough to spot: By calling Lorry "the passenger booked by this History," Dickens is already punning several times over (1034). He takes a conventional trope—novel-as-vehicle, or history-as-vehicle—and points out his own cleverness in opening his novel with a literal mode of transport *and* a character named after a method of transportation.<sup>78</sup>

The rider calls out: "Is this the Dover Mail?" "Never mind you what it is," the guard retort[s], "What are you?" Besides the fact that it takes the form of a classic Who's On First or

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<sup>76</sup> We could also say that a pun is something like the equivalent of a kind of impudent, hyper-localized allegory, a double meaning affixed to a single word and whose intent is only the more effective the more unintentional, meaningless or indecorous it appears—that is, the farther it reaches away from its literal or expected primary meaning to invoke a second.

<sup>77</sup> As Jonathan Culler points out, "to groan at puns... is viscerally to reaffirm a distinction between essence and accident, between meaningful relations and coincidence, that has seemed fundamental to our thinking." The stronger form of his statement might be: Most of us think punning is *not* thinking, nor is thinking with puns: in order to think, we believe we must deal with meanings that are unitary, linear, and strictly controlled. Culler, ed. *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 3.

<sup>78</sup> The use of the word "lorry" as a conveyance goes back to at least 1832. See "lorry, n." *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, March 2017). Last accessed 13 May 2017.

an I-am-I bit, the exchange is also significant in that it prompts a Tom Swifty, a species of elaborate wordplay Dickens made famous in *The Pickwick Papers*.<sup>79</sup> The rider is errand-boy Jerry Cruncher, whose voice has been growing rougher and rougher in the bad weather, rides up to the coach and spouts a Tom Swifty: “Well! And hallo you!” said Jerry, more hoarsely than before” (1056). The “hoarse” messenger in the exchange is also a “horse” messenger: several more puns of the same outsized awfulness will follow. When Lorry receives his message from Jerry and answers — “Tell them I said, *Returned to Life*,” — Jerry’s response is another Swifty, more explicit because of the mention of a specifically horsey accoutrement:

Jerry started in his saddle. “That’s a Blazing strange answer, too,’ said he, at his hoarsest. (1068)

The third example comes at the end of the chapter.

“After that there gallop from Temple-Bar, old lady, I won’t trust your fore-legs till I get you on the level,” said this hoarse messenger, glancing at his mare. (1084)

At this point, Jerry is walking his horse down Shooter’s Hill, preparing to return to London. The demonstrative adjective attached to the front of “this hoarse messenger” is almost excruciatingly emphatic, a deictic pointing firmly at its own blazingly bad pun in its third appearance. Here a “hoarse” messenger is a “horse” messenger is also a “horse messenger” of another color: we almost see our Jerry, as an equine, so firmly does the sentence insist upon binding “hoarse” and “horse.” Nor does it hurt that Jerry personifies the mare by calling her “old lady,” placing the two of them in the same ontological realm, or that his glance feels like a

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<sup>79</sup> A Swifty (or a Wellerism, after *Pickwick*’s Sam Weller) is a familiar Dickensian joke-form, in which the content or circumstances of an utterance are punned on with an adverb describing the form of that utterance. Swifties experienced a massive lift in popularity after *Pickwick*, in both Britain and the United States. See Florence Baer, “Wellerisms in *The Pickwick Papers*,” *Folklore* vol. 94:ii (1983), 173-183.

familiar one, an easy sizing-up of her capacity that suggests long co-existence. Taken along with the “old lady,” the word “mare” takes on the same connotations we see at the end of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: here is a man and his mare — that is, a man and his old lady.<sup>80</sup> A pun on the word “trust” is also activated by the idiomatic meaning of “on the level” as “truthful” or “trustworthy” — but perhaps it is worth leaving the sentence there.

As the novel’s narrative moves through mud and fog and over the hill, so too does its language increase in its insistence on double meaning, as if pulling toward the moment when it can deploy its least subtle paronomasia. “The Mail” closes with a pun perhaps even more difficult to catch than the hoarse/horse monstrosities. Jerry has continued to mull over the meaning of the phrase: “You’d be in a Blazing bad way, if recalling to life was to come into fashion, Jerry” (8). The sentence is downright confusing. Jerry is the reader’s surrogate at this moment — neither of us know what “recalled to life” means — and while we are already puzzling over this the novel asks us to find within that same phrase a secondary meaning, then to sense some sort of foreshadowing, the opening of a Jerry sub-plot that will center on his work as a Resurrection Man, digging up corpses and selling them to science. Confusing or no, overcomplicated or not, we find the same technique of binding a novel’s literal and symbolic dimensions through a system of polyvalent — that is, allegorical, or punning — imagery that critics remark in Dickens’s other novels.

In *Great Expectations* this system is that of chains and forges, what Alex Woloch calls “partings welded together”; in a *Tale* that system — what Miller might call its “material

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<sup>80</sup> The theme of the comic, especially the satiric, as “written from the place of the animal,” in Simon Critchley’s words, will become important to this dissertation in later chapters. Comedy places us outside or beside ourselves — and outside the ontological distinctions that separate us from the nonhuman animal. Critchley treats satire specifically; see *On Humor* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 35.

complex” — is a more various constellation of images: roads, threads, conveyances, and most insistently, footfalls and echoes.<sup>81,82</sup> In the novel’s third chapter, Lorry will fret and dream, jolted by the mail coach of which he is a passenger. He dreams of digging out Doctor Manette, returning him from his living death as a shoemaker to his life with his daughter, canceling Lucie Manette’s belief that her father was dead, repairing what turns out to be a near-defunct mind and will. This is only one and an early example of how “recalling to life” thus acquires its own spread of images and actions; the phrase will also acquire its own symbolic complement, a contrastive metaphorical match generated by the novel. The primary passage in which this occurs is worth quoting at length for its grimly funny mimicry of the bank’s antique efficiency and calm, and for its demonstration of the use of satire to provide stylistic coherence and to construct an atmosphere without the hassle of realistic description:

Putting to Death was much in vogue with all trades and professions... Death is Nature’s remedy for all things, and why not Legislation’s? Accordingly, the forger was put to Death; the utterer of a bad note was put to death; the unlawful opener of a letter was put to Death; the purloiner of forty shillings and sixpence was put to Death; the holder of a horse at Tellson’s door who made off with it, was put to Death; the coiner of a bad shilling was put to Death; the sounders of three-fourths of the notes in the whole gamut of Crime, were put to Death. (3)

The swift, biting repetitions of “put to death” both dispose the listed offenders with great, Tellson-ish aplomb and allow for the invocation of a tiny satirical opera, six scenes of everyday life, complete with six offenders, from forger to coiner, and a chorus — “the sounders of three-fourths of the notes” — to boot.

Of course the *Tale* cannot be recuperated into a perfectly aligned system of compressed symbolic meanings, nor does the kind of fine, rapid depiction simultaneously made possible by

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<sup>81</sup> Woloch, *The One Vs. The Many* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 177.

<sup>82</sup> *The J. Hillis Miller Reader* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005), 149.

Dickens's comic technique persist throughout — though the closeness with which the novel's referential and symbolic terms align and the multiplications of its networks of meaning can be nonetheless breathtaking. V. S. Pritchett wrote that “it is in the comic Dickens above all that we find the artist who has resolved, for a moment, the violent conflicts in his disorderly imagination” — and one is tempted to agree with him.<sup>83</sup> It is the comedy of *A Tale of Two Cities* that brings its readers and its characters from London to Paris and back again, through two trials for treason, through the switches and mistaken identities that would otherwise require hundreds more pages and represent far, far less of an achievement.

But for all the literally violent conflicts contained within the book, its center, at least characterologically speaking — is empty. The young man who overcomes a slew of opposition — in this case, enmity between England and France, internal political strife and his own unfortunate past — to marry the novel's beautiful girl is the one who does the least, who offers that novel the least. His dialogue is wretchedly boring, his appearance simply a tidier version of a seemingly minor, character, Sydney Carton; he never even receives indirect discourse, separating him from the book's linguistic texture. Woloch diagnoses Dickens's novels with a tendency to a “weak protagonist” — a tendency with its a leading example to be found in the baffled Pip of *Great Expectations*, whom minor characters are always buffeting about. In the *Tale*, we have our Charles. His one dramatic action — to leave his wife and child and return to France during the

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<sup>83</sup> There is no critical consensus as to whether Dickens could create structurally sound or even well-plotted novels. At one turn he is celebrated for his seething, violent genius, at another for his harmonious effects. Pritchett seems to come closest to admitting that Dickens's work is unsettled while also highly composed, capable of fusing plot and imagery into a symbolic patterning sometimes so fine as to lift itself up into lyricism and sometimes downright slovenly. Pritchett is quoted in Polhemus, *Comic Faith* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 90.

French Revolution to assist a loyal if uninteresting family servant menaced by the Terror — is rather stupid, and draws down scorn from both the narrator and other characters. When Darnay is stopped at one of many checkpoints on his way into Paris, Citizen Defarge demands of him: “In the name of that sharp female newly born and called La Guillotine, why did you come to France?” (4917).

We could say that to seed such obvious impatience with Darnay’s incompetence was unwise of Dickens, since it exposes instead of excusing the novel’s most extravagant contrivance and its reliance on metaphysical or symbolic plotting. “The unseen force was drawing him toward itself,” relates our narrator of Darnay’s hasty decision to leave his wife and child and head to Paris, with no further specification as to that force might be. But Darnay’s resultant arrest, literal and figurative, forms a major part of a *Tale*’s comedy, in that it allows for minor characters to take up prominent narrative roles — including that same Sydney Carton, whose seemingly sudden and late centrality both depends on Darnay’s second imprisonment and, as we shall see, makes a strong case for reading the *Tale* as comedy.

Woloch notes the “essential significance of Dickens’s distorted and exaggerated minor characters and the *over*-significance of minor characters within the novels.”<sup>84</sup> An analysis of any comedy is incomplete without an examination of comic character; an analysis of a Dickensian comedy without an examination of its characters would be something like inconceivable. Woloch outlines “the essential way that Dickens makes more of minor characters: not by rounding out their flatness or reducing their distorted nature, but, on the contrary, by extending their flatness in such a compelling way that it focuses the reader’s interest.” To compel and interest the reader by selection and exaggeration, especially of human persons — the central

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<sup>84</sup> Woloch, *The One Vs. The Many*, 78.

interest of any story — , is a novelist’s best trick: one might say that no matter how “realistic” the novel, the elaboration of a life-or-lives-as-lived is the form’s definitive act of artifice, even when it hides under the sign of attempting to represent people who could exist in the world we know. This is of course especially true in Dickens, but more significant or more challenging might be to extend Woloch’s claim to point out that Dickens’ deployment of exaggerated minors troubles our notion — an important and a precious one — that the most important ethical function of a novel is to teach us that all characters possess a full subjectivity, a roundness, somewhere in the work’s imagined universe.

Dickens happily produces characters whose emphatic minorness produces a kind of caricature that might help us drain away some of the negative ethical connotations from the act of caricature as such. The tall, red-haired Miss Pross offers a helpful example here, for two reasons. The first is that she is extremely strange, and even the novel knows it:

A wild-looking woman... observed to be all of a red colour, and to have red hair, and to be dressed in some *extraordinary* tight-fitting fashion, and to have on her head a *most wonderful* bonnet like a Grenadier wooden measure, and good measure too, or a great Stilton cheese. (17; my emphasis)

The second is that she explicitly and repeatedly rebukes attempts to determine her motivations or to fill out her story. “Her character (dissociated from stature) was shortness,” as the novel relates, taking suitable advantage of a parenthetical building into its description of her its own flippant, sealed structure.

On her first encounter with Mr. Lorry, the banker asks if Miss Pross will be accompanying Lucie Manette to France to find Dr. Manette, a simple question that might occasion a firm statement of will, or a considered assent, or a quick dissent, or a confused balk in a major character with a “full” psychological range:

“A likely thing, too,” replied the strong woman. “If it was ever intended that I should go across salt water, do you suppose Providence would have cast my lot in an island?” (18)

Her retort, really another question, is unanswerable. Its grammatical form invites a negative response. But its content suggests a positive, in that a person who lives on an island is surrounded by water and would have to cross the ocean in order to go anywhere, at least in any meaningful way. Then again, an island is a zone of isolation, fixedness; maybe we should expect that Miss Pross will stay in England forever, like a good Englishwoman. Or perhaps we, like Jarvis Lorry, should simply retreat to our rooms at her answer. A comical answer — like the one Miss Pross gives — is an answer full of mystery, concrete in each of its terms yet perfectly insoluble. (Similarly, Miss Pross’s face is never described: her facial features, that which we most readily associate with unique human persons, are withheld from the reader; she is her clothes, her mock-heroic headgear and little else.)

Of course, we could say that Miss Pross’s answer could have been given by a real person who is confused, or embittered, or dislikes Mr. Lorry, but this would feel somehow beside the point. Alenka Zupančič advances the theory that “character, as invented by comedy... does not involve a person in all her ‘complexity,’ it does not seek to define a person by the multiplicity of her character traits, it is not a study that would help us understand the person’s actions.”<sup>85</sup> For Zupančič, comic characters possess a universal symbolic function: in other words, they are allegorical, and flat — like Jerry, whose hair “resembles an animated bit of the wall at Newgate” (39). But this function (in Jerry’s case, to serve as a standard bad-guy-with-heart-of-gold trope) is in fact the bearer or the protector of their concrete humanity. Jerry and Miss Pross are no less *human* than characters who more closely resemble the flesh-and-blood subjects we know as

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<sup>85</sup> Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 36.



people or persons (who, for instance, have more ordinary hats and hair). Rather, they ask of us a much more difficult task: to accept that a certain cartoonish thinness is frequently true of real human beings, and that in that very thinness — or our inability to accept that fact and our ability to attempt to press past it, constantly — lies our humanity.

Miss Pross was both born on and is, metaphorically, an island — hers are the metaphysics of isolation. She may love Lucie Manette, she may fight almost to the death to protect her charge and the family that employs her, but she does not *express* herself in any common way.<sup>86</sup> She will gain a backstory involving a ne'er do well brother, Solomon Pross, but only because and inasmuch as it serves the novel's rapid accumulation of conspirators in its final third and allows Sydney Carton to blackmail his way into self-sacrifice and centrality. She has not the rich interiority to which we will might access if we somehow allowed her more of what Woloch calls "character space" within the novel — and perhaps we should fight the impulse to advocate for more of such space on her implied behalf.

For comic thinkers like Giorgio Agamben, however, the *prosopon* — the comic mask, ugly but not too ugly — represents the site upon which judgement is enacted, preserving the unseeable, natural self behind it: the actor herself, or in Agamben's thinking, a character's creaturely self.<sup>87</sup> We laugh at the mask, while behind it — or perhaps because of it — the

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<sup>86</sup> I am aware of arguments — compelling and necessary — that emphasize the reduction of the representation of servants to narrative helpers and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel's interest in eliding lower-class characters — and also of arguments that insist that even minor, exteriorized servants in the novel stage surprising confrontations with the social systems and representational technologies that relegate them to the margins. See especially Bruce Robbins, *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below* (New York: Columbia University Press: 1986).

<sup>87</sup> By contrast, for Agamben and others the tragic situation is identified by the "confusion between actor and character."

creaturely self remains innocent. The position is an ethically difficult one to accept, perhaps because of a strong and real relationship between ridicule and cruelty. Nonetheless comic thinkers and writers have expressed similar ideas. “Contempt is a sentiment that cannot be entertained by comic intelligence,” writes George Meredith in one place; “in Comedy is the singular scene is charity issuing from disdain under the stroke of honourable laughter,” he writes in another.<sup>88</sup> He moves past the disavowal of scorn — here “disdain” — to its inclusion in a scheme in which it is in fact required to produce the unstinting love human beings ought feel for one another (“charity”). We must laugh *at* one another in order to show that below that laughter, behind the mask, lurks the unimpeachable because unknowable stuff of common humanity.<sup>89</sup>

By contrast, tragedy does not know the split between mask and creature, character and actor. There is no excess to the tragic character, no diversion from their course or in their constitution: they are guilty of a flaw so deep and so inextricable from the constitution of their being they usually can’t see it and will never overcome it. For a tragedy to work, this flaw conflicts with some larger symbolic or social order and drives a character’s doom. Strangely, it seems to be precisely because tragedy does not hold character apart from actor that it is the tragic, not the comic, character who possesses an interiority: a tragic flaw, a blind spot, the mark of original sin, a pathology-ridden unconscious — in other words, a dark space from they must issue periodic expressions of varying artfulness, intellectual interest and moral worth: the traces of a struggle to fit into a world by which they are reviled. It may be for this very reason that characters we see suffer gravely are more likely to be considered human, sympathetic,

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<sup>88</sup> In, respectively, the “Essay on Comedy,” in *George Meredith’s Essay on Comedy and Other New Quarterly Publications* (London: Associated University Presses, 1998), 116 and *The Egoist: A Comedy in Narrative* (Boston: Scribner and Sons, 1898), 3.

<sup>89</sup> This theme works its way through all the authors discussed in this dissertation.

“rounded.” We see these characters struggle with their own guilt or flaw (even if that guilt is a kind of innocence, as in the case of Hardy’s Tess), and we pity them precisely because we know they are doomed. We might even say that their hopelessness makes it easier for us to like them; it certainly is a requirement for catharsis.

By contrast, comic characters advance a larger, brighter claim about the ontology of the self. To recast Eric Auerbach’s famous account of the difference between epic “flat” and realistic, “mysterious” characters, only fully externalized description leaves whatever else there might be to a person — an interiority that is not *a priori* or necessarily stained, broken, or sick — both unrepresented and unrepresentable. This is not a flattening of some originally full self, or even a less “real” portrayal of humankind. Dickens’s Miss Pross is an unknowable island: which is to say she is free from even the most fundamental of our queries, those assumptions and interrogations to which we would subject “her,” and by which we would make her — against the wishes and the best uses of comic thinking — a subject.

## 7. A HAPPY END

In the *Tale*, all the characters who suffer, mightily — one thinks not only of Dr. Manette’s years of imprisonment but of the terrible fight between Miss Pross and Madame Defarge at the novel’s end — are not solely comic in the sense that we are not allowed to pity the characters involved but in that they are appropriately invulnerable, not just to physical or material but to concomitantly temporal woes. Nothing that is of the world can hurt them: they will have their return to the ideal. Even the little seamstress who dies with Sydney Carton is comic, though only in the Christian sense of the exit from time, history and the material that it

offers. In contrast to the knitters attendant at the novel's final scene — those putters to Death whose furious activity signals their bloodthirstiness, their assumption of a murderous decisiveness best reserved for the Fates, the gentle seamstress to “the better land”: “There is no Time there, and no Trouble,” Carton tells her. She goes further, voicing for the novel its incessant pointing toward Carton as a Christ figure, a vessel for a blessed eschatology:

But for you, dear stranger, I would not be so composed, for am naturally a poor little thing, faint of heart; nor should I have been able to raise my thoughts to Him who was put to death, that we might have hope and comfort here to-day. I think you were sent to me by Heaven. (234)

All character arcs on the “good” side of Dickens's moral allegory are pointed outside of time and materiality. We could say that in one sense the *Tale's* comedy hides in plain sight: structurally, theologically, the novel is unquestionably — or question-beggingly — a comedy. Stylistically, too, it is rife with pun and parody, developed out of a kind of self-conscious hesitancy at the perceived enormity of its own historical task. The same is true of the novel's uncertain hero and its central comic character: Sydney, who by the time of his execution will have saved our putative protagonist, Darnay, from death on two occasions and architected the novel's two most important plot twists. Carton may not be cartoonish, as flat as Jerry or Miss Pross, but he is nonetheless a comic character. He is an *ieron* in Northrop Frye's sense, a character whose self-deprecations disguise his very heroism. He is also a classic vice, a type imported from stage comedy: “a cheeky, improvident young man who hatches his own schemes... It is he who helps the play to end happily, cheats or hoodwinks the stupid old men and puts the young in one another's arms.”<sup>90</sup> It is Carton who brings the novel to its happy, domestic conclusion.

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<sup>90</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 154.

“[The eiron] is in fact the spirit of comedy,” writes Frye, drawing our attention back to the fact that Carton is the spiritual heart of the *Tale*.<sup>91</sup> Frye’s other comments on the vice are useful: his role “includes a great deal of disguising, and the type may usually be recognized by disguise.” At the initiation of the novel’s denouement, the unknotting of the threads that have bound the characters together, Carton performs the clothing swap in the Bastille that saves the life of Charles Darnay. Carton’s aptitude for disguise and for mimicry allows for Darnay’s safe passage out of Paris. And Carton is not only an eiron but one who wears his disguise with him everywhere: his very resemblance to Darnay has already saved the Frenchman once, in the courtroom scene of the novel’s second book. That novel, it could almost go without saying, is Carton’s disguise as well: it hides its hero until its last third, behind the living veil that is Darnay.

The doubles and puzzles of the *Tale*, its investment in costume and comically mistaken identity break through the representational and into the metafictional: they apply as equally to discourse as they do to story. Carton is a thinly cloaked author figure — not just a Darnay but a Dickens, an incurable and incurably clever *bon vivant* whose mind — a mind very like the mind of a novelist, say — ensures the continuance of their story and his own. He is also, as Maxwell indicates, a master condenser, who sweats and suffers over the legal documents: his worth to his employer, Stryver, is the power of “getting at the pith and marrow” of cases, “extracting that essence from a heap of statements, which is the most striking and necessary of the advocate’s accomplishments” which Stryver lacks (137).<sup>92</sup> Carton boils down cases, moves toward essence,

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 157.

<sup>92</sup> We know, too, that Dickens was inspired in the creation of Carton and the novel’s sacrificial logic by Wilkie Collins’s *The Frozen Deep*, in which a Carton-like character gives up his own life for the life of two lovers. Dickens played the role in 1856, and it is mentioned, circumspcctly, in the Preface to the *Tale*: “I have so far verified what is done and suffered in

deals in concentrations and abstractions, just as the joker outside the Defarges' shop manages to reduce the wine to bloody ink and inscribe on the wall of St. Antoine one of the novel's single most significant words.

But there are other, structural reasons that Carton holds the keys to an appreciation of the *Tale* as comedy. "Playing at human sacrifice seems to be an important theme of ironic comedy," remarks Frye, following a line of critics who link comedy to the temporary confusion of ontological categories (for instance, the animate and the inanimate, subject and object, in comic art and perhaps in representation as such).<sup>93</sup> We are meant to take Sydney's self-sacrifice seriously, in one sense — it should make us weep, trigger a catharsis — but in another it is only play, a zone of confusion between the quick and the dead. (Fascinating, too, is that Carton plays an extended metaphorical game of cards — or *cartes* — against the British spy and LaForce turnkey Barsad to win the chance to sacrifice himself.) Far from a tragic fall or downfall, his death on the scaffold secures Sydney's redemption thrice over, in the mind of the reader and her moral judgment, in the social world of the story, and in the implied heaven he attains after the fall of the guillotine.<sup>94</sup> In a certain sense, then, *A Tale of Two Cities* ends in a tense, a thrilling and a fine fusion of an ironic comedy and the un-ironic Christian comedy that promises the integration of the soul into the highest orders.

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these pages, as that I have certainly done and suffered it all myself." That the structure of the *Tale* comes from stage drama also helps justify the use of dramatic types in its criticism.

<sup>93</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 46.

<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, Maxwell suggests that Carton's speech could be read as posthumous, since the narration of his execution precedes it.

Dickens' final sentence must have been written with his first sentence in mind. It is worth attending to the grammar of the last paragraph, not least because it is the most famous ending of any famous novel and is also quoted by Christian Bale's Batman in *The Dark Knight*:

It is a far, far better thing I do, than I have ever done. It is a far, far better rest I go to than I have ever known. (264)

The repeated "far, far better" shift the reader and Carton's sight toward Heaven; they allow the articulation of Carton's and Heaven's excellence not through the false, earthly absolutes mocked in the novel's opening paragraph but through a more powerful *because* qualified statement. The superlative degree of comparison has been exchanged for a kind of comparative superlative: we have moved from "It was the best of times..." to "It is a far, far better thing I do..." Carton's assumption into Heaven (which is also his author's wished-for assumption, in a lovably funny way) announces itself with a downward shift, from the empty, unsubstantiated, parodic superlatives of the novel's faux-historical opening to a simple comparative made by a single voice in terms of its own convictions and experience. The shift from past tense to present, too, suits the moment when the novel and its central character steps outside of time into transcendence.

We could see this implicit revision of a satiric opening as a closing movement from a stylistic comedy of derision to a structural comedy of integration, and the indication of Dickens's ability to envision the movement between the two modes as a satisfying dramatic structure, however attenuated by the great mass of pages that falls between them. That shift also echoes our simplest definition of comedy: the movement from woe to joy, from trouble to happiness. Chesterton had it, to a tee: Sydney "is never so happy as when his head is being cut off."<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Chesterton, introduction to *A Tale of Two Cities*, xi.

In being put to death, Carton receives his personal expiation and is recalled to life. He, too, presses us to understand the novel as un- or anti-tragic, as comedy. In order to understand *A Tale of Two Cities* — to feel the enormous, living system of its doubled and redoubled comic meanings — we must believe with Chesterton that “a joke can be so big that it breaks the roof of the stars.” While the theological overtones of the novel are no longer of immediate or unmediated relevance to our moment, this form of comedy appears again and again in the novel and outside it. Within the pages of this dissertation, it will arrive as a fervent belief in comedy as the perfection of art and as an engine of love in Joyce; in Lerner’s case it arrives as a response to ecological catastrophe and the end of our world and takes the form of an attempt to stop time and therefore conjure up a utopian future.



## CHAPTER 2

### The Perfect Manner in Art: Comedy, Poesis and Love in James Joyce's *Ulysses*

In the midst of the purling and cutaways and returns of “Penelope,” Molly Bloom’s consciousness surfaces a string of words, a memory containing an episode of make-believe. She remembers the love games she played in Spain while being courted by Leopold Bloom. She teases him and taunts him:

...what did I tell him I was engaged for fun to the son of a Spanish nobleman named Don Miguel de la Flora and he believed that I was to be married to him in 3 years time there’s many a true word spoken in jest there is a flower that bloometh (18.772-775)<sup>96</sup>

Much here calls out for close reading. But a set of broader observations may be made first, and profitably. The genre of the fiction, of the trick Molly plays on Bloom is romance, in keeping with the setting of the memory among the roses and terraces. Romance operates as a kind of mediate genre between tragedy and comedy; it allows for comic effects — resurrection, regeneration, marriage and so forth — to conceal themselves behind the logic of fateful dream and quest as it refutes tragic outcomes, primarily death.

But Molly doesn’t call the story of her invented Spanish suitor a romance. She calls it *jest*. “There’s many a true word spoken in jest”: the line’s meaning comes probably from Chaucer’s *Cook’s Tale*: “a man may say full sooth in game and play.” The fictional prank Molly plays on the young Bloom contains and bears out a stunningly lovely truth: the truth is that there *is* a flower that bloometh, and that it is she, and that further — punningly — it is her eminent marriage to a suitor more esteemed here at least by the language of her thoughts than any son of

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<sup>96</sup> Subsequent citations from the novel will appear in text. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Hans Walter Gabler, ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1986).

the Spanish nobleman: Bloom himself. Evidenced by Molly's memory, *play*, *fiction* itself make love, and both are rooted in comedy, in its particular gestures: not just pun, but prophecy (sooth indeed), for the fiction here secures the future she accidentally prophecies. Her story of marriage *makes* a marriage. This, for Molly, and for Joyce, and for *Ulysses*, is equivalent to a three-way connection between poesis, comedy, and love.

As discussed in this dissertation's introduction, the comic sphere names the ceaselessly novel space of dialectical interplay between everything and nothing, form and void produced by comic art and all those varieties of human making and doing that forward life, survival, integration, and renewal. This space, this shine abides in the day-to-day world, but we experience it only when a comic recognition — that is, the landing of a punchline of whatever size, the conversion of an unexpected incongruity from fear into pleasure — throws us beside ourselves and outside of worldly time into an unbounded present, an innocent realm that abides in and alongside the real or the serious at all points. Within this sphere no harm can come to us or to others; death and terror do not exist. Love, fellowship, pleasure, learning, culture: these abide within the same space, even — as in Molly's soliloquy — in and through the memory of negative affects, pain, error, betrayal, grief and sickness. For the comic sphere — and Joyce's comic effects — enfold and contain without effacing their opposites.

*Ulysses* attempts, with great sincerity and hopefulness, to build a world of art that shows us that our world is both “tentative and reparable,” to borrow a phrase from Sheldon Brivic: we can see its flaws and laugh at them, witnessing and transcending what we thought was necessary in its suddenly exposed arbitrariness.<sup>97</sup> The concept of the comic sphere helps us clarify the

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<sup>97</sup> Sheldon Brivic, *Joyce Through Lacan and Zizek: Explorations* (New York: Springer, 2008), 124.

metaphysical and poetic means by which Joyce's novel achieves his happy ends — and to re-emphasize the connection between comedy and poesis itself. For Joyce, the comic was “the perfect manner in art,” as he wrote in one of his 1904 notebooks: “a comedy (a work of comic art) which does not urge us to seek anything beyond itself excites in us the feeling of joy... tragedy is the imperfect and comedy the perfect manner in art.”<sup>98</sup>

And yet the optimism of Joyce's oeuvre, especially as expressed in *Ulysses* — undoubtable the “most comic” of his works — is often overlooked by critics, who prefer to either fawn grimly over the somberness of *Dubliners* or fall helplessly into the unreadable swirl of *Finnegans Wake*. By contrast, the cheerfulness of *Ulysses* — again, which is not to say the absence of moral seriousness or of suffering — could easily be summarized by the eleven-word story that is the opening sentence of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “Once upon a time and a very good time it was.” Fairytale beginning, convivial and colloquial happy end, fabulist and realist orders neatly coincident, syntax winningly off-kilter, a sleeper pun on the word “time,” in which the a-historical time of a tale and the time of a specifically historical telling are yoked.

That sentence could also be taken as a statement of Joyce's eccentric, happy position within the canonical high modernists, whose poetics we generally understand to be those of fracture and alienation. But Joyce was as much a utopian as he was a modernist, no matter T.S. Eliot's early and influential attempt to recruit him as the same kind of artist that Eliot himself wanted to be, a disillusioned genius in search of a means “of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary

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<sup>98</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 1.

history.”<sup>99</sup> While a closer scrutiny of Joyce’s work through any number of critical lenses will remain warranted as long as that work continues to outstrip its interpreters (likely forever) — why would we continue to hold fast to the idea of *Ulysses* as a mournful attempt to shift through cultural rubble, as a scrabbling against chaos? Even the single most famous line in *Ulysses* — “History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake” — could be productively read as a joke, especially if it is read in the *context* in which it appears. Stephen Dedalus *teaches* history. This is why he would like to awake from history: because his history class is a nightmare to teach.

Certainly critics *know* Joyce is funny. Derrida notes that Joyce is most — or only — loveable when he laughs.<sup>100</sup> Vicki Mahaffey at least implies the same, by pointing out the incongruity and reversal that lies at the heart of all comedy:

The assertion that Joyce insists on the equality and interdependence of binary oppositions... and celebrates the humor and instruction implicit in their self-reversals is hardly a novel suggestion, whether one’s authorities are Derrida, Barthes and Kristeva, or Giordano Bruno and Nicholas of Cusa.<sup>101</sup>

But nary a critic has taken Joyce’s comedy so-to-speak seriously; almost no one has followed through on Joyce’s assertion in the notebooks, as I attempt to do in the following chapter, first by briefly examining the novel’s qualifications as comic art and then by presenting close readings of two particular moments within it. Zack Bowen, who has written one of surprisingly few books on *Ulysses* as a comic novel, is wrong, surprisingly and intensely wrong, in concluding that a

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<sup>99</sup> T.S. Eliot, “Ulysses, Order and Myth,” reprinted in *Critical Essays on James Joyce* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co, 1985), 27.

<sup>100</sup> “...je ne suis pas sûr d’aimer Joyce... Je ne suis pas sûr qu’on l’aime... sauf quand il rit...” (his ellipses). Jacques Derrida, *Deux paroles pour Joyce* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1987), 51.

<sup>101</sup> Vicky Mahaffey, *Reauthorizing Joyce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 6.

comic work is only comic if readers find it funny, and instead repeats what Paul Grawe calls “an almost universal mistake in the criticism of comedy.”<sup>102,103</sup>

By contrast — and instead of rehashing the critical conversation about the context-dependence of “funniness” — I look instead to the novel’s formal gestures, to those structures encapsulated by the idea of the comic sphere and the connection, in turn, between the comic and art. Comedy pervades the novel, from its most straightforward plot structures to the smallest and most delicate expressions of Joyce’s overall philosophic and aesthetic aim: to secure joy, to rest within it, to forefend that fear of death and the unknown that ends thinking and in fact the forward movement of life itself. Rife with twoness, *Ulysses* gives us not just one but two happy endings: on the one hand, the symbolic reunion of a bereaved father — Leopold Bloom, with an alienated son, Stephen Dedalus, and on the other, the reunion of Bloom and his wife Molly in what Stanley Cavell might call a comedy of remarriage: “the drive of its plot is not to get the central pair together, but to get them *back* together, together *again*,” since we know that both have been unfaithful.<sup>104</sup>

In both cases, we should recognize the same overall comic turn: a restoration of the social and of love, innocence regained on the other side of knowledge — for Dedalus and Bloom, acceptance of new friendship is born of the knowledge of loss; for Bloom and Molly, their marriage is now *preserved* by their knowledge of unfaithfulness. Both cases involve what Northrup Frye calls “post-dated innocence”: we end on the reconstitution of the family, together

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<sup>102</sup> Zack Bowen, *Ulysses as a Comic Novel* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1989).

<sup>103</sup> Paul Grawe, *Comedy in Space, Time and the Imagination* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983), 4.

<sup>104</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

again, their innocence more enduring because now structured by its opposite.<sup>105</sup> We could see Joyce's knowing acceptance of this second, postdated sort of blamelessness in that Stephen refuses to move in with the Blooms and instead promises to pay them visits.

Other critics, most notably Maud Ellmann, have found Stephen's return to the Martello Tower melancholic in tone.<sup>106</sup> But that return in fact highlights that *Ulysses* is a buddy comedy, in which the incongruity at the heart of all comic procedures becomes a characterological structure, an arrangement of types against types. Brainy Dedalus is set against bawdy Bloom; Dedalus "the centrifugal departer," Bloom "the centripetal remainder" — "one lean, one full," as the driver who drops them at Bloom's house observes (17.118). The two must never change: Bloom must remain a lovable almost-dunce with a deep love for feeding various down-and-outs and Stephen must remain a too-bright ponce who must feed his saturninity above all else. Neither character can be normalized so that both can be shown as perfect in themselves, or perfect all along. For Joyce, at least, beneath the mask of our flaws we are all shameless, all the same: the two are "mirrors of the reciprocal flesh of theirhisnothis fellowfaces" — these eccentricities — personifications of personification as with all comic characters — exist precisely in order to protect the living stuff, the innocent undifferentiated invisible unquantifiable *life* behind them (17.168).

If the novel produces comic types — and not just types but types who travel in pairs, who begin sundered and who attempt to rejoin across great distances (and this includes its novelistic characters and their epic originators, Dedalus and Telemachus, Bloom and Odysseus, Molly and

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<sup>105</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 162.

<sup>106</sup> Maud Ellmann, "Endings," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ulysses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 95-109.

Penelope stretching toward one another over the centuries) — we could say that *Ulysses* is a book of twoness; Joyce once tried to convince Eliot that the novel was a “bi-plane” text. The novel’s constant switching between its seemingly paradoxical under-and overdetermination requires that it find and sustain a medium for connections and meetings, dialectical movements between extremes. *Because it is a comedy*, *Ulysses* is composed of divisions that still connect, of passages between and through realms; it generates the middle terms that Joyce calls “portals of discovery,” “inlets of happiness” and, of course, epiphany: “Remember your epiphanies, written on green oval leaves, deeply deep,” thinks Stephen, in “Proteus” (3.140-141).

Here we could make a connection again to the cultural and aesthetic function of the trickster, who deals in opportunity, “a pore or a penetrable opening in an otherwise closed design.”<sup>107</sup> In *Ulysses*, this constant recuperation of incongruity in motion resolves itself in the great soliloquy at its end, in the comic — comic as in bawdy and comic as in rife with the formal gestures and structures of the comic sphere — outpouring of Molly Bloom in bed. Joyce once said to Djuna Barnes of *Ulysses* that “there’s not a serious line in it.”<sup>108</sup> The chapter to follow presents a reading of a short joke scene from the beginning of the novel, briefly examines the connection between comedy and poesis in “Proteus,” and then moves forward to the novel’s final episode, “Penelope.”

## 1. THE ONE POT

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<sup>107</sup> Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2010), 67.

<sup>108</sup> Djuna Barnes, “A Portrait of the Man Who is, at Present, One of the More Significant Figures in Literature,” *Vanity Fair*, April 1922. Available online at <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/1922/03/james-joyce-djuna-barnes-ulysses>.

A sort of family scene: the Englishman Haines, Stephen Dedalus, and Malachi Mulligan sit down to breakfast. Mulligan — the Falstaff of the occasion, as well as its *miles gloriosus* and its presiding comic spirit — “I wouldn’t personally repose much trust in that boon companion of yours who contributes the humorous element, Dr. Mulligan, as a guide, philosopher and friend if I were in your shoes,” Bloom will later advise Stephen, and it’s true that Stephen doesn’t much like him — Mulligan the true friend, irrepressibly candid, plump and stately, has made the three bachelors eggs and tea (17.279-281).<sup>109</sup>

Stephen is sulking, since Mulligan has just told him a harsh truth about his pride and what he feels it must have cost Stephen’s dying mother. Posh Haines pours out the latter and dispenses the sugar. “I’m giving you two lumps each,” he says. “But, I say, Mulligan, you do make strong tea, don’t you?” Mulligan, who doesn’t much like Haines, responds without responding to him, and by crafting a little comic scene:

Buck Mulligan, hewing thick slices from the loaf, said in an old woman’s wheedling voice:

—When I makes tea I makes tea, as old mother Grogan said. And when I makes water I makes water.

—By Jove, it is tea, Haines said.

Buck Mulligan went on hewing and wheedling:

—*So I do, Mrs Cahill, says she. Begob, ma’am, says Mrs Cahill, God send you don’t make them in the one pot.* (1.355-362; Joyce’s italics)

The first two points to be made are one, that Mulligan is a good actor and a good joketeller, and two, that these two capabilities are likely one and the same for Joyce. Note the naturalness with the Mulligan drops at once into the character of Old Mother Grogan, whose voice Joyce gives

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<sup>109</sup> Not many critics like Mulligan much, despite the novel’s early emphasis on Mulligan’s status as its comic psychopomp. Mulligan laughs, he sings and poetizes, he points out the funniness of Joyce’s mythological conceit: “The mockery of it, he said gaily. Your absurd name, an ancient Greek.” His own name he finds “tripping and sunny,” the very stuff of poetry, “two dactyls” (1.122).



the reader in direct quotation. Mulligan, like Odysseus, slips in and out of his masks in an eyeblink; he is polytropic, a conman or trickster, which is to say an artist.<sup>110</sup> Unlike the novel's other characters, he speaks the little scenes, sings out loud the comic songs that occur to his conscious. (In this he is closer to an incarnation of his author than either Bloom or Dedalus.)

Mulligan builds the table scene beat by beat, though the annoying irrepressibility of his performance — that is, his talent — might hide how neatly he brings its structure into being. In Old Mother Grogan's voice, he invokes a second character, Mrs. Cahill: she enters the scene without stage directions or description. She is called and so she is, as though Buck had, in his funniness, ready and complete access to the well of fiction. And he does, in that comic art often or perhaps always refuses to abide by the separation between the supposed world of art and the world of the real. We see that the construction of fictional scenes and the worlds they imply, no matter how tiny, is paratactic, accretive (and we can see this even more clearly in the “*yes, and*” rule of multi-person improvisation in theatrical comedy). For this reason, the funnier things are, the so-to-speak more fictional they get, the more free their relation to the purported real becomes. Thus the exhilaration, the felt degree of increasing freedom that takes place during a long bit, in whatever medium.

In another of the playful paradoxes upon which the comic thrives, the effect of this “lifting” of art out of life and into its own world is felt in the world it leaves behind. Mulligan begins to ignore Haines, whose sporting comment on the strength of the actual beverage in front of him — “By Jove, it is tea” — seems suddenly limp or daft. So delicately, through a typically Joycean bit of naturalism, we see the means by which comic performance establishes and alters social forms: Haines is suddenly on the outside of something. His status as recorder of

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<sup>110</sup> My ideas here borrow liberally from Hyde.

Mulligan's jokes and so forth, as a mere transcriber of Irishness is not simply reflected but reified, brought into being anew.

Such an observation would have implications for an ethically inflected reading of the novel; it also speaks to commonsense insights about laughter verified by behavioral biology. But, and perhaps more importantly, it shows us the way in which art is always used: its structures and procedures are always already those of everyday life. Joyce's comedy, like all good comedy, is relevant to and inherent in our lives *for* its artfulness. The processes by which we make comic representations are the same ways we make social forms; the two processes are not isomorphic but identical. We would say that Haines's comment is "awkward," in contrast to the usual order of things: the deep wisdom in the word, which means "Upside down; hindside foremost"—that is, ass first."<sup>111</sup> We could say that this tiny social inversion is kindred to the massive inversion of the Nighttown episode, and to the inverted worlds — the glimpses of pure freedom through structure, unity through variety and variety in unity — always pertinent to the comic sphere.

Within the scene, however, Old Mother Grogan's jibe at the expense of other people's tea-making puns without punning, or puns in one dimension: we could call it an inverse pun or an anti-pun, a joke in which the lid is held onto multiple meaning as a paradoxical means of emphasizing its presence. "When I makes tea, I makes tea," she says: there is only one fluid worthy of the name despite everyone else's best efforts to pass off their flavorless brew as such. We can also see more clearly the relationship between comedy and exemplarity: here the funniest tea is the best tea, the strongest tea, singular tea, tea so strong it detaches itself from all

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<sup>111</sup> "awkward, adv. and adj." *OED Online*. (March 2016. Oxford University Press). Last accessed 14 March 2016.

others and becomes a kind of proud eccentric or prototype. All other, un-singular beverages lose their claim to the class of “tea” and become “water.”

The joke’s second step is to flip back into pun, against the grumpy Grogan, who has overstepped her bounds a little. “When I makes tea I makes tea,” Mother Grogan says, “and when I makes water I makes water” — leaving herself wide open for her comeuppance at the hands of Mrs. Cahill: “God send you don’t make them in the one pot.” In evidence here is the system of checks and balances, the taking of turns in the social work of play: Mrs. Cahill one-ups Mother Grogan, and we can assume that if Mulligan continued the scene they would flip again. But if we can hold our attention steady, we can also — and more importantly — see that Mrs. Cahill’s punning jibe in fact bears a close relation to *making*, to poesis itself. She points out that Old Mother Grogan must be talking about urination — precisely because no one *makes* water, either when understood as a chemical compound or as a classical element like fire or air, unless they were some sort of deity.

The idea of making undergirds the joking scene and renders it a sort of textual crux: “When I makes water I makes water” rephrases the first few lines of Genesis: “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.” Old Mother Grogan suddenly assumes a kind of divine aspect, perfectly in keeping with her imperious claim to make the world’s only tea. Mulligan’s joke shares — as it must share, since it is a parody — a one important aspect with Scripture. In both holy text and comic scene, a first contrast appears between two qualities formerly self-identical. For Joyce, the inner structure of the moment of creation, the moment in which an elemental substance discloses the beginning of a world — is playful. And it is no accident — or rather, it is a tellingly happy accident — that the generation

of the world and the generation of a joke entail the playful suggestion of a form, a container, for them both.

Indeed the arrival of the punchline — the one pot — is very like epiphany, when a passage is opened between two quantities without destroying either, when two dissimilar realms are placed in dialogic or dialectical balance inside some a geometrical figure (the circle is the most common). As we shall see, for Joyce, getting a joke — and making a joke, which are in turn two sides of the same process — is the same as an epiphany, a ha-ha very little different from an ah-ha.<sup>112</sup> The sacred and the profane, aligned through parody, a new idea brought into being in a temporary configuration: the opening of a larger form or middle term that surrounds them both. In Mrs. Cahill's punchline, we see — almost as if by a miracle — a figure for that middle term: the one pot. And if we were to move scales, since the smallest parts of *Ulysses* work as dynamic miniatures of its larger systems, we could say, almost jokingly, that *Ulysses* itself is the one pot, the same way that Stevens's jar on a hill is the one pot, the same way that Keats's urn is the one pot, the way the rock pools Stephen observes on the beach are the one pot. Each shows us the emergence of form around and through heretofore undistinguished content, the structuring of an inlet of happiness.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Contemporary cognitive science has verified this claim: joking triggers the same areas of the frontal lobe as problem solving and stimulates the same pleasure centers. Most investigations have been into dementia praecox and its relation to disinhibited, though less complex, jokemaking; thinking and joking make use of the same anatomical structures within the brain. See Jason Warren, "Humour in Dementia Studies," *Nursing Standard* (London: Royal College of Nursing: 1987), 20 Jan 2016, Vol. 30, Issue 21, 32.

<sup>113</sup> Joyce's technique is some ways very like Rodin's; the sculptor sometimes arranged small models inside a vase in order to determine their best relative positioning according to classical forms before advancing to full-size casts.

Old Mother Grogan's punchline returns us, as Stevens's poem returns us, to an (imaginary) moment of origin: to poesis, when naught becomes one, a moment after which Joyce is always seeking: "Hello. Kinch here. Put me on to Edenville, Naught naught one" (3.6). And we could say that the return to origin—to the margin, to the beginning—is what makes Joyce a comic poet. He is always searching for the first incongruity required to make art, locating the moment of creation between something and nothing, in the joining and sublation, the spinning out of the two into a new world, a greenness, another Eden, another instance of the comic sphere.

## 2. PAIN IS FAR

"Proteus" ends the Telemachiad, the three-chapter sequence that might make us think the novel we're reading is a sequel to *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. We travel with Stephen down Sandymount Strand, revisiting the site of his epiphanic self-dedication to art in *A Portrait*. Appropriately, the Linati Schema gives the episode's meaning as "primal matter," its interest in philology, its color blue. As we learned in the novel's opening pages, for Mulligan the sea is a great sweet mother; for the alienated Stephen it is snotgreen and reminds him of his mother's vomit. (He also doesn't like swimming or bathing, in decided comic contrast with Mulligan and with the bath-happy Bloom.)<sup>114</sup>

It might thus be hard to think of Sandymount Strand as a comic realm of any kind. But the emergence of primal matter out of nothing — so much on Stephen's mind as he walks —

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<sup>114</sup> Like Stephen, Joyce was a hydrophobe; his attempt to reverse many of his own peccadillos is surely part of the novel's "humor and instruction." See R. Carter, "James Joyce [1882–1941]: medical history, final illness and death," *World Journal of Surgery* 20, (1996), 720–4.

nonetheless occurs as the emergence of an incongruity, the coalescence of a difference within the heretofore undistinguished. And we will see that Stephen, despite his mood, can't help but find the establishment of these incongruities funny. Wit and play guide the shaping of the liminal landscape in front of him into objects, sounds, ideas, and words, even when he drags the sad figure of Hamlet into the business at hand. Jokes accompany the bringing of the world itself into being. Walking with his eyes shut along the space where land is still sea and vice versa, he considers his doom. "If I fell over a cliff that beetles o'er his base, fell through the nebeneinander ineluctably." But then, immediately afterward: "I am getting on nicely in the dark" (3.15).

Like Mulligan, Stephen is in fact extraordinarily good at jokes — but unlike Mulligan, he always seems to be suppressing them. The interior monologue is an intensely dialogic form, consisting of back and forths: the consciousness moves in and among the perceptions, inside and outside running into and out of one another like the waves as they commingle on the beach. But if interchange and incongruity lie behind the movements of consciousness, that only re-emphasizes the artist's need to discern or to invent — to knowingly invent — some original form. The seaside setting is charged with the idea of art and its first moments, starting with the origins of perception:

Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signature of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs.  
(4.456-60)

As Joyce builds the world of Stephen's consciousness, Stephen, too, is building a world, beginning with the visible: he sees, therefore he thinks. And what he sees and what he thinks are fittingly centered around the idea of *poesis*.

The beach suggests to him the concept of diaphane: the edge of the knowable, of the known world: "Limits of the diaphane," Stephen muses, opening and closing his eyes. What

comes first? Light or darkness? What emerges first out of the well of potential beneath both? Stephen also sees signatures, or reads them, though perhaps it would be most accurate to say that simply by seeing, Stephen reads: he presses through to the singularity of each object, its haecceity, which is produced by its mediated status. This is in contrast to the method he jokingly suggests Aristotle used:

Then he was aware of them bodies before of them coloured. How? By knocking his sconce against them, sure. Go easy. Bald he was and a millionaire, *maestro di color che sanno*. Limit of the diaphane in. Why in? (4.57-4.58)

There is much to remark here, not only the joking allusion to Stephen's first philosophical master but to the means by which every object and idea—and for now the objects are ideas and vice versa—arrives while he is *playing*, while he repeats to himself the rules of his universe and invents tests to subvert and nuance them.

Diaphane, adiaphane. If you can put your five fingers through it it is a gate, if not a door. Shut your eyes and see.

“If you can put your five fingers through it” — here Stephen delivers an example of an example, according to mathematical logic the first and most singular inhabitants of any world: objects when they are still ideas and vice versa, when their signatures are most visible. This one strikes one as vaguely obscene, but its comic bluntness accounts for its inclusion: Joyce includes a joke about passageways and gates because *that is what jokes are*: passageways and gates, icons of that which is coming into being or shifting between kinds of being.

“But he adds, in bodies:” in the next line, Stephen revises his own memory of Aristotle. The choice of the word “body” is meaningful for a comic reading of the episode. One of the great dualisms inverted and subsumed by the comic is that of the body and mind, objective and subjective. Objects — bodies in the philosophical sense — are allied with the corporeal, human body in their assertion of their thingness. Indeed the word “sconce” is, like “bodies,” a pun, since

it can mean both a candle or hand-held light and the human head. The light Aristotle carried, the light of the mind — is held in no more than a skull.<sup>115</sup> The idea of cleverness — intelligence, but intelligence occupied only with worldly ends — seems to be the middle term in which both senses of the word can operate. And in its turn the idea of cleverness seems to trigger Stephen: “Go easy,” he thinks, as though he were already having too much fun, spinning out his comic sphere too fast, the ellipsoidal earthball whose details and inhabitants accumulating too quickly for him to manage as he walks (3.6).

The objects in Stephen’s mental world are props, and contain the same bizarre outsize importance as props in comic theater — they are both fictitious and elemental, unreal and the most real objects on the stage. They stand on the border between what is and what isn’t. On Sandymount, reality is encountered by knocking one’s sconce against it. Each object is exemplary insofar as each functions as a gateway to the ontology Stephen spins out in his mind. An example doesn’t merely show us something we ought to imitate, whether in art or with our behavior. It possesses a curious status, a certain shine that — as is often the case with the newnesses spun out by the comic sphere — fluoresces as greens and bluenesses. Seaspawn and seawrack: twinned origin, “spawn” and end, “wreck”: the “nearing tide,” the oscillation between beginning and ending.

This world includes the origins of poetic rhythm — Stephen invents a bit of light verse — and the wellsprings of language, which Joyce calls “wavespeech”:

Listen: a fourworded wavespeech: seesoo, hrss, rsseeiss, ooos. Vehement breath of waters amid seasnakes, rearing horses, rocks. In cups of rocks it slops: flop, slop, slap: bounded in barrels. (4.456-59)

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<sup>115</sup> “sconce, n.2.” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, Dec 2015). Last accessed 28 Feb. 2016.



Onomatopoeia is one of the languages of the comic sphere, with its relatively high degree of what linguistics calls iconicity: that is, the relationship between signifier and signified is less arbitrary and reflects some formal similarity between the two. Onomatopoeia thus brings us closer to the putative emergence of language from sound; Murray MacArthur points out that Vico believed that onomatopoeia was language at its youngest, an idea since verified by developmental linguistics.<sup>116</sup> Stephen's ear for onomatopoeia links him to the earliest, babble-phases of language, allies him with nonsense as much as it does with his moderate Latin and less Greek. Both an emergence and an inspiration, the overcoming of nothingness as it becomes life, or the emergence of a form of life from nothingness: each of these transitions belong to the comic sphere and are safeguarded by them. New phonemes arrive bearing at once maximal and minimal incongruity.

Even the return of language to the sea, the weight of the past Stephen senses — “These heavy sands are language tide and wind have silted here” — is cast as a return to a reservoir of potential, to life (3.298-299). His consciousness registers the retreat of a wave to the sea: “And, spent, its speech ceases. It flows purling, widely flowing, floating foampool, flower unfurling” (3.459-460). As language exhausts itself, it effluoresces, flowers: here, as with all the novel's many other endings — chapter endings, represented endings, shutting of doors, farewells to friends — a beginning, a victory, a moment of growth or mutual presence.<sup>117</sup> And in the same way, we are given, even as Stephen laments his own past naivete, a striking image of the comic

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<sup>116</sup> Murray MacArthur, “Signs on a White Field: Semitics and Forgery in the ‘Proteus’ Chapter of *Ulysses*,” *English Literary History*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Autumn 1986), 633-652.

<sup>117</sup> Even the chapter one would expect to end sadly — that of Paddy Dignam's funeral — concludes with Bloom getting in a dig at the solicitor John Henry Menton, deftly putting him into place by pointing out the dent in his hat. “How grand we are this morning!” thinks Bloom, mocking Menton in the episode's last line (6.1034).

sphere in its most iconic form:

Books you were going to write with letters for titles. Have you read his F? O yes, but I prefer Q. Yes, but W is wonderful. O Yes, W. Remember your epiphanies written on green oval leaves, deeply deep...

The green oval leaves, spring images of Stephen's youth, the playful return to the beginning of words and the beginnings of books: even the pun on leaves expresses the naïve exfoliations of the comic sphere.

As important to the episode as art's comic origin — and in keeping with the importance of comic procedure to the episode — is Stephen's destination, or lack thereof. He has an appointment to meet Buck Mulligan at a bar called the Ship at six. The path of "Proteus" is thus explicitly a digression, a wander. Stephen is killing time, which is precisely one of the functions of the comic: to convince the mind, however temporarily, that it needn't fear its own ending.<sup>118</sup> The ending of Stephen's meander to his family's ties itself off as he recalls a line of Dryden's: "No, Cousin Stephen," in a deflation of his own ego, "you will never be a poet" (3.128). In his Latin quarter hat, Stephen isn't a poet; he is a sort of pathetic, profane saint — that is, a fool, and he knows it. "God, we simply must dress the character," Stephen thinks of himself (3.175). And the very fact that he can't stop dwelling on his clothes might remind us of the comic as well. In one of his passing observations, Northrop Frye notes the dependence of the comic on costume changes and disguise; this is likely the formalization of the comic's deep reliance on the interchangeability of persons. Nor is it ever far from Stephen's mind in that he's wearing Mulligan's pants and boots: "a buck's castoffs, *nebeneinander*. He counted the creases of rucked

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<sup>118</sup> Here I disagree with Kenner, who sees the absence of motive in the novel as Joyce's refusal of comic simplification. But characters who wander around, aimlessly, are behaving comically: they refuse the grave, safe fiction that we all have some intact, rational notion of what we ought to be doing at any given time. See Kenner, *Ulysses* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), especially 21-23.

leather wherein another's foot had nested warm" (3.446-48).

Stephen treats his past self with disdain, views it as an exercise in pretense and melodrama. So jejune was he that he carried Metro tickets with him in order to prove an alibi, and imagines speaking to the police: "Other me did it, other fellow." But even now, on his second tour of Sandymount—and no matter how firmly he derides that past Stephen, with his Latin quarter hat—his identity remains that of the transformer, the metamorphoser, the trickster or con man: "I moved among them on the frozen Liffey, that I, a changeling, among the spluttering resin fires. I spoke to no-one: no one spoke to me" (3.308-309). His ability to project himself through time and to move unnoticed makes him a jester, if a gloomy one. And of course the thought would come from his "other me." Comic types are reproducible: there can be infinitely many of them. A logic of substitutability, in which each one serves for the other, in which each of us is beside ourselves and our relationship to our own individuality is fluid, its borders less fiercely policed. The borders between subjectivities are continuously and safely shuffled and reshuffled. As discussed This leads to the rudimentary framework of a comic ethics in which duty to the other is the same as duty to one's self.<sup>119</sup>

The keenest example of comic technique in *Ulysses* is of course that of the callback, the associative return of memories, images, and tropes. In "Proteus," this means the uncanny apparition of the ship as Stephen stands, having freshly placed his booger on a boulder. He misses an article of clothing Mulligan hasn't returned to him:

My handkerchief. He threw it. I remember. Did I not take it up?  
His hand groped vainly in his pockets. No, I didn't. Better buy one.

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<sup>119</sup> Alenka Zupančič makes a similar point within a Lacanian framework in *The Odd One In* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012). Comedy "leads us through certain shifts in the symbolic Other, including the presentation of the knowledge that we are Others, too" (99). Without wanting to diminish the theoretical complexity of Zupančič's argument, one might point out that this insight is repeated in anthropological and behavioral biological work on humor.

He laid the dry snot picked from his nostril on a ledge of rock, carefully. For the rest let look who will. (3.498-3.500)

Stephen's acute self-consciousness emerges out of a complicated staging: in interior monologue we feel, with Stephen, that we have been caught short. The clipped sentences mimic the patting of his pocket, the probing of his memory of the afternoon. Then comes the faint release of realization: "No, I didn't" take it up. Stephen then asks himself if someone isn't watching him, and the very question seems to draw a witness, indeed an entire ship out of nothingness, imposing it on the horizon:

Behind. Perhaps there is someone.

He turned his face over a shoulder, rere regardant. Moving through the air high spars of a threemaster, her sails brailed up on the crosstrees, homing, upstream, silently moving, a silent ship. (3.502-05)

The ship induces a kind of sublime quake in the reader, not least because it is also freighted with christological imagery; it spooks us as it would spook Stephen; the beauty of the passage derives from Joyce's typical appositive, alliterative, lyrical structures, exercised here another version of the recurring vision he has from *Portrait of the Artist* forward: a feminine figure, clothed — "I see her skinties. Pinned up, I bet," as Stephen remarks of a woman he glimpses earlier in "Proteus" (3.331). But the appearance of the ship is another callback of another kind as well, to the name of the bar where Stephen was supposed to meet Mulligan, and so on, and so forth, as *Ulysses*'s profound investment in the comic perfectability of art.

These kinds of patterns are in fact part of Joyce's utopianism; they are the means by which he establishes dynamic order, builds out into the blue, to borrow a phrase from Ernst Bloch. Discarded, a rusty boot on Sandymount Strand can take on extraordinary pathos, can remind us of *The Waste Land* or of mortality or of suffering or any of the entries in the list of serious subjects for serious aesthetic treatment. But it is telling that, unlike Eliot, Stephen greets

the idea of the sea change, the externalization of the body, as miraculous: “Seadeath, mildest of all deaths known to man.” Even the hydrophobic Stephen, dreaming of drowning, looks at the dead-dog-littered beach and finds in it some gentleness, some comfort or succor. If we must die, we will die without pain. “Pain is far,” he thinks, in a singularly beautiful passage in which he leans back against a rock to watch the sun:

Pan’s hour, the faunal noon. Among gumheavy serpent plants, milkoozing fruits, where on the tawny waters leaves lie wide. Pain is far. (3.441-43)

The “faunal noon,” the “serpent plants”: Arcadia, a garden on the seashore. The echoic passage of wavespeech presages the ending of the next episode, “Calypso,” in which we meet Bloom.

Enjoy a bath now: clean trough of water, cool enamel, the gentle tepid stream.

This is my body.

He foresaw his pale body reclined in it at full, naked, in a womb of warmth, oiled by scented, melted soap, softly laved. He saw his trunk and limbs riprippled over and sustained, buoyed lightly upward, lemonyellow: his navel, bud of flesh: and saw the dark tangled curls of his bush floating, floating hair around the limp father of thousands, a languid, floating flower. (5.565-572)

The passage is one of *Ulysses*’s most beautiful, for its tenderness, here demonstrated by another instance of Joyce-typical repetitions and appositive phrases, “scented, melted,” “sustained, buoyed,” “floating, floating.” It also striking in its recapitulation of the tropes of the comic sphere: the commingling of time scales and tenses, a driving happiness, hopefulness and an intense lyric beauty. But in many ways—its worshipfulness of life and reproduction, its union of the genders — it also hearkens forward, to the novel’s single most marvelous and funniest episode: “Penelope.”

### 3. HIM AS ANYONE ELSE

In the Linati schema, “Penelope” is marked “∞”; Joyce also referred to it as the novel’s “clou,” the nail, the keystone of the Book of Bloom, which belongs to Leopold but finally and most irrevocably to his wife Molly. The critical discussion of the episode has thus been particularly rich, as well as divisive. In a useful summation, Lisa Sternlieb describes critics’ response to Molly as either as a triumph of feminism or as a flagrant instance of sexism, a reason for exultation or avid critique. To the former camp, Molly is, in Sternlieb’s words, a rare example of *écriture féminine* as penned by a male author. To the latter, she is stupid and slothful, mired in her own lusts, clinging to her marriage in an act of unimaginative desperation, an unflattering portrait produced by a bigoted author and/or his bigoted age.<sup>120</sup>

We could learn several important things from these positions, though the most important might belong to the category of the metacritical: Molly Bloom is one of our most striking affirmations of the power of language — at points, almost of bare language — and of literature to imply persons. Yet more crucially, at least for the argument at hand, she shows us the way in which *comic* characters are at once singular and protean. They are implied subjectivities and, at the same time, in the very starkness and strangeness of their outlines, they make no secret of the fact that they only trick us into believing that they are persons at all. Their extravagance amounts to a kind of unconcealed con. They reveal that a “subjectivity” is a very limited thing indeed, and that at least half of human life lies outside it, in the province of impulse, compulsion, the body, the subconscious and the uncontrolled — that is, under the sign of any one of the terms usually arranged on the other side of the word “self,” or “ego,” or “reason,” or “mind” — all the

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<sup>120</sup> Lisa Sternlieb, “Acting Natural,” *English Literary History*, Vol. 65, No. 3 (Fall, 1998), 757-778.

impersonal drives and appetites that belong to what Joyce would call, in his bad German, “der Fleisch.”<sup>121</sup>

If most people attempt and succeed, for the most part, in holding these parts of themselves down and away, any good comedian — any good comic actor, and any good comic character, and any good cartoon, the three being close cousins, common inhabitants of the comic sphere — any good comedian forces us to pay attention to the incongruity that lies between willed or conscious and the compulsive. Characters whose behaviors one could call “cartoonish,” who wear exaggerated comic masks trigger a strong response in terms of neurological activity and felt aesthetic response, “when a painting of a face is more like a face than a face itself.”<sup>122</sup> One might speculate that we laugh at cartoons precisely because they clash most strongly with the granular flow of undifferentiated reality that forms the ground of our perceptions.

*Ulysses* invites readers to become caricatures of themselves, revealing their own assumptions and temperaments, the associative engines of their minds. The provocations of the comedian and the cartoon belong to Molly, and she to them: she often outrages her critics, forcing them outside of their calm, ratiocinative centers, and perhaps exactly to the degree those critics believe they remain within them. For evidence, we could look to Sternlieb’s own interpretation of the episode, which describes Molly’s extravagance as coinciding with accounts of her concealments: “she has memorized every face, but her countenance of shifting webs is unrecognizable to others.” Sternlieb is wrong, factually speaking — Molly hasn’t memorized every face, and has trouble remembering which of her suitors has a moustache — but she is right

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<sup>121</sup> “Fleisch” is neuter; the phrase is, more properly, “Ich bin das Fleisch das stets bejaht”: *I am the flesh that always says yes*. The phrase reverses Faust’s “Ich bin der Geist, der stets verneint.”

<sup>122</sup> Timothy C. Baker, “Neuroaesthetics of Caricature” *Poetics Today* 30.3 (Fall 2009), 471-515.

to point out that in her very eccentricity, Molly presents herself as a kind of blank screen. Furthermore that blankness is produced by her memorableness, what Ellmann calls, with some sarcasm, calls her “unprecedented eloquence.” We remember Molly because she isn’t memorable, because, as Ellmann describes her elsewhere, less a person than “a topography of intensities.”<sup>123</sup>

Unfortunate, then, that Molly’s striking memorability and her seemingly paradoxical blankness are an integral part of the episode’s genre and its concomitant philosophical framework — that is, an integral part of its comedy and *Ulysses*’s higher level pertinence to the comic sphere. Sternlieb’s work, however, at least provides a starting point from which to advance a reading that reclaims it as such. The idea of the comic sphere allows us to appreciate Molly as a character while repositioning her as a *comic* character — as both a person and no person at all. In so doing, we might be able to move beyond a century’s worth of conversations about what kind of woman Molly Bloom is. She is less a reflection on biological womanhood, or a net of stereotypical symbols for same — including Joyce’s conception of her as pure flesh, as “indifferent Weib” — than, as with all the other inhabitants of the comic sphere, a joker in her own right. She and the comedy which makes her — and sustains her love for Bloom — attempt and succeed in returning her readers to the garden of a great joy.

#### 4. SOULS

Molly’s mind ticks over with little send-ups and wisecracks, as when she tries to recall the word for the transference of souls: “Met something with hoses in it.” Molly’s typical disdain

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<sup>123</sup> Ellmann, “Endings,” 95.



for her husband's pretensions — which we, too, may have disdained — is revealed through an accidental almost-pun produced as she searches for Bloom's favorite ten-dollar word. The sudden physicality of her nonce phrase — the implied writhing rubberiness of hoses is so different from the chiseled stateliness of the Greek word — toys with our sense that signifiers could have anything to do with their signifiers: we also catch a proleptic echo of Molly's ease with the body, and the metonymic moraine of body parts that spills across the episode, bottoms, hands, genitals, eyes, noses, moustaches and thighs. (If, for Stephen, clothes were costumes, bodies themselves are costumes for Molly.) Both effects belong to the comic sphere.

Indeed everywhere in "Penelope" grow the elaborate surprises, the breakdown of necessity and its replacement by the strange as the harbinger of heretofore unknown possibility. We could say, even, that the episode is so comic that it reverses this same arrangement. Later in the chapter, Molly recalls that Blazes Boylan showed up late for his last tryst. S/he remembers being irritated. She then describes the particular irritation of keeping house and not knowing who will show up during the day: "I hate people who come at all hours answer the door you think its the vegetables then its somebody" (18.334). Briefly put: Molly expected something odd and received something normal. In this case, the arrival of another person is in fact cause for upset of the kind that might evoke a laugh—but the texture of her thought just as it occurs to her comes as a fully formed punchline. We almost feel as if vegetables, not people, knocked at the door.

And of course Molly's jokework can be much more complex, digressing or transgressing outside its original representational plane. As with the novel's other characters, Molly seems to have specific knowledge of other episodes, here "Ithaca," which immediately precedes "Penelope." She reflects on men who excite themselves by asking women questions: "doing that frigging drawing out thing by the hour question and answer," a callback to the previous chapter,

“Ithaca,” and a send-up of its tedious length. The reader is equally free to imagine that Molly has overheard the exchange of questions between Stephen and Bloom. Two moments are worth noting. The first is Molly’s metafictional cry to Joyce himself: “Oh Jamesy let me up out of this” — and the second is her remark that she “doesn’t like books with Mollys in them” (18.657-58; 18.1128-29). The two quips perform same timefreezing comic gesture whose locus classicus is parabasis, in the vein of the Old Comedy — encyclopedic, highly allusive — written by Aristophanes and his cohort.

This breaking out of one representational frame — this comic crossing of boundaries — reflects many of *Ulysses*’s structures. We find one even in Molly’s mentions of tragedy:

It must be terrible when a man cries alone  
I’d like to be embraced by one in his  
vestments and the smell of incense off him  
like the pope besides there’s no danger  
with a pope if your married he’s too (18.120-121)

Molly’s quip that a pope is married to the Church and ought to take it as seriously as a woman takes her marriage to a man — that is, not so seriously at all — offers a thorough, properly dialectical inversion. Each figure involved — woman and priest — suffer through the indignity of being shown to be merely human. If the priest is the judge, and the judge sins, well, no one can be judged. Here we run back into Cavell’s description of the comedy of remarriage: “It will be a virtue of our heroes to be willing to suffer a certain indignity, as if what stands in the way of change, psychologically speaking, is a false dignity”... “or, socially speaking, as if the dignity of one part of society is the cause of the opposite’s indignity, a sure sign of a disordered state of affairs.”<sup>124</sup> Molly’s supposed indignity at Bloom’s philandering and at his behavior places even

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<sup>124</sup> Cavell, *The Comedy of Remarriage*, 8.

her marriage to Bloom well within Cavell's description, which in turn helps us see the virtue in that marriage (or in that re-marriage).<sup>125</sup>

By the end of the passage, it might be hard to remember what came before it. The emblem of the tragic — “a man cries alone” — is briefly wondered at but then followed by a rush of desire, of the need for more life, by Molly's honest and bawdy lusts: “I'd like to be embraced by one in his vestments.” The comic lets us see the tragic in the passage and then moves past it, from the imperfect to the perfect manner in art. The imperfect — that is, the tragic — manner remains on the page, to be read and re-read: our need to forget that at the beginning of this passage a man cried alone is not in itself sufficient grounds for a condemnation of the comic as unserious, or escapist. That which is enveloped by the comic does not vanish. It remains, to be witnessed, but not finally to be obeyed.

The comic and the tragic abide side-by-side — and the mechanism that allows for that seeming paradox is in turn *comic*, on a higher level. Objections could be made that comedy is cruel, that it participates in or heightens tragedy. Behold the *man*, says Pontius, in one of the cruelest jokes ever made—his joke being both that Christ is a man, not the son of God, and that no one will ever behold Christ again. In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas answers the question as to what must happen to waste in Eden. Surely our first parents evacuate, since they eat. Aquinas responds that the excess is disposed of as God sees fit; it is simply vanished away into space. And while Aquinas, at least in the form of his thinking, is a comic thinker — as Hegel is a comic

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<sup>125</sup> It also anticipates Ben Lerner's use of the poet Robert Creeley's “humiliating posture of renewal” in the next chapter of this dissertation.

thinker — this idea seems to evidence perfectly the conservatism that accompanies what many theorists of comedy characterize as “bad” or untrue comedy.<sup>126</sup>

The comic sphere is constantly enlarging and protecting whatever life: if we read we can keep in mind that the idea of a happy ending and an idea of waste are not mutually exclusive: they are mutually reinforcing and comic. Derisive violence in word or deed, scatological humor, bawdy humor: all these belong to ritual dirtwork and the policing of the body, whether social or physical. A mechanism must be devised to extinguish or expurgate the unwanted; waste or dirt is simply magicked away or shamed, pointed *at*, laughed *at*. But in *Ulysses* and in the comic sphere, whatever substratum is instead brought into participation in an ever-enlarging whole on the move from necessity toward freedom, recuperated into pattern. Molly’s menstruation is not included in the novel in order to be purged. Indeed the menstruation taboo seems so inconsequential to Joyce as to furnish him little material except that which cuts against men. We encounter a Molly whose sexuality seems surprisingly fluid: “God I wouldn’t mind being a man and get up on a lovely woman” (18. 1146-47).

Molly might imagine fighting with Bloom: “Ill let him know if thats what he wanted that his wife is fucked yes and damned well fucked too... its his own fault if I am an adulteress” (18.1510-17). But a Molly for whom Bloom almost seems to pimp, or a Bloom for whom Molly expresses exhaustion, impatience, fury: these are comic characters nonetheless. On the other side of grief and betrayal, they make their nightly return to one another, to their shared memories and their shared bed perhaps *more innocent* for their having sinned — or perhaps having disproven,

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<sup>126</sup> Alenka Zupančič’s definition, as provided in this dissertation’s introduction, is worth repeating: in true comedy “the concrete and the universal co-exist, the concrete being the indispensable grounding of the universal.” Here the concrete can be equated with the material world. Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 196-197.

like Saint Pelagius, that there was such a thing as sin at all. This is an arrangement aspiring to some more generous capaciousness — honest in spite of itself, if a little silly, if uncomfortable, if topsy-turvy, sleeping head to foot.

*Ulysses* opens itself up to a dizzying array of socialities, coupledoms, and lonelinesses: all the odd possibilities of love and intimacy, all the tremulousness and vice and bumfuckery and braggadocio of Dublin, red light district included, in order to redeem by representing each of them. This is part of its comedy, and its carnival — and not a conservative form of carnival that would turn the wheel until the same people come out back on top. In the true comic, the odd ones are to come in, the purview of the social expanded until even those characters so comic as to come apart, whose existences are nothing but mask, nothing but metonymy, are shown as participating in the same shared essence, the same vitality.

As with the novel's content, so with its form. "Penelope" recuperates strangenesses into design, troubling boundaries and undoing exclusions. The eight sentences of the episode's 41 first edition pages form an inverse mirror of one another, a pattern Joyce likely borrowed from Vico. Associative work — including staged epiphany and callback — gains its effectiveness because it restores to the consciousness that which it had thought was lost. It brings back, in a surprising way, that which we already know, to comfort and delight us as we move forward through time. Jokework deals in the episodic memory: its callbacks make our former states available to us and allows us to re-experience them safely. It revises the story of a life — and often the most shocking events in that life — so that it and they seem happier, purposive. Comic telling binds together the past and the present in an experience of staged surprise that mellows into delight and then into happiness and then on into contentment.

Again the impulse to lift itself free of its setting, to stage itself as a self-enclosed form and therefore protect its contents, creating scenes of instruction, offering pleasure and happiness: these are all functions of the comic sphere — which appears in “Penelope” along with its usual tropes of greenness, bloom and growth. Flower of the Mountain, Molly is called, as if to reify the sense of elevation, of climb and distance, retrospective tininess, visions of cities and kingdoms in thimbles that happy endings so often entail:

O and the sea the sea crimson sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets and the figtrees in the Alameda gardens yes and all the queer little streets and the pink and blue and yellow houses and the rosegardens and the jessamine and geraniums and cactuses and Gibraltar as a girl where I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes (18. 1598-1603)

Obvious, too, is a shift in syntax: parataxis becomes the engine of the sentence: *and and and*.

Molly’s felt breathlessness, the catalog of flowers, then the switch into the present tense: “*Shall I wear a red yes.*” The memory absorbs Molly at the same time as it remains, very explicitly, a memory, the mode of its description abstractive: a list of nouns, the capitalized “Flower,” as though the scene and its heroine were sublimating back into ideals.

Recall the mark that Joyce gave “Penelope”: ∞. Worth noting as the episode reaches its non-ending are the abolition of time in a state of innocence regained and the performed force of her remembered promise: “Yes I said yes I will Yes.” The thrice-repeated affirmation, the capital Y: you’d have to be dead to miss the vitality surging through the line. And there are more “Yes’s” in the first edition than in the manuscript, which reads, with a comparative plainness almost laughable: “And I said I will yes.”

One needn’t, however, adhere too closely — or at all — to Joyce’s intention to feel the affirmation of language, of the body, and the mind bursting through the lines. Recall that for Vico as for Joyce writing comes into being with language, so that its exuberance, the capital Y is

not a postmodern performance of indeterminability, not a means of emphasizing the fretful mediations necessarily involved. For Joyce, the mediations are not fretful. Art is neither disguise nor desperation. Jubilation in whatever form, graphological or linguistic, is jubilation. The fact seems to be that his critics need near-endless reminding that it is possible, though extremely difficult, though requiring of a virtuosity in its turn deserving of critical and uncritical adoration, to be very clever without being very cynical.

Perhaps this capacity — the temperament required for this kind of reading — simply vanishes with the onset of age, as Robert H. Bell points out in his study of Joyce’s “jocoserious” novel.<sup>127</sup> But Bell also indicates, seemingly without realizing it, that this was simply not the case with Joyce himself: in a letter, Nora Joyce recalls her husband laughing as he composed *Finnegans Wake*, and having to shush him as he composed. Laughter, language, story and character were to Joyce coeval; all pertained to the same, comic sphere. We could say, of course, that Joyce by that point had reached a kind of hysterical end point, his eyesight failing, his teeth removed, and that *Finnegans Wake* is a vision of his own death — and that his efforts to convert his own rapidly approaching funeral into a “funferal” are somewhat hideous to contemplate.

That might be so. It might also be true that Joyce suffered from a form of high-functioning *Witzelsucht*, the German term for an abnormal condition of the frontal lobe marked by compulsive punning, scatological fixation, and hypersexuality and caused by micro-strokes of the kind to which he would have been prone, given his alcoholism, his migraines, and the ongoing infections in his teeth, eyes, and stomach. But the structures of comedy are not in fact subjective, which means they ought to be visible, whether as cultural forms or as they appear in

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<sup>127</sup> *Jocoserious Joyce: The Fate of Folly in Ulysses* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996).

individual artifacts; clothed in their historical specificity, they are nonetheless as real by dint of their endurance as any other literary phenomenon.

Nor do re-readings of “Penelope” diminish the effect of its ending. The punctuation of yes’s throughout the chapter remind the reader of Molly’s sexual appetite, and the relation between the imagination and pleasure, in this case erotic fantasy and sexual pleasure. As Molly lies in bed, thinking of her different lovers, of Blazes and of Bloom, she constructs a cosmos, the fantasy she requires to bring herself to masturbatory climax: among its many simultaneous meanings, the novel’s ultimate “Yes” is readable (and has been read many times) as the moment in which she, alone in bed, reaches an orgasm, her body and her consciousness recombined. For such is the effect of playing, of pretend: to exercise — literally — the tandem working of the cognitive and the somatic, “dissolving the dualism between object and subject, play and games undo the imagination of the ‘individual’ in its epistemological and existential isolation, by experiencing bodily that the human is not alone in the world,” in the wonderfully unabashed phraseology of one Norwegian theorist of sports.<sup>128</sup>

Such is the effect of placing oneself within the comic sphere or calling it up out of the world with art, narrative art, roleplay, the visual imagination. The closing crescendo, the effective carnival of the flesh, in which the mind and the body switch places, each relinquishing their form of control, also unmakes time. Molly’s “Yes I said yes I will Yes” links all three forms of time with which we usually juggle: it is related in the implied present of stream-of-consciousness but represents the past (“I said”) and prophesies a future: “I will,” its futurity re-emphasized by the “Yes” which follows it. Three different spaces of time commingle, into a

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<sup>128</sup> Anonymous, “Sport as Festivity: Towards a Phenomenology of the Event,” *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* Vol 3, No. 2 (Sept 2009), 225.



small syntactical example of the comic sphere. Pleasure and hope within the paradoxical boundaries of disordered temporality. We have seen this same gesture toward infinity expressed in the bizarre posthumous prophecy that closes *A Tale of Two Cities*, and we will see it again, in the crescendo that closes *10:04*. Each in their separate idiom, all three novels end on images of childbirth and biological continuity in defiance of clock time.

The repeated “I” of Molly’s soliloquy also opens into precisely the kind of eternal “I” Lerner puts forward in *10:04*, the “I” which is so singular it becomes an emptiness, a comic mask and a singular figure for collectivity, a no one. The point is that our souls are not interchangeable, but their costumes are. In this light, we can forgive Molly Bloom yet another of her funny phrases, one that might scan as desperate to a less sanguine critic. (For it is true that critics tend to project on Molly whatever they like, often while pointing out that other critics tend to project onto Molly whatever they like.) “[A]s well him as another,” Molly says, unable and willing to hide from herself this the most unromantic of the reasons she accepts Bloom’s marriage proposal (18.1604). He could mean everything, or nothing. There is no transcendental man, no perfect lover, only a transcendental love that depends on neither god nor nature and which is an act of will. Her love, its exultation, not only accepts but bears witness to its own arbitrariness, seizing out of it an opportunity for a rapture no less rapturous because staged.

Precisely through its shamming, [Molly's] love becomes a poetic love; it is defined by the playful generation and regeneration of itself at its own hands. And even as it stages a dialectical solution to the authenticity – artificiality paradox, it fulfills two others. The first is that love must have everything to do with the beloved and can have nothing to do with the beloved at all. Any love must touch its object and yet *not* touch it, must only signal to it, since to infringe upon any other human creature, as Aquinas knew, is to strip that creature of its rightful claim to the

infinite. The second, as Stevie Wonder writes in the greatest 20<sup>th</sup>-century reinvention of agape, of the love which is ceaseless greeting — that is, in his Top 20 hit “I Just Called to Say I Love You” — is that every experience of love is required to be “though old, so new.”

For both these reasons — because of the double paradox that love, one, may never possess anything it possesses and, two, must be reinvented in every instance, which is precisely its claim to eternity — Molly’s love for Bloom *must* be performed, staged, fictitious in order for it to be real. And, furthermore, it must be comic, since only the comic is powered by paradox. Only the comic takes incongruity, the constant integration and reintegration of discontinuities, as its means of happy continuance. We might say that only the comic makes the terms “life” and “art” interchangeable, without destroying either. Instead it sends them on holiday together; it makes life art, and vice versa; and this is precisely what Wonder tells us — with the circumspect philosophical insight of all good pop music — true love makes of ordinary days.

The comic can show forth the artificiality of any convention, any pattern *and yet continue the pattern*, enfold and alter without destroying it: this is the function of the comic sphere, of its micro- and macro-instances, of parts that seem to change in order to better suit the whole — in the digression or in the callback, for instance, as discussed in the reading of “Proteus” above or the reading of *10:04* in this dissertation’s next chapter. The comic will travel any distance to find a larger framework, one with a difference, with ever more freedom. When he puns, for example, Joyce is thinking — like many poets across the full span of human time — about possibility itself, about how much more meaning can be captured than we thought, and set free again: how beauty may be achieved, and in the most perfect manner.

Evident everywhere in the novel is exuberance, a play that belongs to the comic and to the comic sphere: as a ludic text, as the fruit of Joyce’s comic intention, as a sincere precursor of

postmodern irony, as an expression of anti-colonialist subversion, as a profanation of Catholic dogma: any of these readings belong under the larger formal heading of the comic, inside its one pot. Just after Buck Mulligan tells his dinner table joke, he asks Stephen a question, and one that clearly lampoons both Haines's ethnographic efforts and their author's mythological method:

—Can you recall, brother, is mother Grogan's tea and water pot spoken of in the Mabinogion or is it in the Upanishads?  
—I doubt it, Stephen said gravely. (3.373)

The joke is in Stephen's remark, which is a Swift; Joyce splits a clichéd phrase — “grave doubts” — between Stephen's reported speech and the *verbum dicendi* attached to it. Doubt is a form of gravity; it brings things to earth. But *Ulysses* everywhere traces an upward movement. Here we see again that even Stephen can play along, especially when the joke is about seriousness; it is easily read as treating the playful seriousness of the novel itself.

Like the double deixis of Ben Lerner, in which particular forms of metafiction are used to point at both text and reader — I see you reading *this* — the ambiguous gesture whose great secret is that it doesn't need to mean anything. It wants only to sustain itself. (It is the opposite of the point and laugh, of an *Ecce homo*; it seeks not to degrade but to preserve.) “There is but one infinite game,” and it is played only for the sake of playing—to make us at home within itself. As Hegel wrote of comic drama, “the spectator is completely at home... and sees himself playing in it.”<sup>129</sup> As Frye points out, “the audience is sometimes jocosely invited to an imaginary banquet afterward,” because comic art disrespects distinctions between borders, especially representational borders.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Hegel is quoted in Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 35.

<sup>130</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 146.

Such a game — the work of making and finding the world funny — which is the endlessly moving threshold of the comic sphere and its iterations, is also poetic in the strong sense: like love, it seems to make only itself. What is the smallest increment of possibility? How would we describe it? To what preserve do we consign our naïveté, and where does it wait for us when we need it? It is the island, the garden, the minute earth — the comic sphere — from *A Portrait of the Artist*, from which stems all Stephen's passion and which presages — how could it not presage — the beautiful ending of Joyce's beautiful-because-comic novel:

Oh the wild rose blossoms  
On the little green place.<sup>131</sup>

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## CHAPTER 3

### The Ends of the End of Time: Ben Lerner's *10:04*

Gibt es wirklich die Zeit, die zerstörende?  
— Rilke

... What is meaningless and tragic in the world has not grown larger since the beginning of time, it is only that the songs of comfort ring out more loudly or are more muffled.  
— Lukács

The mostly unnamed, slightly shifty protagonist of Ben Lerner's *10:04* — let's call him Ben, since that's what he calls himself — is a late-thirty-something writer with a fat book deal and a life-threatening medical condition: he is both attempting to dilate a short story into a novel for which he has already secured a six-figure advance and suffering over the notion that a sudden dilation of his aortic root might kill him without warning, “an event [he] visualizes, however incorrectly, as a whipping hose spraying blood into [his] blood” (5).<sup>132,133</sup> Ben is also trying to help his best friend Alex get pregnant by donating both his advance and his sperm toward her efforts to become a mother through IUI: “Imitative desire for my virtual novel was going to fund artificial insemination and its associated costs,” he quips; as with the bit about the blood hose, his tone is in fact gently ironical, awash in a cleverness that makes us feel our narrator knows exactly what he is getting away with and is winningly astonished by it (155).

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<sup>132</sup> Citations are taken from Ben Lerner, *10:04* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2014) and included in-text, as parentheticals.

<sup>133</sup> As both a poet and a prose writer — but perhaps in this he shows himself still and all a poet foremost — Lerner often discerns a kind of zero degree of unlikeness out of likes; he enjoys approaching as closely as possible the moment when difference emerges from or dissolves into identity. From his first collection, *Mean Free Path*: “I like looking at things under glass, especially / Glass.” Another, more famous instance of this is the sixth line of Genesis: “And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.”

Indeed Ben's innocent cleverness or clever innocence could be understood as the sign under which Lerner accomplishes any number of narratological experiments: not just a crazily zeugmatic plot (dilations of story and heart; donations of sperm and money; the gambling of large sums on conception both biological and literary) but point of view shifts from first to third person and back; the insertion of photographs, film stills, and paintings; chunks of a long poem called "The Dark Threw Patches Down Upon Me Also," which Lerner wrote in Marfa, Texas in 2011; a four-page report on dinosaurs called *To the Future* which the fictional or nearly fictional Ben co-authors with the fictional Roberto, an eight-year-old Brooklyn schoolboy conscripted into helping him keep up his Spanish. Lerner also includes a short story called "The Golden Vanity" first published in the *New Yorker* in 2012: it appears verbatim, as the short story Ben is attempting to expand into his own novel, which is — of course — also the novel we're reading and which Lerner produced in much the same manner his character did and so to speak at the same time.<sup>134</sup>

But what else can one say about that novel? Part fiction, part memoir, part poem, written at "the very edge of fiction," according to its own narrator, *10:04* unfolds from a lavish Manhattan dinner with Ben's agent through the development of his struggle with the idea of fatherhood and his sense, at this point in history not particularly unique, that civilization now faces an apocalypse of its own making (237). He falls in love with an artist named Alena. He recalls another woman he once loved, only to confess that she never existed. He listens to a woman tell the story of learning that the man she thought was her father didn't exist. He

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<sup>134</sup> In fact, the story doesn't appear verbatim but something like verbatim plus, since the novel contains the sections or at least selections from the forged email correspondence Ben rejects as the wrong architecture for his novel and which an editor removed from the draft of "The Golden Vanity" that appeared in the *New Yorker*.

fabricates a literary correspondence with famous authors; he deletes it. He goes to an artists' colony and tries to write a novel; he goes to a fancy hospital and masturbates into a cup. Very little happens or seems like it will. The end of the world is invoked on almost every page and in almost every conversation, no matter whether Ben is talking to fellow characters, to himself, or, in well-handled moments of sincere parody of Walt Whitman, to the reader.

For what Ben and Lerner, character and author, are so-to-speak *really* attempting to get away with in *10:04* is a radical re-envisioning of the future, his, theirs and ours. The novel is set in New York City in the age of superstorms, that is, in our present. It takes its opening scenes from the arrival of Hurricane Irene and its closing scenes from the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. But Ben never experiences the latter, more terrifying storm directly, nor does his aorta ever burst; he and Alex manage to conceive a child; instead of writing a bad novel about fabricated emails, he finishes his book, which we should have suspected, since it's the one we're reading. That novel assesses the damage wrought by Sandy, but it emphasizes the endurance and even the flourishing of the city and its inhabitants; it radiates personal and impersonal lines of poetic correspondence, achieved through form. It is this faith, alongside the novel's considerable funniness — two related phenomena — that lend credence to *10:04*'s own claim to represent the edge of fiction. The novel offers strong evidence that for Lerner comedy and the comic have enfolded tragedy and the tragic as the means by or through which contemporary questions must be articulated, if not answered.<sup>135</sup> With a loving acknowledgement of the vagueness, even the kitschiness such a claim entails, it is in this sense that *10:04* exemplifies the novel of the future.

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<sup>135</sup> This is not a new claim at all. But it is arguably the most beautiful claim, in a kind of theologico-aesthetic sense, and might have been accepted as such by Dante. It is repeated in quieter, secular modulations by critics as recently as James Wood, whose phraseology — the comic novel as “tragicomedy of forgiveness” — might seem to prioritize tragedy but in fact

The chapter to follow traces the means by which *10:04* fulfills the conventions of comedy as a mode and not merely as a funny piece of writing, though I hope to trace some relationship between the two below. Crucial will be some naïve recapitulation of the structural principles, philosophical workings, and symbolic touchstones of comedy. (For instance, that zeugmatic plot — “I remembered the sensation in my chest when I’d sent off the [book] proposal, as if that way of dilating the story was linked to the dilation of my aorta,” says Ben — unfolds out of a conjunction of unlikes; it is comic not because it ends happily but because it depends on a series of giant puns, what critics more allergic to the term would call “double senses” or something similar (137)).<sup>136</sup> Useful, too, will be some coarse-grained examination of what a novel is and does, especially as compared to and in conjunction with poetry. I do not intend to reign over entire media, but I do intend to trace certain of *10:04*’s techniques to the furthest extent I can, and not to shy from ideas when they appear on the horizon; rather, I shall see if I cannot tempt them into my reach.

The reader is hereby warned that she will encounter a great deal of highly condensed and speculative argument; my endnotes are meant to indicate, among other things, further lines of thinking, the many roads not taken (or not taken in this particular dissertation). However, taking

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contains it so that it can be overcome. See *The Irresponsible Self (The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter in the Novel)*. New York: Picador, 2005).

<sup>136</sup> In an interview with Lerner, the poet and artist Ariana Reines uses the phrase “signal verbs” to describe the novel’s punniness; whatever one would like to call it, the technique is ludic, anti-serious, stretching and complexifying meaning. *BOMB* No. 129, Fall 2014. For an excellent defense of the pun, see Jonathan Culler, ed. *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988). Worth noting, too, is that the word “dilate,” arguably the most important of the “signal verbs,” possesses a double sense: that of an enlargement of space and of a delay in time and could be read as embodying *10:04*’s ambition to create a time-less, place-less moment.



a cue from the book's title, my examination of the novel will center on time. I will show that *10:04* attempts to stop or dispel linear, earthly time (as is true of many comic works, and as was true of Dickens's unintentional comedy in Chapter 1). To that end, the novel deploys repetition of word, phrase, image, event, sometimes with a difference, sometimes without, in order to still the motive forces of its own prose.<sup>137</sup> Among and through its many formal experiments — all of which are underwritten, grounded, achievable *en masse* by the comic —, *10:04* wants to work as if it were a certain kind of lyric poem, to voyage without voyaging through a forest of linguistic and structural echoes, thereby demoting narrative sequence and its dominant logics, subverting the unfolding of what Frank Kermode calls, quoting another scholar of medieval theology, “one damn thing after another.”<sup>138</sup> Lerner was a poet before he was a novelist; it seems reasonable that his novels would seek after a kind of lyric non-time, either by intensifying its reader and its narrator's mutual sense of the present or by rendering all of time's dimensions so mutually interpenetrative as to achieve the same effect.

“And then in the future I can yearn for the past when I yearned for the future when I would yearn for the past,” says Ben to Alex. But why? The proliferation of so temporalities dimensions and so many connections between them as to feign the surcease of time itself might forefend — imaginatively — the one terrible future imminent for Ben's world and ours, “a future I increasingly imagined as being underwater,” says Ben, in a phrase much quoted in the novel's

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<sup>137</sup> J. Hillis Miller points out that there are two kinds of repetition, one “Platonic... grounded in a solid, archetypal model”; the other is “Nietzschean and posits a world based on difference.” See “Two Forms of Repetition” in *Fiction and Repetition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). One of the theoretical roads not yet taken might be to say that *10:04* indulges in both forms, as does this dissertation, and that the comic could be read as a middle term, a dynamic ground of possibility between the two.

<sup>138</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 47.

reviews and on its jacket copy (40). Indeed Ben often tells us what he thinks about the art he sees and the art he produces — ie, the novel that surrounds him — and also what we ought to think about what he's telling us. Many of his opinions are fine works of criticism (and some were published as criticism, before the novel's writing, primarily in *Harpers Magazine*; in dealing with Lerner Derrida's phrase *il n'y a pas de hors-texte* — *there is nothing outside the text* — often wanders into the mind). But Ben and Lerner's explicitudes are valuable not or not solely because they contain ideas about the future but because they participate in its dynamic, formal scrutiny of the idea of futurity. They are part of the *10:04*'s attempt to build an emergent comic haven, a secular heaven — an open utopia of a-temporal form within and of itself.

An artwork that thinks aloud about itself encourages its critics to think more, and more artfully. While this seems to have upset some of the novel's professional readers, it may be a genuine attempt to provide intellectual pleasure; it likely also represents one of *10:04*'s many invitations to correspond, to co-construct.<sup>139</sup> What is a critic to do with a novel whose genesis is recounted in its pages, and whose narrator explains his aesthetic aims four pages in, *and* who is both a reliable narrator and a good critic? In the novel's opening scene, Ben's agent asks him about the book he's going to have to write. "We were eating cephalopods in what would become the novel's opening scene," relates Ben:

"How exactly will you expand the story?" she'd asked, far look in her eyes because she was calculating the tip.

"I'll project myself into several futures simultaneously," I should have said, "a minor tremor in my hand; I'll work my way from irony to sincerity in the sinking city, a would-be-Whitman of the vulnerable grid." (4)

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<sup>139</sup> See "The Function of Criticism," in Vendler, *The Music of What Happens* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1983), 1.

Very well. There's still a great deal there to "unpack." Why the tremor in the hand? — as well as why Lerner's novel is important, where it came from and where it belongs in literary and other kinds of history. Where does novelist and a poet who calls himself a would-be Whitman fit, among all our other writers, and how does he make use of all the writers whose words, ideas and images he repeatedly invokes? If my work is to take the novel apart and put it back together so that it becomes more intelligible and more moving, I would also like to present it with a vision of its own excellence, and of those artworks it might not know are its kin.

As I proceed, I hope to pay attention to form above history, though not to the latter's exclusion. I will also introduce my major theoretical interlocutors as I proceed, among them Roland Barthes, Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno, and Giorgio Agamben — this last my tutor and Lerner's, explicitly, in poetics, ethics, and philosophy — as well as a host of other minds who have written on time, utopia, comedy and, less significantly, outer space and plants.<sup>140</sup> My task is an act of imaginative solace, as the novel is an act of imaginative solace. If time doesn't move, or if it moves so complicatedly and in innumerable dimensions, if we can see, as Ben says, quoting without quotations from Whitman, "the similitudes of the past, and those of the future, corresponding," then we can face that future, find hope and a very pure kind of possibility — the possibility of possibility — within it (239). Amy Hempel expresses a similar idea at the turn of a short story called "Pool Night": "We can only die in the future, I thought; right now we are always alive."<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> For Lerner, form and history are always already co-extensive. The reader interested in past and present developments in formalist and new formalist criticism in English departments is directed to Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>141</sup> Amy Hempel, *Reasons to Live* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 81.

## ISLANDS

At the beginning of *S/Z*, Barthes writes that “there are said to be certain Buddhists whose ascetic practices enabled them to see a whole landscape in a bean.”<sup>142</sup> He then uses these Buddhists’ bean-gazing as a metaphor for the work of his predecessors, the structuralist narratologists who attempted to build an anatomy of all the world’s stories and then judge every story in existence by its relation to that anatomy. By contrast, Barthes’s aim was to advance a new method, “functional, not classificatory,” that could accept and examine each story — or, in his poststructuralist idiom, each text — as it constructed itself, thereby preventing the reduction of difference between them.<sup>143</sup>

So far, so good, except for the fact that the bean-gazing metaphor doesn’t work. Parts often whisper something of the larger system in which they participate, especially in dynamic systems like landscapes. It might not be useful to insist that there are only four kinds of stories in the world, or seven kinds, and that their relations to one another are fixed. But a seed may hint at the flower it might become or the tree from which it fell, the shape of its first leaves, the things that will try to eat it and which it will try to repel, and so forth on until a truly ace bean-gazer could read out of it the outlines of a dynamic, living system. “A seed may grow or not grow,” writes Orwell, “but at any rate a turnip seed never grows into a parsnip.”<sup>144</sup> (One could even say that Barthes’s method in *S/Z* is something like bean-making; by “starring” the text he analyzes into units of reading or lexias he attempts to coax a whole into disclosing its parts instead of the

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<sup>142</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 2.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> George Orwell, “The Lion and the Unicorn,” in *The Orwell Reader* (New York: Mariner Books, 2008), 251.

other way around; he, too, is treating his text as a field of dispersed, shifting — “but controlled” — possibilities.)

Certainly this isn’t possible with every bean, of every being, or of every text, but I intend to read *this* text if it contained several of its own seeds, significant, isolatable islands, contingent origins tucked within itself, in Barthes’s own terms, “several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one.”<sup>145</sup> If one wanted to determine the compositional principles of *10:04*, or its first principle — the origin of its values and themes — one might seize on Ben’s slight mention of a magazine named *Origin* to which Robert Creeley once contributed, or a long lecture about Ben’s own poetic influences in which he cites the Challenger explosion and the language produced in its wake — specifically, a bit of poem quoted by Ronald Reagan and a bunch of children’s ghoulish jokes about exploding schoolteachers. But many, many of *10:04*’s smaller, formal units recapitulate its larger structures; many of its images and particularly its stories miniaturize the novel in which they are contained. One can only say that perhaps that there is an art and not a science in choosing, an art that can only be evidenced in showing forth one’s choice.

In a short second section marked “TWO” and titled “The Golden Vanity” — and likely the first section of *10:04* to be written, since it comprises exclusively that *New Yorker* short story, of the same title and the first chunk of *10:04* to appear in print — Ben and a version of his girlfriend Alena, now called Hannah, visit Florida’s Sanibel Island, presumably fleeing the New York winter. (In keeping with the green festivity and rebirth traditionally associated with comedy, the novel begins in a time of growth and ends there, from life through death to life again; section “ONE” opens in summer; section “FIVE,” its last chapter, takes place in a very

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<sup>145</sup> Barthes, *S/Z*, 5.

early spring — an unsettlingly early spring, but spring nonetheless.) Ben and Hannah have also come to visit Ben’s family; shortly after their arrival, Ben sits with his father while the latter strums his guitar. “‘Have you been able to do any writing lately?’ his dad asks, playing the chords of ‘The Golden Vanity,’ a song he’d sung the author as a child” (75).

No, Ben hasn’t really been writing. He’s been overwhelmed by a version of his medical diagnosis, in this section of the novel not a dilating aortic root but a tumor in his nose. As if prompted by his own frustration and grief, a memory resurfaces, the earliest we receive from him; it arises almost certainly because his mind, despite all his travails, is healthy enough to present him with a comforting memory when he needs it most. He recalls that:

... he used to cry at the end of the “The Golden Vanity,” when the boy who has managed to sink an enemy ship is left to drown in the ocean by a double-crossing captain, so his dad would improvise additional stanzas for the ballad in which the boy was rescued by a benevolent sea turtle and deposited safely on an island. (75)

Ben’s father takes the ballad “The Golden Vanity” and converts it from tragedy to comedy, replacing its tale of doom and untimely death with a happy ending at the hands of a comic, providential, and comically providential animal helpmeet who invokes communion with the natural world and the dissolution between heretofore distinct ontologies. Voilà microcosm: the temptation is to say that this is *10:04*, in its smallest, starkest form, and cease the examination there (with the further specification that the novel’s primary animal helpmeet is an octopus, those cephalopods from its opening scene, and that the assistance they provide is imaginative, not actual; Ben thinks repeatedly of the octopus’s lack of proprioception — its decentralized, dispersed, radiant perception — as a novel figure for the relationship between the social body and its members, one of *10:04*’s most pressing ethical and aesthetic concerns).

But that wouldn’t be entirely fair, not least because there is a great deal to say about that octopus and because neither Ben nor Lerner are entirely happy with the climate change and its

consequences, with the destruction of the seasons, with the eventual flooding of “Red Hook, Coney Island, the Rockaways, much of Staten Island,” where “hospitals were being evacuated after backup generators failed; newborn babies and patients recovering from heart surgery were carried gingerly down flights of stairs and placed in ambulances that rushed them uptown, where the storm had never happened” (230). It would be unjust to imply that the novel’s conflicts are of no significance save for their eventual surmountability, to demonstrate that it is always possible to “rush uptown,” where nothing bad has happened (though, as we shall see, it *is* always possible to go uptown, metaphysically speaking, since the novel is on something like a comic mission of survival and depends on the existence of “higher” ground in which nothing happened or can happen.)<sup>146</sup> When Hurricane Sandy strikes land, drowning “who knows how many rats,” Ben couldn’t “help but imagine their screams,” extending his sympathy to even those other beings on the other side of silence in a manner reminiscent of George Eliot — with the further qualification that he personifies not simply nice animals like squirrels but pests, rats and pigeons and bedbugs (230).<sup>147</sup>

And in any case the moment in which Ben’s father plays those chords and Ben describes for us his version of the song at first feels stark but no stranger or more significant than any of

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<sup>146</sup> The bad version of “uptownness” is generalizable past Manhattan, Upper East and Upper West, across the global north, what Billy Joel calls the “white bread world,” and indexes a vast range of socioeconomic and racial inequality perhaps (or at least) as old as the division of agricultural labor and coalescing, among other points, in a still-pervasive perversion of the biblical notion that post-fall everyone must work for their bread to the idea that those who must work at all are inferior or deformed. See or listen to Joel, “Uptown Girl” (*The Essential Billy Joel*, Sony Music, 1973).

<sup>147</sup> The novel’s cover image is of Manhattan after the storm, showing the single golden tower of Goldman Sachs, and was chosen by Lerner as a condemnation of the financial industry, a bad beacon in a time of darkness. Ben Lerner, in conversation at Green Apple Books in San Francisco, October 21, 2014.

Ben's many encounters with art, with Christian Marclay's *The Clock*, for example, or with the prose and poetry of Walt Whitman, or with the art of Jules Bastien-LePage, Paul Klee, Vija Celmins, Donald Judd, or Elka Krajewska; with the poetry and letters of Wallace Stevens, William Bronk, John Keats, Jack Spicer or Robert Creeley; or with the writings of Walter Benjamin, or with the site-specific sculpture of Donald Judd, or with the feature films *The Third Man* (dir. Carol Reed; 1949) or *Back to the Future* (dir. Robert Zemeckis; 1985), which Ben watches twice and which contains the novel's namesake moment. But unlike those others, this one feels manageably small, as though it might serve as an entry point to that larger, ekphrastic archipelago. It also helps that Ben says so very little about the ballad, so that the critic has work of her own to do.

Ben and Hannah have come to Sanibel Island from the fragile almost-island of Manhattan, where most of *10:04* is set. As their plane touches down in Florida, Ben "tries to remember the light snow that morning in New York, beads of precipitation on the oval window streaking as the rain took off," a sign of both the winter and the climatological anxiety he's hoping to leave behind. Weeks ago, up late, alone in Alex's house, he heard the "rain intensifying on the little skylight" above him and worried that it "might soon be shattered by flying debris" (22). At novel's end Ben will hear that same sound of precipitation again; he hears it again during an artist's residency in Marfa, Texas, while driving, a pattern of anxious noticing that runs throughout the novel: a condition of coastal life in the Anthropocene is that each drop of rain presages flood. But for now the two, Ben and Hannah, have come to forget the fragility of the novel's other islands, not just the almost-island of Manhattan but the beleaguered Earth, a



biological island, paradise compared to the howling inhospitableness of the rest of the known universe.

By comparison with these others, the improvised island in Ben's father's ballad is yet more delicate: it has no name, no literal being: it is a no-place, appearing only within the invocation of another artwork. It belongs to a strange category: the ekphrasis of the *almost* non-existent.<sup>148</sup> But its very fictitiousness renders it of interest; if the great theme of comic fiction is, in Robert Polhemus's phraseology, "the power of the mind and body over the universe of death," what could be more comical than a utopia dreamed up for a child, one that preserves for him a sense of safety and continuity, that vanishes death from the mortal scene so that he can die virtually, that is, sleep?<sup>149</sup> It is worth noting again that here the natural world still protects the little boy; harmony exists between him and a turtle faintly reminiscent of the "silentious porpoises" of Wallace Stevens's long poem "The Comedian as the Letter C" or the troops of animal monsters that attend depictions of the festive god Comus in Milton and elsewhere — this of distant interest because it is for Comus that comedy is named.

Ben's father's ballad is comic not solely in Polhemus's sense but also in Frye's, for whom "the theme of the comic is social integration," full stop, (43), and in Alenka Zupančič's, for whom the comic depends on its interpolation of categories including subject and object, Self and Other: "the impossibly sustained encounter" between them —note the quality of eternity or long, long, *durée* her language picks up (57). Worth noting, too, is that Ben's father's

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<sup>148</sup> By contrast, purely fictional ekphrasis is common: the portrait of Dorian Gray, the painting of the fur-coated bourgeois woman in *The Metamorphosis*, the Maltese falcon, the invaluable canvas *Boy with Apple* in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. In *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, the more interesting, "barely existing" or doubly fictional figure is Dorian himself.

<sup>149</sup> Robert Polhemus, *Comic Faith* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 8.

performance of “The Golden Vanity” asserts itself at a moment when Ben isn’t doing much writing; he’s been sidelined by thoughts of his own death by “dissection,” the medical term for a heart dilated too far. But within the realm of the comic all stories are collective, and can be transferred to the closest member of any given community; this is what communities exist *to* do, to perpetuate life against death, the thought of it in the individual or its irrevocable fact for the social whole.<sup>150</sup> In this case, Ben’s father takes up the narrative mantle; the story must go on, the future must remain open. And of course the story he tells involves a similar magic. With the sea turtle’s intrusion, the ballad’s plot becomes paratactic instead of catastrophic, open to the addition of however many units of action and meaning, as many rescues and as many sea turtles as its author might like.

In content, in form, and the conditions of its performance, then, the version of the ballad “The Golden Vanity” related in the short story “The Golden Vanity” belongs squarely within the mode of the comic as classically defined and demonstrates for us (or can be made to demonstrate) what kind of art is possible within the world of the novel *10:04*. Like the little ballad it contains, *10:04* seeks to revise a tragic narrative — environmental apocalypse at the hands of what Ben calls, in a characteristic, comical combination of euphemistical and deadly accurate language, “an unusually large cyclonic system with a warm core” — into a story of its survival, of the triumph not just of the mind and body but, as we shall see, of the *collective* mind and body over death, of the establishment not simply of a community of a philosophically and

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<sup>150</sup> One might cite any number of sources from the philosophical, political or sociological literature on community on this point; for brevity, one might include only Jean-Luc Nancy’s (alas, mixed metaphorical but otherwise useful) statement that community provides a “place from which to surmount the unraveling that occurs with the death of each one of us — that death that, when no longer anything more than the death of the individual, carries an unbearable burden and collapses into insignificance.” *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1.

ethically specific kind (213). We could say, too, that the novel starts to inch closer to the writerly, from the closed classic novel to the text which is “ourselves writing,” in Barthes’s terms, which is reversible from all entry points, fractured so minutely that it assumes an illimitable wholeness, a form without final boundary.<sup>151</sup>

But the reader might object that I have forgotten time, and we might only be half-kidding if I responded that that was the point (“I was kidding and I wasn’t kidding,” Ben says, on the novel’s first page). If an island is a utopia, an isle of the blest, it is also thinkable as a reification of a lyric poem, as the spatialization of the lyric moment. It touches nothing; it is not a place in relation to other places; it exists outside of the historical; its temporality set to the dilations of affect and the abeyance of change. It is unreal: a paradise, an unfallen world, before the rhythms of building, of cultivation and learning arrived with their various human teloi, where the Nectarine Fruits drop from the vines and Eve can trim the flowers if she wants to, as long as it’s just for fun: “no more toil / Of thir sweet Gardning labour then suffic’d / To recommend coole Zephyr, and made ease / More easie.”<sup>152</sup> We are, at least notionally, close to the womb and to (mythic, if not actual) species-beginning, to the comic life, which is “an innocent life, that is, a life outside of history.”<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Francis James Child lists 35 versions of “The Golden Vanity,” also known as “The Sweet Trinity.” In each the child is tricked or comes to some sick end: in 286.A1 he is cheated out of a wife he’s been promised; in 286.A2 he is hanged; in 286.A3, presumably Lerner’s version, he drowns, is wrapped in a cowhide, and then sunk to the bottom of the sea.

<sup>152</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, lines 4.326-330.

<sup>153</sup> Agamben uses “parody” and “comedy” as homologues, as appositions for the category of the profane, or, better, as examples of profanation. This process its turn goes under several other names in his thought but always moves the human — and the animal, the child, and the prankster, the cartoon, and the *homo sacer* — closer toward its own transcendent, singular being, its uniqueness, exemplarity or “taking-place” in a space always beside, through and in the world: a “space of ease,” a fallen paradise, “limbo,” or “the comic sphere.” It is usually marked by a

Then again, Ben, a Kansan, feels strange on Sanibel Island; he notices the sound of the surf because it's a "sound he's always found alien" (74). And indeed it is vain to think that anything — a human body or a text — could last forever, that utopias are real, that from art we could build ourselves an immortal paradise; we have little patience for these kinds of ideas and tend toward declamations of Shelley's "Ozymandias" in the face of them. It feels especially strange to speak about aesthetic immortality in regards to a novel, whose world is social, historical, bound to time, whose task, according to Bakhtin, is to find a means of figuring the temporal.<sup>154</sup> But Lerner is a poet, and at present we are reading him for the timelessness of lyric form: indeed reading him one is put in mind of the Yeatsian member of the species, the golden bird who sails to Byzantium, out of the life of man and toward the fundament, into the bright world of pure and permanent form. Yeats' speaker sings "of what is past, or passing, or to come," just as Ben, waiting in his underwear for a doctor to tell him that his heart might tear itself open without warning, can imagine himself as "both older and younger than everyone in the room" (7).

In both cases, the two authors' — or the two poets' — literary work involves imaginary access to all of time's dimensions, or at least to "the tension between biological and textual immortality," in Ben's words (54). The figures on Keats's Grecian urn don't go anywhere but instead remain in a state of dynamic stillness, an endless present, forever panting and forever loved. *10:04* is even seeded with little kernels of gold, as if to establish by ritualistic repetition an endless present of exactly the kind Keats liked best, the space of the fane. Ben describes three

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halo, a trembling into extremity, or a flickering light. I choose "comedy" for terminological coherence. Giorgio Agamben, "Parody," in *Profanations* (New York: Zone Books, 2000), .

<sup>154</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.

beautiful nurses during an early appointment, the three graces or fates or muses, in “almost parodic health even in hospital light, a dusky gold” (6). A glimpse of a glamorous young woman at a literary gathering: “in the firelight, she was dusky gold” (37). As he drives with Alex in a cab, he notes “the thin gold necklace she always wore at her collarbone,” and then notices it again, as if for the first time, several pages later, though the second time her collarbone is “perfect,” its form achieving itself by repetition-with-a-difference (23; 80); when he first meets the artist Alena, his eye is caught by “her nose ring, silver but appearing rose gold in that light” (68-69). Later, gold will become a kind of aesthetic principle, will color a view of waterfront Manhattan; he sees “the softening sky reflected in the water. Silver but appearing rose gold in that light” (74).

Barthes says it, too — “meaning is golden” — and its making requires at least some form of stability, closure, the formal austerity of a classic or a classical work of art, which constructs a system of connotation, the “dissemination of meanings, spread like gold dust on the apparent surface of the text”: shades of paradise, islands, urns, all the metaphysics of unity whose glittering strikes the modern eye as ideological obfuscation, pyrite or tin (9). But peace, the security this kind — shall we call it a Hesperidean art, art as friend to man, outside of time — offers exactly the kind of comfort a child — those on the way into life — might need.<sup>155</sup> Ben learns this himself, when he is tasked with tucking his nephews into bed, in one of the novel’s quainter comic scenes. He is stunned to realize that he doesn’t quite know what to do once he’s put them under the covers. “The particularly precocious author can’t handle the formal

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<sup>155</sup> Those on the way out of life also need it, which is one of the tenderest and most lasting truths *10:04* expresses: Alex’s mother, dying of cancer, wears a gold head scarf (300). There is much more to say here: Alex and Ben’s child may or may not be conceived in the same chapter, for the exquisite and exquisitely humane reason that she is dying, a reason Alex’s mother, Ben and the novel all embrace.

complexity of the bedtime story,” he thinks, and drinks a little to help him get up his courage (76). At first he “tells the boys to listen for the waves and then to imagine that this bunk bed is a ship at sea in search of the world’s largest and most vicious shark.” And then he panics:

He doesn’t know how to continue the story in the present, at least not in a way that would put the boys to sleep as opposed to enlisting their participation in a kind of game. (76)

That phrase “a kind of game” here means not structured play but competition; Ben’s nephews start to compete with each other to see who can spot the shark first. But a different kind of present is required; narrative itself must be interrupted.

Now that we’ve spotted the shark, the author resumes, let’s put down the anchor of our boat and I’ll tell you all about him. (76)

Only by pausing the story a little can Ben calm the boys, only by switching into the descriptive, into the non-narrative tones of the naturalist can he put them to sleep. Ben has taken over his father’s role again: he drops his narrative anchor, converting their boat to a temporary island. One can’t help but think that his task would have been much easier if he had started with a friendlier, more comical sea animal.

Ben knows this, or at least he intuits it: at a medical examination he notices a sea scene painted on the wall “to calm and distract the children from needles or small hammers” (4). And then again, in yet another pitch to his agent, this one as true as the other and as seemingly ridiculous as the would-be Whitman business: “An author changes into an octopus. He travels back and forth in time” (156). But our narrator’s humility — his drunken, bumbled book pitches, his drunken fear he can’t deal with kids, either his nephews or the child Alex might have using his sperm — is in fact what Frye would call low mimetic comedy, Ben an *ieron*, whose inadequacy, however sincerely felt, should indicate precisely that the reader is in for its opposite, for a formal complexity intended as a kind of bedtime story for grown-ups, to offer an abstract

non-narrative absorption and a comfort, if not precisely a lullaby. Of course Ben's tactic suffices for his nephews. He lulls his two young listeners into a space outside of time, which is to say they fall asleep. Lerner will find other ways to strand his reader outside of the world, above and within the movement of mundane time, other ways to obey the jointly utopian and comic notion that the best place we and all the other animals could go is perhaps — impossibly, not improbably — already here.

## ARCHIPELAGOS

“Mankind will not long remain bound to the earth forever,” writes Hannah Arendt, quoting the funeral obelisk of a Soviet cosmonaut accidentally quoted by a reporter upon the launch of the first Russian satellite (*Human Condition* 1). That opening passage is very similar in spirit to *10:04* (many beginnings are similar in spirit to *10:04*): here as in many moments in the novel, high cultural ideas expressed are in seemingly low cultural forms, in which seeming ephemera — quotes of quotes, the great game of cultural telephone — nonetheless recycle and express “mass sentiment, mass desires.” Local variations drop away, revealing the outlines of myth; Arendt includes the quotation in order to reflect that the success of the launch was greeted not with exultation but with relief. She seems almost amused at how common is this impatience with our earthly chains, the frankness with which the species will express its spiritual demand for the universal, in one form or another. Very wonderfully, for Arendt this *is* the human condition, something like our shared glory. If you ask us who we are, we immediately envision galaxies or

construct a deity: though our lives may always be conditioned, constrained by Earth, “we are not mere earthbound creatures.”<sup>156,157</sup>

Nor can we remain safe on the little island inside “The Golden Vanity” forever, as much as it can tell us about the extraordinary novel in which “The Golden Vanity” appears, as many keys as it can offer us to that novel’s meanings and structures. *10:04* makes much of space travel: the putative faking of the first moon landing, which Ben once used to tease “a humorless astrophysics major” who was a former boyfriend of Alex’s, faces in the moon, the Challenger explosion. It has become more possible to think of *10:04*’s vision of stilled *and* multiply time — “I’ll project myself into several futures simultaneously” — because of the prevalence of STEM in mainstream culture and the rise to prominence of multiple worlds theory outside physics departments and future studies think tanks. “Is Science Fiction the new realism?” asked the *Guardian* in August of 2015. It isn’t, but the headline is telling. “I promise to pass through a series of worlds with you,” say two of Ben’s heterosexual friends in place of wedding vows, evidencing just how mainstream the idea of the multiverse has become (31). The novel’s title is taken from the moment in the film *Back to the Future* when lightning hits a clock tower, allowing a mad scientist and his sidekick to power their time-traveling DeLorean.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 2.

<sup>157</sup> That the Roman Catholic Church is one of the world’s most voracious collectors of meteorites seems to me the most apposite possible example of Arendt’s description of the human condition.

<sup>158</sup> A reading of *10:04*’s as science fiction represents the path not taken by this draft; suffice to say that one of comedy’s strengths is that it combines high and low, mass and elite cultural forms: many of its varieties (parody, profanity, the grotesque) as well as its primary stylistic tendency (mixed style, the macaronic) and grammatical forms (pun, zeugma) require it. One of Lerner’s models for this work is the film comedy *The Third Man*, whose novelist hero writes westerns and who is always being mistreated — by the film and its characters — for writing them. (Another road not (yet) taken here is of course the filmic itself.) The two best books most helpful here in *10:04* are Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called*



But how, formally speaking, does the novel represent the budding of different presents from a single present, the departure into different stories from the single story, the single instant that is *10:04*? How does a novelist stop time without a time machine — (and leaving aside Bakhtin’s argument, roughly paraphrased, that literature itself is a time machine)?<sup>159</sup> Lerner layers presents atop one another, bridging them by homology, by analogy of idea, by repeating structures.<sup>160</sup> He also repeats images, and phrases, and colors, not just the color gold — the color of eternity and the everlasting, of meaning-making —, but also the color green, the color of the festive, of regeneration and comedy; the color blue, the color of innocence, the heavens and of the firmament; children; sea creatures, marine life; precipitation, coming storms, changes in the weather; and floating lights — signs of wonder, of the miraculous dislocated into the world, made immanent and appropriately transcendental, which suits the novel’s repeated invocation of

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*Utopia* (New York: Verso Books, 2005), and David Wittenberg, *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

<sup>159</sup> For a general overview of the literature on time and the novel, the reader is directed first and foremost to Paul Ricoeur’s beautiful *Time and Narrative* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984), both volumes; to Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984); to Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), particularly chapters 1 and 20; and to Ursula Heise, *Chronoschisms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), particularly the introduction. A historically specific account of Lerner’s use of time would position him as oscillating between the sincerity of the modernist temporalities—Proustian, Joycean, Woolfean—with the postmodern, Borgesian “forking path.” This model (though not yet its specific, blended form of temporality) is being theorized as metamodernism.

<sup>160</sup> Interestingly, this doubling of the subject is native both to comedy and to time travel narrative: as you move around in time, you often meet yourself, as Marty McFly meets not only his parents but catches a glimpse of his own double in *Back to the Future*’s last act. It is also native to some conceptions of the lyric, especially the personal lyric when understood as a speaker talking to herself.

Whitman, the greatest of the Transcendental writers, and Lerner's final, jointly poetic and philosophical — that is to say, spiritual — aim.

But the novel also pays close attention to diction, to single words like “dilate,” as mentioned above, and to the related “dissect,” and to syntax, to all those small, signal elements to which we must always attend when we read the kind of poetry Lerner and Ben write but with which we are more likely to lose contact when we begin to read prose written by anybody. Just before the surfacing of the memory quoted above, Ben answers his father's question. Has he been doing much writing? He has. “Just this,” he says; by that he means the current section of the novel we're reading. His mother responds with sympathy, almost as if she hasn't heard him:

“I wouldn't be able to write anything right now, either, if I were you,” his mom says. “With so much stress. But I really think you're going to be okay.” The author looks at her. “I really do.” (75)

The ambivalent look the author offers his mother, her response: all legible, touching, strengthen a note of helplessness, insufficiency, even sorrow. “Just this” — only this. But beyond the affect it intends to induce, one should note immediately that this instance metafiction freezes time, disobeys the metonymic spread of prose and fixes the reader's attention to the many worlds that abide in that single word “this.” Lerner takes full advantage of the ability of what linguistics would call a discourse deixic or an indexical: this is a token-reflexive statement, one that refers to itself, is always true, independent of the time in which it is read. It is eternal, and it merges the worlds of reader and speaker. Whitman — one of Lerner's many explicit interlocutors — knew this: his ringing phrase, “I am with you, and I know how it is,” that closes the novel's body text.

As with word and phrase, so too with the lines — that is, the lines of verse the novel includes. A little later, during his Marfa residency, Ben will be reading *Specimen Days*, Whitman's late prose masterpiece. He'll still be struggling with his writing, and he'll be writing

poetry about delay that reifies delay, another technique the novel uses to strand its reader, to suspend the progression of the story and allow alternate times — many pasts, many futures, many presents — to blossom. “Tomorrow I’d begin work on my novel,” he writes in prose, and then drops in a poem he’s writing instead:

Tomorrow I’ll see the Donald Judd  
Permanent installations in old hangars, but  
now it’s tomorrow and I didn’t go... (173)

The poem itself drops a new form of time into the prose; within itself it contains yet more revisions in time. The poem cuts times across a line break — “but / now” — jumping from an implied today to an actual tomorrow that comes with its own bit of light paradox: “now” can’t be “tomorrow.” It’s a small but a good joke, and depends on the temporal capacity of the lyric moment, and in turn on the novel’s formal capacity to bring a poem inside itself, to function as, as Ben himself predicted, “a novel that dissolves into a poem.”<sup>161</sup> (But note, too, that the lines are weighted by a central term, “Permanent,” suggesting some deeper center around which the poet builds his procrastinatory scaffolding, surrounding the enduring with his “tomorrow” and “tomorrow”, a firmament emerging out of the division of water from water.)

Another question looms: What about all the rest of *10:04*, which is written in prose? The very amount of time it takes to read a novel renders us unable to pay the same attention to its details as we would to the details in a poem. The way we read — and, in some cases, the way that realist novels were written with the varying rhythms of our attention in mind — drains us of

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<sup>161</sup> That poem was published in an art book edition by Columbia University Press as *The Dark Threw Patches Down Upon Me Also*, in 2012. It appeared in the magazine *Lana Turner* in 2011 (Issue 6) and was composed in Marfa in June of 2011. It thus precedes the writing of “The Golden Vanity”; it certainly precedes the story’s publication.

the ability to notice or appreciate repetition.<sup>162</sup> (*10:04* could very easily pass as mainstream American realism; recall that it was published in the *New Yorker*.) The length of a novel, even one as short as *10:04* — which comes in under 240 pages, including breaks for runs of poetry and pictures, a very small trim size, and a very large font — drains our cognitive ability to remember and account for each detail. How could a reader notice that there are several other versions of the little island of “The Golden Vanity” strewn about the novel? That, for instance, the shimmering landscapes Ben will see contained in the Donald Judd installations are its kin? Ben himself provides a model, when he’s searching the sky above Texas for the famous Marfa lights, said to be signs of alien life:

I imagined the lights I did not see weren’t only the reflections of fires and headlights in the desert but also headlights from Tenth Avenue and the brilliant white magnesium of the children’s sparklers in the community garden of Boerum Hill and a little shower of embers on a fire escape in the East Village, or the gaslights of Brooklyn Heights in 1912 or 1883 or the eyeshine of an animal approaching in the dark, ruby taillights disappearing on the curve of a mountain road in a novel set in Spain. (194)

The rapid-fire, associative invocations of light — fiat lux and lux and lux and lux — creates a luminous net of metaphor, jewels in the metonymic spread of prose (a *tapidum lucidem*, luminous tapestry, this being, as Ben points out, the anatomical term for the structure that creates eyeshine in small mammals). But discerning the metaphorical, within a far larger spread of prose is more difficult than with a short lyric or a specimen handpicked for close reading. In the novel, Ben and Lerner’s invitations to correspond, to view the represented world as a *fôret de symboles* are easier to miss: the *silva silvorum* simply contains too many trees. “But what about a novel that becomes a poem the more times it is read? Is there a prosody in prose, a prosody of images? Of narrative structures? Of ideas?”

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<sup>162</sup> See Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

## A FURTHER NOTE ON COMIC PROCEDURE

One might say that comedy — both its theory and its practice, both as we make it and as we experience it — *does* possess a vocabulary or a set of concepts and feelings for discussing the detection of half-submerged patterns, repetitions across great distances, the sudden salience of metaphor in a vast sea of prose, when perhaps vehicle or tenor has been left far behind, on land. We feel a sudden click of connection or rightness when an unexpected connection occurs, when a prop or a joke or even a word resurfaces — in stand-up comedy, this is called a “call back” — a structure discussed across the length of comic theory. (Joyce is a past master of this technique.) Aristotle praises jokes, riddles and comic writing in the third book of the *Rhetoric*, classing them with metaphor itself as the products of the ability “to perceive resemblances even in things far apart.”<sup>163</sup> Much more recently, Alenka Zupančič describes comedy as a “continuity that constructs with discontinuity,” that brings together likeness across difference, that perceives and creates dynamic formal systems that require jumps across the unlike.<sup>164</sup> Comedy is the

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<sup>163</sup> “Metaphors must be drawn, as has been said already, from things that are related to the original thing, and yet not obviously so related — just as in philosophy also an acute mind will perceive resemblances even in things far apart. Thus Archytas said that an arbitrator and an altar were the same, since the injured fly to both for refuge... Liveliness is specially conveyed by metaphor, and by the further power of surprising the hearer; because the hearer expected something different, his acquisition of the new idea impresses him all the more. His mind seems to say, “Yes, to be sure; I never thought of that.” The liveliness of epigrammatic remarks [... and] well-constructed riddles are attractive for the same reason; a new idea is conveyed, and there is metaphorical expression... They are like the burlesque words that one finds in the comic writers (“γελοίοις”). The effect is produced even by jokes depending upon changes of the letters of a word; this too is a surprise. *Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), III.11 1412a10-1413b1.

<sup>164</sup> Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 14, 55-56.

super-genre of recuperated disjuncts, of incongruity: “comic procedure... makes us see the impossible passage from one side to the other, or the impossible link between the two.” Comic effects take us by surprise; the comic as an aesthetic field takes surprise and delight — with laughter as its physiological correlate — as its constructive principles; Aristotle points out, too, that these effects belong “in verse as well as in prose.”

Simon Critchley provides a reasonable phenomenological description of responding to a joke that helps link comedy in its smallest units to the experience of timelessness: “We undergo a particular experience of duration through repetition and digression, of time literally being stretched out like an elastic band.”<sup>165</sup> He then describes the arrival of a joke’s punchline as “a heightened experience of the instant.” A comedy — a formal structure built from jokes, in which the small begins to replicate the large, and the opposite, in reverse, a joke being something like a miniature comedy and a comedy a very large joke — involves the repetition of this repetitive stretch and snap, the dilation of time and the intensity of the comic moment in dialectical relation. The logical next step would be to indicate that both experiences work against chronological time, against clock time; that the suspension and speed-up of joking are both ways of turning away from the world’s time and establishing a rhythm (a totaled prosody) of one’s own.

A concrete demonstration is also possible. Zupančič traces the evolution — the repetition with a difference — of a dialogue joke similar to a Who’s On First. She describes each instant of confusion, each minor punchline as a “‘ball’ that bounces back and forth in the comic space...” She specifies that running jokes work from “a snowball effect,” an increase in “comic potential

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<sup>165</sup> Critchley, *On Humor*, 7.

and effect” as they build.<sup>166</sup> *10:04*, too, is rife with examples of this kind of comic writing, the priming of the joke — the generation of suspense and then its dissolution in an unanticipated-but-also-anticipated form. Early in the novel Ben is on his way to the hospital to provide a sperm sample.<sup>167</sup> He’s wracked with anxiety: “I had worried about it so much and so vocally that [my doctor] had offered to medicate me; every few minutes riding the train uptown, I patted the inside pocket of my coat to confirm the presence of the pill” (85). Misadventures ensue: Ben confronts a receptionist, feels ashamed by the pornography and grossed out by the room itself. The low mimetic comedy of self-defeat — what we could call ritual self-insult, were we to use the sociological vocabulary for discussing the comic; delay and inefficacy rule the episode. (Ben can’t even bring himself to say that the pill is not a tranquilizer but Viagra.)

He has been told he can’t contaminate the sample and to make sure to wash his hands before masturbating. Thus he washes his hands, touches the remote to the television on which he is to watch pornography, reasons that it must be dirty and goes back to the sink and washes his hands. He sits back down, unbuttons his pants, realizes his pants must be dirty, and goes back to the sink and washes his hands. He sits back down, puts on the headphones for the telephone, realizes the headphones must be dirty, goes back to the sink and washes his hands. The whole business is reminiscent of Beckett’s *Murphy* — and of course Ben goes so far to call it Beckettian, and to use a Beckettian verb to describe his non-progress: “shuffle,” repeated three times, once as a subtly jokey “did the shuffle,” as if the whole thing were a bad dance, which it

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<sup>166</sup> Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 137.

<sup>167</sup> Lerner calls it, later in the novel, a “specimen,” a reference to Whitman’s *Specimen Days*. Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days* (New York: Signet Classics, 1961).

isn't not — slapstick comedy being thinkable as something like a parody of dancing, dancing transposed into a dumber or more hellish key (88-89).

Later in the episode, the pill reappears. Ben takes it from his pocket in a moment of anxiety, just after an extended imagined monologue with his future daughter. He throws it into the gutter, which catches the attention of a nearby pigeon:

What is the effect of sildenafil citrate on stout-bodied passerines? I tried to shoo the bird away; it startled, but then turned back and quickly ate a half before I managed to intervene. (94-95)

The little passage juxtaposes 21<sup>st</sup>-c. pharmaceutical jargon and the plummy tones of a naturalist, drawing a lineage between them at the same time as it jokes at their expense. The helplessness of the infinitive “to shoo” turns Ben into an old lady. That failure also points back into the section, to Ben’s near-inability to perform in the only way he really needs to in order to father a child: wash his hands and masturbate. But the pill’s reappearance is in fact the passage’s true punchline, its moment of staged surprise.

It provides the passage with an open closure that throws the reader back to its beginning. The reassertion of the life of the body as coeval to the life of the mind, the low and the high coincident, conjunct but not simply conjunct: here the universal and the concrete trade places. The not the so-to-speak simple universal truth that all of us possess bodies becomes concrete: it becomes the booger. The same is true of Ben’s pill; it is both a material, specific instance of the inescapable, the bodily, the finite — and yet it joins a class of comic props outside of time, becomes an abstraction, a device.<sup>168</sup> The high ground becomes the low ground, and vice versa.

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<sup>168</sup> One is reminded of the running bit in *Ulysses* in which Malachi Mulligan borrows Stephen’s snotrag to wipe his razor, then forgets to return it. Then, after pages of dithering philosophizing on Sandymount Strand, Stephen picks his nose and realizes that he’s left the snotrag at home: the appearance, disappearance and remembrance of the object amounts to concrete comedy.



As jokes build themselves outward into a running bit into a comic work, this interchange of digression and punchline, stretch and snap, becomes a set of rules, what would in improvisational stage comedy be called “the game”: in the case of the visit to the clinic, the game would be called “Clean Hands” (or “Unclean Hands”), thereby pointing to Ben’s pathetic adherence to the clinic’s one rule. We could think of the comic game structure as an expanded form of the tossing of the Wittgensteinian ball between players in a joking situation, as digressions stretch out only to loop into callbacks, as punchlines are exchanged: these beats become the narrative structure of an otherwise plotless, a-temporal activity that surrounds its players. In abeyance of time, they can build their own fictional world. A good comic text stages such a game — such a world, such a little comic utopia, which contains its own sunshine. It “catches at happiness,” to adapt a phrase of Philip Larkin’s.<sup>169</sup> And in fact it is radically inclusive, an open form of play. As in the famous comic closings of Shakespeare, everyone is invited to correspond, to join. As Lerner writes in the last sentence of his first novel — which is, if one wants to be very accurate, the first utopia he ever describes, the first seed of *10:04*: “Then I planned to live forever in a skylit room surrounded by my friends.”<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Philip Larkin, “Born Yesterday,” in *The Collected Works of Philip Larkin* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 54.

<sup>170</sup> *Leaving the Atocha Station* is a book of crying. There’s so much crying it isn’t worth counting the tears, and any attempt to inventory them quickly becomes an almost disturbing exercise in voyeurism; suffice to say that from its opening its protagonist confuses crying with “a profound experience of art” and follows a weeping man around a museum, hoping to learn his secret. In *10:04*, Ben experiences only “mild lacrimal events,” the funniest while consuming an “irresponsible amount of unsulphured mango.” He calls these events “increasingly frequent” but only describes three, and in any case they involve intimations of beauty (8; mango 109; 148); there are 51 instances of shared laughter in the novel. Very obviously, then, the two novels revise a tragic conception of art into a comic or lighthearted conception, a process begun in the ironic treatment of Adam’s ideas about art and continued in *10:04*’s much more sincere mode. Even in the title of *Leaving the Atocha Station* lies the idea that that novel’s purpose — and the purpose of all it represents for Adam and Ben and Lerner — is to provide a sort of scaffolding that must

## DEATH-IN-LIFE

In an interview for the magazine *BOMB*, the poet artist Ariana Reines asks Lerner a charming question. Lerner responds with a sincerity he couldn't manage when he was still the author of *Leaving the Atocha Station*:

AR: I'm just wondering if you're a funny person, like in real life? Do you make people laugh?

BL: Yeah, I am actually funny. Yeah.

Lerner goes on to describe the jokes he told at the family dining table, conjuring up one of the irrevocable facts about comic art, however improvisational: it is social, and aims to form social groups. Before the composition of *10:04*, or “The Golden Vanity,” or “The Dark Threw Patches Down Upon Me Also,” Lerner was already interested in the integration of points into lines, in the attempt “to integrate isolated units into higher orders of meaning,” as he mentions as part of an interview with the poet Rae Armantrout: the two discuss “the moment versus the arrow of time, the one and the many.”<sup>171</sup> Comedy's great theme is social integration; social integration is also one of the functions of the end of the end of time.

But what about that line of comic theory — verifiable, it would seem, in our experience — that one of comedy's function is to degrade, ridicule, and separate?<sup>172</sup> That it is an engine of

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be left behind. The implied authorial career itself is moving, not least because as the author drops his ridiculously grandiose pseudonym for his own name, Ben, he becomes, quite literally, ever more himself. Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*,

<sup>171</sup> Ben Lerner, “Interview: Rae Armantrout,” in *BOMB*, (Winter 2011), 78.

<sup>172</sup> The classic source for what is known in the philosophy of humor as the Superiority Theory is Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part 1 Chapter 6: “Sudden glory, is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.”

disdain, othering, and sadism? Worth analyzing is an anecdote about collective laughter told to Ben by a nameless and much more famous author with whom he eats dinner. Her grade school teacher told her, in the middle of class, that she resembled her dead daughter. ‘Then I looked up at Mrs. Meacham, who was staring at me, and I heard this terrible laughter... my laughter. I heard it before I recognized it as issuing from my body.’

It was completely involuntary. It was a profoundly nervous response. For a few seconds only I was laughing, and then everybody started laughing. Everybody in the classroom erupted into loud, hysterical laughter. (121)

The children’s laughter isn’t funny to the reader. But the moment nonetheless lays bare the function of laughter and its relationship to our belief in our own survival. The little girl in the story, the first laugher, cannot think of herself as dead; her mind rejects the possibility. Her laughter becomes a psychological defense against death expressed through the subverbal, protolinguistic response that is laughter; the act is an unthinking comic revision of the tragic story Mrs. Meacham is attempting to tell.

“‘You look like my daughter Mary, who is dead,’” says Mrs. Meacham. But “dead” is not an acceptable predicate to attach to a child. Children know this. Their laughter spreads, as all comedy spreads, defining an impromptu or an improvised community precisely to nullify fear. The author with whom Ben is dining explains the event to him as “children trying to process a death.” She’s right, in so far as their processing of that death means rejecting its symbolic contagion and reaffirming their right to live in a present that knows no death and binds them together as a collective. “Mrs. Meacham fle[es] the room in tears,” and then returns, order restored, her tragedy rejected by what we might call the children’s comico-utopian impulse. “Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time,” writes Bakhtin.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 9.

## IF WE BE FRIENDS

The social groups formed by the comic help Lerner think about community, which arrives for him — or would arrive, or might arrive — as a kind of non-hierarchical, conditional accompaniment: correspondence, co-authorship. We could see this in one of the novel's stranger tendencies: the de-individuation of its characters. Ben the novelist doesn't like describing faces, though his agent urges him to so that his novel will sell. He has a hard time integrating the superficial markers of individuality beloved of the realist novel and of most modes of sociality: he thinks of these as "the game of features again" ("The Dark," line 72). He's more interested in the fact that the shapes of craters on the moon could suggest faces, operating at a high level of abstraction that tends to ignore persons: on his first group date with Hannah, later Alena, he wants to talk about pareidolia, wants to know what faculty makes us see faces to begin with. But perhaps it is forgivable, that each character sounds a lot like the novelist who wrote them, and like all the novel's other characters, since *10:04* is to say the least conflicted about the modes of representation that convince us all of our personhood (for instance, our names).

We can say with great precision what the game of features might be: in *10:04*, the social self — call it the novelistic self — can in fact be entirely altered, even destroyed, based on the stories told by nearby humans, exposing something like an after-image, a double-exposure: what a regular reader of Victorian literature or of the lyric tradition would have little trouble calling a soul. As Ben packs food in the basement of his Brooklyn co-op he listens to a story told by his friend Noor: after her father's death, she is told that her biological father is a white man, not a Palestinian, as she'd been led to believe her whole life — a life she had led involved with Palestinian causes. Noor describes glancing down at her hands as her mother reveals her literal

parentage: “The only thing that happened is that my hands seemed to fade” — her mind projects onto her body the dissolution of an identity she thought she possessed utterly (104). But her hands of course only “seem” to fade. This revision of her biography deradicalizes and deracializes her because it was based on the kinds of predicates that don’t in fact establish the value of human life, of any given person: biography, lifewriting, isn’t life at all, only a reorganization of epiphenomena. The novelistic self, the social self of realist prose is not the lyric soul.<sup>174</sup>

Lerner’s method is best exfoliated by Agamben, or vice versa, particularly in the early essay “Comedy” and the later *Coming Community*, in which it acquires a thick set of political and ethical implications: “a being radically devoid of any representable identity would be absolutely irrelevant to the State,” the blossoming of the modern nation state being that which predetermined the need for Noor’s activism and the Israel- Palestine conflict and before it British imperialism.<sup>175</sup> It is also repeated across the history of comic theory. Here is Zupančič again: “character, as invented by comedy... does not seek to define a person by the multiplicity of her character traits.”<sup>176</sup> For Lerner, for Agamben, and for many other comic thinkers and writers, character traits are but the markers of realism, reality effects stuck onto beings whose singularity — which is their commonality, their participation in community — lies much deeper or alongside than the real.<sup>177</sup> Noor possesses traits; she is what character criticism would call round;

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<sup>174</sup> Helen Vendler, *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>175</sup> *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013), 86.6.

<sup>176</sup> Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 36.

<sup>177</sup> At this moment we hear an echo of Bergson’s influential theory of the comic, that it is “the mechanical encrusted on the living,” an artifice encroaching on — though in Agamben’s version it also protects — organicity. See Bergson, “Laughter” in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 61-146.

we witness her suffering and are encouraged to empathize. But her suffering is produced by a construction, by an identity produced by a set of meanings produced by the ideology of the modern state and empire before it in order to define, separate, systemize and surveil human beings as well as buy and sell them.

Lerner attempts to depict a pull toward some other conception of the human world and of ethical relations that do not depend on a concept of personhood. If we move past the socially constructed self we move toward what Agamben invokes as the creaturely self, the innocent self, singular and unpoliced. As a character, Noor is an implied person, but she is also a mythical type, another apparition of Joan of Arc, and of Alex, who looks like Joan, and of Christa McAuliffe, who appears in a photograph inserted on page 16, with her hand outstretched, enormous, the closest part of her to the lens; each is a vision of revolutionary woman but with a historically specific cause (Noor who organized for Palestine, Joan who freed France, McAuliffe who went to outer space, Alex who has broken with patriarchy to conceive a child outside of marriage). But Noor is also part of a larger statement on being. She is one of a larger flock of beings whose hands are experiencing tremors or who, like the octopus, never had proprioception — no sense of the specific location of their limbs — to begin with.

Several of *10:04*'s characters lose track of their extremities, a refiguring of the social body such that its members are begin to acquire a kind of numinousness, or a trembling; they glitch out, get stuck in becoming, in Lerner's approximation of Agamben's "taking-place, the communication of singularities in the attribute of extension, does not unite them in essence" — which under his conception would in fact be cruelly, inhumane and inhuman — "but scatters them in existence."<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 14.5

Ben is enchanted by Bastien-Lepage's failure to represent Joan; the reader, too, should feel a strange flicker of potentiality when the two hands, Joan's and Noor's, overlap within the same work of art — that is, in Lerner's novel — and when Marty McFly's hand joins them, in a film still included across the gutter from Joan's picture, or when Ben in Marfa starts taking beta blockers that have the "paradoxical effect of making [his] hand shake," paradoxical in that they forestall the dissolution in one part of his body but accelerate it in another, perhaps more significant site (167). "I have faded from the photograph," he writes, reappearing in a poem, which then appears in three other places. In Lerner's version of the comic it is not possible to give anyone your hand, only to have your vanished hand participate in an empty set of hands that have disappeared. But community must be signaled somehow, by correspondence — or by waving. Near the end of the novel, Ben wanders past a news crew: "I walked within range of the camera and tungsten lights and waved; maybe you saw me" (235). The "you" addressed here is the reader, you and me. Lerner and Ben take instinctive advantage of waving as a kind of universal deixis, a dynamic indication of our co-existence by pointing at as much of our shared world as possible for a second or two. (Or we declare our mutual presence in the same atmosphere by attempting to make it palpable, by stirring it around with our fingers, or both.)<sup>179</sup> Here the atmosphere we share with Ben cuts between the novel's represented world and ours; he imagines that there is a world we share. And of course there is such a world: the present (and present) tense of reading.

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<sup>179</sup> Certainly there are many different kinds of waves: I'm talking about the kind that are mutual acknowledgements of presence, either its opening (hello) or its closing (goodbye), which with a beat of thought separate themselves from their less lovely but not entirely unlovely cousins, waves as demands for attention and so forth.

Ben and many others in his world are experiencing an immanent transcendence; they are being absorbed into their own taking-place: indicating the presence of a space not-quite-non-existent, a coming community, not about to arrive but constantly arriving, just on this side of not-being, accessible only through fiction. That community, timeless, comic community, which we may never see — but which we are invited to voyage — holds within it what is true and what is not true; its goodness depends on witnessing what is good *and* what is evil.

## HELL

In the novel's section FOUR, Ben undergoes a kind of purgatory — or, in an older idiom — a katabasis in Marfa, Texas: “I felt like a ghost in the green hybrid, driving around Marfa in the dark” (163). He has come to Marfa for a writing residency but ends up inverting his Circadian rhythms, consuming Whitman's *Specimen Days* and “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” as well as hallucinating that his neighbor is Robert Creeley. Ben listens to recordings of Creeley's “The Door” and also of Whitman. He spends most of his time alone, writing, eventually producing a 314-line soliloquy called the “The Dark Threw Patches Down Upon Me Also” — and indeed the section presents a symbolic sojourn into darkness, ridden with ghosts, a test of our hero in a region geographically and metaphorically south of his usual sphere. His only social activities involve a visit to the aforementioned Donald Judd boxes, dinner with a few acquaintances, and a party, during which he steps into an explicitly parodic reenactment of Whitman's presence at a wounded soldier's bedside when an art museum intern does three lines of ketamine and vomits all over himself.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Section FOUR functions as the novel's falling action, its shift in key, from major to minor, light into dark, from diurnal to nocturnal — the bridge in its AABA structure — which leads one



But whence the hellishness? In *Specimen Days*, the poet is damaged, and is recalling scenes of internecine war: Whitman is recovering from a stroke and seeks succor in the natural world, by wrestling with trees and so forth. In Lerner's Marfa, the poet has descended into damaged life and has only his grappling with various ghosts for exercise: his cabin is located across the street from the cabin in which Creeley died, or is said to have died: Ben knows that Creeley is gone, but he sometimes sees a figure in glasses standing on the porch and imagines that it is the dead poet whose work he loved. And, like Whitman, like Creeley, Ben is also sick: one of the problems with his sickness is that he has been medicalized, his body quantified, broken into parts, measured, calculated, manipulated. To be treated this way is to live in fear because it is, in a certain sense, to die repeatedly in advance, to be treated as inanimate, all quantity (this is one reason why the novel's primary verb for "to die" is "to dissect").

But the other metaphysical badness, the evil Ben faces is late-phase capitalism, another form of killing calculation, speculation. "I will sell myself in hell," Creeley writes, in "The Door".<sup>181</sup> "I was crossing my art with money more than I ever had before," says Ben, as the novel moves from section THREE into section FOUR. And indeed that third section could be understood as a kind of ferry crossing, a Stygian movement. Ben listens in to conversation around him while dining with his agent: "'They need a highly liquid strategy,' someone at an adjacent table said" (157). "For a second all I heard was the desperation, the hysterical energy of passengers on a doomed liner... 'That market's completely underwater, probably forever'" (158). Down he goes, into the darkness, and into a historically specific darkness. "Look," says

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to observe, among other things, that while nothing seems to happen in *10:04*, the nothing that does happen is surprisingly well-wrought.

<sup>181</sup> Robert Creeley, *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

Ben, in the poem he writes in hell, addressing Whitman's time and also our own: "the small sums will grow monstrous as they circulate, measure: / I have come from the future to warn you" (line 137). For it is greed, rapaciousness, "a system of great majesty and murderous stupidity" that has upset the planet and which may lead to us all being drowned (47).

Even in hell, however, there is something to be learned, a glimmering glimpse of hell's opposite. The visit to the Judd boxes is a particular revelation:

The work was set in time, changing quickly because the light was changing, the dry grasses going gold in it... All those windows opening onto open land, the reflective surfaces, the differently articulated interiors, some of which seemed to contain a blurry image of the landscape within — all combined to collapse my sense of outside and in. (179)

Ben encounters yet another vision of utopia — "a blurry image of the landscape within" — and have done with it. We catch a glimmering of aesthetic permanence in "the dry grasses going gold," with its indulgence in that anaphoric "g," producing a sudden sense of the auratic, a flicker of the fane. Perhaps even more significant is that the boxes are both container and contained. Their form is their content; the two are co-extensive, co-eval, co-constructive. The passage is reminiscent of Charles's Olson's manifesto of 1950, loud, of course, because it is a manifesto: "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" or of a quieter passage by the master of reminiscence: Proust recalls the minnow-catching jars the boys of Combray dropped into the Vivonne river and notes that they were "filled by the current of the stream, in which they themselves also were enclosed, at once 'containers' whose transparent sides were like solidified water and 'contents' plunged into a still larger container of liquid, flowing crystal" (271).<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> The passage is so beautiful it is worth relating in its entirety: "I would amuse myself by watching the glass jars which the boys used to lower into the Vivonne, to catch minnows, and which, filled by the current of the stream, in which they themselves were also enclosed, at once

## THE OTHER SIDE

The novel shifts out of section FOUR into section FIVE with Ben's visit to what Alena calls the Museum of Totaled Art, where she displays works that have been removed from circulation and declared worthless by their insurers; the Museum is based on the work of the artist Elka Krajewska and the New York-based Salvage Art Institute, which Lerner visited on assignment for *Harpers* in 2013 — is a parody of it, one might say.<sup>183</sup> In *10:04*, Ben visits the Museum and is frankly delighted by everything he touches and sees. He smashes a piece of a Jeff Koons balloon dog, a heady externalization of his intellectual and moral objection to Koons's work and to the machinations of the market. "It was wonderful to see an icon of art world commercialism and valorized stupidity shattered; it was wonderful to touch the pieces with their metallic finish, to see the hollow interiority of a work of willful superficiality" (131). Intact, Koons's pieces are bad jokes, shrill giggles, their form of expression what Adorno would call "the smirking caricature of advertising pure and simple... its ordained character fits into the way of the world. It encourages people to submit, comply"<sup>184</sup> (250). There is no fit between form and content because the content is always the same: a bullying vision of the human as mere consumer, naught but one of 7 billion objectified nodes in the global moneyflow.

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'containers' whose transparent sides were like solidified water and 'contents' plunged into a still larger container of liquid, flowing crystal, suggested an image of coolness more delicious and more provoking than the same water in the same jars would have done, standing upon a table laid for dinner, by shewing it as perpetually in flight between the impalpable water, in which my hands could not arrest it, and the insoluble glass, in which my palate could not enjoy it."

<sup>183</sup> Ben Lerner, "Damage Control: The Modern Art World's Tyranny of Price," *Harpers Magazine*, December 2013, 43-49.

<sup>184</sup> "Is Art Lighthearted?" in *Notes to Literature* Vol 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann; trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 268.

But everything in Alena's museum, including the bits of balloon dog, is for Ben "a utopian readymade — an object for or from a future where there was some other regime of value than the tyranny of price" (34). It empowers, radically, instead of requiring submission; the political implications of both Ben's language — "tyranny of price" — and his time in the museum are clear. For Ben as for Lerner, utopian art is unalienated art, art with the hope of remaining aloof from reification or purged of its prior reifications. Thus the three become "children" or tricksters, who are allowed to touch anything, and who pass through taboo unharmed and happy.

Here, too, Lerner echoes Adorno. The art in and of the Museum for Totaled Art — note the pun on the word "Totaled" — is a comic art, an art which is, in Adorno's words "lighthearted": for Adorno, art itself ("a priori, in advance of its works" — that is, in advance of time and history, its incarnations in the world) is something very like utopian, the complement and the only grace of the endless dystopia of damaged life. And, like the coming community imagined by Agamben, art's utopian capacity is granted by an ontological status neither necessary nor contingent. It is neither inside nor outside the text (to switch briefly into a different critical idiom), but is instead the means through which the text is expressed, not precisely art's form but that thing which proceeds form and which we might call the very possibility of its taking-place.

What is lighthearted in art is, if you like, the opposite of what one might easily assume it to be: not its content but its *demeanor*, the abstract fact that it is art at all, that it opens out over the reality to whose violence it bears witness at the same time. (248; my emphasis)

Adorno further specifies that individual works are not lighthearted, and that lightheartedness might in fact be disappearing from the world, to be overtaken by the culture industry, by "art prescribed to businessmen as a shot in the arm"; he also notes that he doesn't

know what the art of the future might look like, or how it will spread its wings out over the void. In Lerner, at least, it involves revisions and inversions, the establishment of comic contact between worlds, aesthetic connection between seemingly disparate spheres: between prose and poetry, between past and future, history and science. These conjuncts are accomplished by an array of effects, by those intensities of affect and idea native to poetry — that is, by lyric effects; by what the psychology of perception would call cognitive priming or pattern recognition; by what comedians would call beats, or callbacks; by what literary criticism would call the structured deployment of tropes, of *figura*, that word Auerbach reminds us the Latin poets must have loved for its “living and dynamic, incomplete, playful” sound; by what Baudelaire would call *correspondance*; by what we could call a parody of poetry, which is thinkable as comic prose.<sup>185,186</sup>

These techniques as simple and as classical as the recurring image of a light — which in characteristic Ben-fashion Ben encounters on his way to an awkward social engagement that will turn out blissfully (it’s just before Ben-Ben falls in love with Hannah-Alena). He describes the light as opening up into the non-time of the universal in a passage with which one could make infinite hay and which is yet another form of the novel itself, another model for poetry in prose, or comedy:

... it was as if the little flame in the gas lamp he paused before were

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<sup>185</sup> Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 12.

<sup>186</sup> Agamben draws a similar genealogy in “Parody,” revisiting the moment described in Aristotle when the recitation of Homeric epic first broke the link between speech and melody, that is, when the lyric was first degraded into parody. “We know this mode of recitation provoked irrepressible fits of laughter among the Athenians.” This separation of music from speech is, implicitly, the origin of prose and sends it on its way toward later, more specific conceptualizations of novelistic prose as heteroglossic, split and split and split again into many forms of language within itself, attaining structured babelhood. Agamben, “Parody,” 38-39.

burning at once in the present and in various pasts, in 2012 but also in 1918 or 1883, as if it were one flame flickering simultaneously in each of those times, connecting them. He felt that anyone who had ever paused before the lamp as he was pausing was briefly co-eval with him, that they were all watching the same turbulent point in their respective presents. Then he imagined his narrator standing before it, imagined that the gas light cut across worlds and not just years, that the author and the narrator, while they couldn't face each other, could intuit each other's presence by facing the same light, a kind of correspondence. (67)

Almost every word in that passage is a pun, a disjunct-conjunct between discourses, forms of discourse, registers, philological strata, texts, authors real and fictional, forms of knowledge, media, time scales, temporalities, the real and the virtual, etc. The grammar itself — so well-ordered, ordinary! — is extraordinary. But suffice to say that here, the “turbulent point” — the tragic, that which is troubling and which in its motion threatens to tear subjects and communities apart, to kill or dissect them — is surrounded and contained by their respective presents and the represented present that unites them. (This is what Auden means when he writes, “ May I, too, show an affirming flame” — may I be among the company of lights that makes clear to us that we live in darkness but also endlessly defeats it, however tentatively, in whatever incompleteness.) Indeed the act of its witnessing — vigilance, from the Latin “to wave” — is a kind of correspondence, the intuition of presence the beginning of *communitas* and eventually, the social (as well as its associated literary forms, first the lyric, addressed to all beings, and then prose, addressed to and dealing in specific social identities).

Or, by contrast, Lerner's comic effects can be as granular as the careful insertion of a set of indexicals, as discussed above. But all of these effects are grounded in the promise, the hopefulness latent in the comic, its demeanor, its ability to integrate separate orders, to merge ontologies not in essence but to show them in their common transcendence — their ability to not-*not* be —, to dilate a moment until it is capable of bending, splitting, erasing the arrow of time

and opening up, however briefly, the vision of a skylit non-place.<sup>187</sup> Just before Ben leaves Marfa, he receives a sign, or rather comes to a conclusion about signs that serves just as well: “I imagined the lights I did not see weren’t only the reflections of fires and headlights in the desert.” At the same moment in the plot of the *Divine Comedy* — and it doesn’t matter one whit for my purposes whether Lerner has read Dante, although of course he has — the poet climbs up into the stars and sees a vision of transcendence, a vision every poet reënvions when she imagines lights she does not see and which every reader relives, in however parodic, however fallen a form, when she notices, for example, that all three sections of the *Commedia* — including the *Inferno* — terminate with a flash of unseeable light, with the word “stelle,” or stars.

It bears repeating, not least because comedy is the means by which we ourselves bear repetition, that under the comic dispensation or within the comic sphere every experience reforms itself into a vision of higher ground, “glimpses from the whirlpool of awakening” called up by “the uplifted finger of day.”<sup>188</sup>

## HEAVENS

But eyebrows might fly up at my examining *10:04* through such an insistently theological lens, or on revisiting theological structures with such earnestness: Ben mentions he hates

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<sup>187</sup> Funnily enough, the version of the Institute for Totaled Art that exists in our world is attempting to install itself on a boat in the New York harbor, utterly prepared to protect its damaged goods from the floods that menace the region, from all the warm-cored hurricanes on the horizon.

<sup>188</sup> Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way* (New York: Modern Library, 1976), 268.

Whitman for his Christ-complex, not least for his attempt to build a “paper heaven / where the suffering is done by others” — and it is always worth indicating Lerner’s sensitivity to suffering, relating his anger at Whitman at attempting to aggrandize the pain of the dying into poetry. But while the lens may be theological, the vision is a secular one, even if Lerner’s efforts to step outside of time all depend on judeochristian models, on a textual practice developed and first practiced on a sacred history that begins that founds its originary paradise on injustice and exclusion at every turn. (As Jameson pointedly reminds us, More’s utopia has a moat around it).<sup>189</sup> Historically specific accounts of the comic novel already center on the secularization of the nineteenth-century western world: according to Polhemus, the task of comic writers was to “compose secular visions able to convince people imaginatively of the possibilities of attaching themselves to large processes of regeneration.” We can have comedy without God, and without the gods, and without the id, ego, and super-ego, without Self and Other, without the living and the mechanical, wholeness and deformity — without any of the many trinities, deities, dualities, and other concepts that have been used as frameworks for comic art in the past.

The Hassidim tell a story about the world to come that says everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so will it be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too will it sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too will we wear there. Everything will be just as it is now, just a little different.<sup>190</sup>

My theory is that what we call comedy or the comic represents an older form of community than that of Christianity or of Judaism, older than whatever garden, whatever sin, perhaps as old as the species, certainly as old as laughter, whose behavioral linguistic function is to convey good will, the absence of threat and the invocation of group play. Comic art reassures

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<sup>189</sup> *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso Books, 2015), 5.

<sup>190</sup> This is the novel’s epigraph and appears on no citable page.



us that we will conquer death, just as the revision of “The Golden Vanity” reassured the young Ben. Time must be stopped — or disavowed — precisely so that our lives may continue and so that the infinite possibility of other worlds may be imagined. Clock time — specific, measured time — is separated from neurobiological time or, in a slightly older idiom, the subjective time of any individual’s interior life. We imagine that both the objectivity of clock time and the isolating, strictly interior movement of subjective time can be frozen by our collective experience of art. In the case of a good joke, we might really feel as if it has, that together we have left Chronos behind for Kairos, abandoned the old for the young, “emerge[d] from profane duration to recover an unmoving time, eternity,” from the ordinary to the opportune time.<sup>191</sup> The story pauses a little, in simulation of the great pause to come, while we furnish a revision of that great pause into a happy ending.<sup>192</sup>

This is why, or one of the many reasons why, *10:04* ends with a classic happy ending. It shows us the forms of collectivity our time can accept — with friendship, and a pregnancy, with a child held safe from the world, with another life not starting but about to start — because it could not and should not finally abandon its desire for intelligibility. It must, like the Judd boxes, be set in time in order to transcend time. (Nor do I believe that Lerner would have attempted to write anything *not* informed by the historical conditions under which it was written: no paper heavens here.) Its native hopefulness is of course, ridiculous — and humiliating. “Am I allowed to bow myself down / in the ridiculous posture of renewal,” writes Creeley, frank, cranky,

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<sup>191</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), 106.

<sup>192</sup> There is a faint reminder of this escape from clock or worldly time and into a sort of shining kairos in all conventional fable and fairytale endings, especially in the smugly funny version known to modern Greek: “και ζήσανε αυτοί καλά και εμείς καλύτερα.” “And they lived happily ever after — and we (the hearers of the story) lived even more happily.”

correct (“The Door” line 33-34). But even this humiliation is significant to the novel’s less visible comedy. For Agamben, a self-avowed laughableness allows re-entry into innocence: the comic character par excellence is the one who “purifies himself of personal guilt in showing the full extent of his shame.”<sup>193</sup> That mechanism of depersonalization — of personal guilt, of the trappings of the self and indeed of person — centers Agamben’s system of ethical and juridical thought, and appears in many different guises, far too many forms of delicate similitude to align here.

We can say that, for now, that for Agamben as for Lerner depersonalization is the best or perhaps simply the only means of stepping into a time that contains our time, a world that cuts across worlds, the world that is intercut undetectably between every world and that permits the transcendence of all things over themselves, that takes potential as its foundational principle and which is shared with all creatures of earth. And we could say that for Lerner as for Agamben as for Adorno utopia is, in a word, art itself, *poesis* as it unfolds and is unfolded again and again, making the future: an almost heinous effort; unspeakable outside of art, endangered, too, by the bad forms of irreparability — the tragedy Ben sees at the center of the Judd boxes, in that instance the tragedy of war, the clash of states. “The changing rhythm of the boxes’ interiors felt like a gesture toward a tragedy that was literally uncontainable...” — they look to him like coffins — “or a tragedy that, since some of the ‘coffins’ internally reflected the landscape outside the shed, that had come to contain the whole world.” It is almost unbearably obvious to say that this is death, the unmaking that art must understand and acknowledge if it wants to retain any claim to an ethics. It must bear witness to the violence it contains, must disclose and enclose it at the same time; only then can it claim truth.

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<sup>193</sup>Agamben, “Comedy,” 16.

Ben stares at a can of coffee in the grocery store as he prepares for Hurricane Irene, a can which has suddenly, like Keats's urn, or Stevens's jar, started to shape the whole world around itself, acquired a halo, begun to become art — but art of the wrong kind:

I held the red plastic container, one of the last three on the shelf, held it like the marvel that it was: the seeds inside the purple fruit of the coffee plant had been harvested on Andean slopes and roasted and ground and soaked and then dehydrated at a factory in Medellín and vacuum-sealed and flown to JFK and then driven upstate in bulk to Pearl River for repackaging and then transported back by truck to the store where I now stood reading the label. It was as if the social relations that produced the object in my hand began to glow when they were threatened, lending it a certain aura — the majesty and murderous stupidity of that organization of time and space and fuel and labor becoming visible in the commodity itself now that planes were grounded and the highways were starting to close. (18-19)

But the moment — a kind of secularization of opening of the gates of hell — passes. The world becomes the world again. Ben ceases to regard his container of “tasteless coffee”; in the next beat, “Alex gets her tea” (note the pun on “tasteless,” made possible by the conjunction of tea with coffee, a much less decorous beverage, which allows Lerner to shift back down into narrative, back into realism from his flight of demi-lyric: when he first notices the container it is sacred, not just a “marvel” but “vital”). The novel continues, bridging what worlds it can, corresponding so thickly that we could easily call correspondence — lines between islands, integrations of isolations — its controlling metaphor. We could say that the novel began as an epistolary form and that it will survive, at least for now, which is as a form of correspondence. But that would call the novel what it is not, which is life.

“Kunst-werke sind von einer unendlichen Einsamkeit,” writes Rilke, artworks are of an endless solitude, summing up the isolation shared by all art, unending because imperfect — for how can isolation be perfect, if it is a set with many members, who have their isolation in common? — incomplete at the same moment it achieves its completion and which in its

oscillation between both states produces a kind of shine, or a flicker, or a halo: a golden vanity.<sup>194</sup> We could say, if we were very brave, that what the figure of the golden vanity finally offers us is something like a wishfully peaceful vision of the ontogenesis of art, a glimpse of an untroubled primary relationship between form and content, word and thing, world and work, the best possible origin of art as it arrives ceaselessly into being. Defined by that halo — the circle, first of all forms — is a blurry landscape, an island, the non-place in which all is green *and* golden, where form and content, word and thing were and always are one, where there is no violence and no history, no labor and no class, and where the tension between form and reference is only expressible as — in fact representation can only take the form of — absolute beauty, where if you open your mouth a song flies out and absolutely no one ever makes puns.

But we would have to be very brave indeed to say that, and untruthful, since comedy does not return us to the garden — utopia is a no-place — but only convinces us that it's worth our while to try. We could say *10:04* does not believe in gardens, or in islands, or in isolation, but that it wants to be a garden, an island. Or — to return to where this chapter began — we could say that it is artwork as a kind of fractal bean, stuffed full of kernels of its own potentiality (ein-Sam: one seed, but also ein-Samm, one gathering), that it is very near to what Barthes would call a plural text and achieved much differently — much more classically — than Barthes might have

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<sup>194</sup> “Vanity” is from the Latin *vanitas*, emptiness, from *vanus*, empty. Ben’s attraction to mirrors as a figure for art could be said to recapitulate this same sense of emptiness as the generative possibility of nothing. Ben and Lerner’s sense of transcendent possibility also goes some way to explaining his love of mirrors and reflections, of which the Judd boxes furnish but one striking example. For mirrors are most full at the same moment that they are most empty: a mirror full of reflections is a mirror at its most emphatically full of nothing; at the same moment the content of the image in the mirror is identical to its form. The landscape Ben sees — “the dying grass slowly going golden” — is thus utopia as mirage, the first instant in which the utopian impulse assumes utopian form. (Vanity is also, according to both Meredith and Bergson, the funniest possible thing.)

suspected. That it is, as the poet and scholar Robert Bringhurst writes of Haida myth, “a piece of timelessness caught in an eddy of narrative time,” an antediluvian no-place in and from and with which we can all acknowledge our mutual shipwreck, when we can say, in a knowing minor harmony: “I am with you, and I know how it is.”

Or, to be more faithful to the novel’s own syntactical carefulness, in which we *could* or *should* all acknowledge our mutual shipwreck, in which we *could* or *should* say together, “I am with you, and I know how it is.” And that means all of us: Ben, Alena, Walt, Noor, her father, her other father, the two antelope Ben sees dash across the Marfa landscape, the sea turtle, all the animals, human and non-,<sup>195</sup> of Brooklyn and Manhattan, and the many poets he begins to quote without quotation marks in a great flood of correspondence — really a chorus — at the novel’s end, chief not solely Whitman but T. S. Eliot, poet of *The Waste Land*, tragic envisager of deaths by water, whom Lerner and his comic Ben are attempting to refute with their vision of a little paradise.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> The question of the animal in the comic utopia goes unexplored in this dissertation, but the reason that animals are included in Agamben’s *Coming Community*, the vision of the open and immanent utopia that Lerner attempts to formalize, is that they — like comic characters — bear no original sin, are not bound to history: for them time has always already ended or opened up. Thus the world for them is something like purgatory, the space-beside-heaven (which is also the space of art) that certain varieties of Catholic thought hold apart for children and the Old Testament fathers, who died before baptism. These spaces are spaces of what Augustine calls “mitissima poena,” superlatively gentle punishment, which is logically equivalent to no punishment at all. And which is logically (and theologically) equivalent again to blessing: thus innocents live in a kind of transcendent limbo on earth, in a comic atmosphere, in ceaseless lightheartedness.

<sup>196</sup> Lerner’s “I imagined every woman as pregnant” — the worst line of the novel — reverses of Eliot’s vision of the dead streaming over London Bridge: “A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many / I had not thought death had undone so many” (*The Waste Land* 63-64). The same is true, unintentionally and therefore tellingly, of *Ulysses* as such, and of *A Tale of Two Cities*.

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