

The Alchemy of Laughter

Comedy in English Fiction

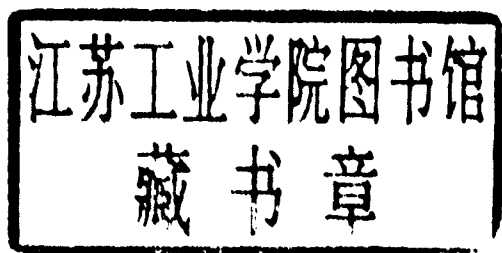
Glen Cavaliero



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STEEPLE ON A HILL (*poems*)

For Roddy and Mary

Preface

This book is the product of over fifty years of novel-reading, and has been written simply for the pleasure of it. It is a work of celebratory investigation, one which offers a practical approach to the study of comedy in the belief that, in order to discover what comedy is, the surest method is to determine what it does. If we equate it with any of its various elements (satire or farce, for example,) we immediately become entangled in a cat's-cradle of conflicting definitions, for comedy is not a quantifiable object, nor is it merely a literary category: it is a living process, an experience *of* experience, a way of contending with the enigmas, frustrations, contradictions and misfortunes that are the external obstacles to happiness – and also with the vanities, follies and sheer wickedness that human beings breed within themselves. As a consequence, comedy is most readily understood by observing processes rather than by establishing rules.

Although comedy is usually discussed in connection with the stage, I believe that it can be most comprehensively related to its human context through the medium of prose fiction. Novels are a mongrel breed, deriving from allegory, romance, journalism, the drama, travel-writing, biography, the moral essay and the character-sketch: they obey no laws and have no agreed structure or predetermined length, save as commercial practicalities dictate. While making use of the conventions of comedy that have been formulated within the temporal and spatial limitations of the theatre, they do this by so great a variety of means as to embody those conditions of relativity and inconclusiveness in which the comic sense originates. Moreover, the comedic process can be found at work even in novels which would appear to question the validity of comedy's procedures, through their concentration on momentous, harrowing or unavoidably calamitous events. In this study I have accordingly used my chosen novels to illuminate each other by means less of applied than of enacted theory. Through deciphering what they show and say, and through examining the methods by which their authors obtain the effects they do, one stands a good chance of appreciating the nature of comedy itself.

My controlling metaphors are taken from the ancient science of alchemy. I have drawn on the endeavour to transmute base metals into gold as a structural paradigm with which to describe the various

comedic processes detectable in prose fiction. Alchemy, an enacted symbol of inward purification, may be less irrelevant to our concerns than the subject's esoteric and arcane associations might lead us to suppose.

I have used the word 'comical' to denote the humorous or 'funny', and have reserved 'comic' for the *conceptual* aspects of comedy – for comedy as a literary genre or category – and have employed 'comedic' to relate to comedy as a *process*. It is the nature and outcome of that process which forms the subject of this book.

The first chapter focuses on comedy's occasion, which I have symbolised in the image of the monolith. It argues that it is personal beliefs and institutional behaviour of an absolutist and authoritarian kind which form the primary material for the imaginative process of comedic transmutation, a process which enlarges human understanding and perspectives, and of which the several categories of comedy (celebration, parody, satire, farce, irony, burlesque and wit) each form a part. The second chapter analyses those seven categories, its successors illustrating each of them in turn; the novels examined in those contexts have been chosen for their representative qualities – no doubt others would have served my purpose equally well. Since comedy is relative to the numberless examples of the monolithic spirit which it encounters and subverts, I am as much concerned with what novels have in common, and with what differentiates them, as I am with questions of influence and evolution: accordingly, the final chapter discusses comedy as a regulative and linguistic procedure, examining it as an element in a novel's form and methodology as well as in its content. For reasons which will become clear, my survey concludes around 1960, when certain far-reaching changes in traditional ways of thinking and feeling became evident in popular behaviour, in moral perspectives and in the economic functioning of social structures. It was a time when new monoliths began drastically to modify the old.

One final point: since human beings (alone apparently within the natural order) are incorrigibly prone to the detection of absurdity, a potential danger lurks in any systematic enquiry into the origins of humour. Comedy is something which not only fictional characters experience, and it tends to resist solemn or over-deliberate investigation, so that even theorists as redoubtable as Freud or Bergson can at times arouse an unintended quiver of amusement. I readily acknowledge that should my own more hesitant conclusions in this matter turn out to be self-defeating, then it follows that the laugh's on me.

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1

The Matter of the Work

It is useless to base any system on a human being.

Henri Bergson, *Laughter*

'Did you ever hear the like of that for impertinence?' Mrs Parsons wound up, brushing the crumbs from her furs.

Why is this so funny? Virginia Woolf obviously intended that it should be: its position in a passage that records the various sounds and movements in a London tea-shop is designed to produce the maximum comic resonance. Consider what leads up to it.

'Pie and greens for one. Large coffee and crumpets. Eggs on toast. Two fruit cakes.'

Thus the sharp voices of the waitresses snapped. The lunchers heard their orders repeated with approval; saw the next table served with anticipation. Their own eggs on toast were at last delivered. Their eyes strayed no more.

Damp cubes of pastry fell into mouths opened like triangular bags.

The observations are dispassionate, no less staccato than the waitresses: the process of ordering and consuming food in public is made to look absurd, since these customers are functional objects related only to what they eat. But then follows a moment of individuation.

Nelly Jenkinson, the typist, crumbled her cake indifferently enough. Every time the door opened she looked up. What did she expect to see?

Here the novelist shows her hand: she considers a character's possibilities. That definite article before 'typist' places Nelly Jenkinson in a social group, while at the same time it differentiates her from the other customers. (Had the indefinite article been used, she would have been appropriated for narratorial ends.) As to that 'enough' – it suggests rôle-playing: Nelly's actual indifference is related to a suppositious one. The rhetorical question that follows forbids any answer; at the same time it marks the writer's momentary assumption of interest in the possibility of one.

Another specific person now appears.

The coal merchant read the *Telegraph* without stopping, missed the saucer, and feeling abstractedly, put the cup down on the table-cloth.

Bless him, one thinks: the mood has become more intimate; the comical action is both personal and representative, an all too familiar mishap.

And now for Mrs Parsons, third and last and most elaborately presented of these figures. With her we are in the realm of the satirical, recipients of a pictorially encoded message. The flourish of her question, in an idiom that would be recognised by Woolf's original readers as 'not quite quite', is splendidly enhanced by the opulence of those 'furs' – note how different the effect had they been mentioned in the singular. And 'Parsons'? According to this code of discourse 'Perkins' might have been more comical; but 'Parsons', with its clerical echo and broad vowel-sound, conveys precisely the right note of complacent grandeur. The clinching comical device, however, is in the verb 'wound up'; it evokes an auditor and invites the reader's empathy. Finally, as though to underline the musical nature of the passage, there comes a choral aftermath.

"Hot milk and scone for one. Pot of tea. Roll and butter," cried the waitresses.

This little scene from *Jacob's Room* (1922) is comedic: it takes isolated objects, relates them to each other, and in so doing endows them with vitality. But whereas Mrs Parsons has been rendered as a dramatised personality, the typist and the coal merchant are, by virtue of a definite article, mere signifiers, and in conception monolithic.

The nature of a monolith

A monolith is a single block of stone, its purpose in one form or another monumental. Human ideas and institutions naturally incline to such a petrification. So do human personalities: in post-Renaissance stage-comedy we see the obstructive power of monoliths expressed through the comedy of humours. This arose from the belief that human beings were a balance of substances (melancholy, choler, blood and phlegm) which circulated in the body; and that an excess of any one of these 'humours' resulted in distorted personality. The afflicted individual was a natural target for derision, a derision whose apparent cruelty was regarded as justified by the damage which disproportion could be seen to wreak upon the harmonious operations of society as a whole. While it was the function of the comic spirit to draw attention to distortion and excess, it was the work of comedy itself to restore proportion and good order.

The nature of a monolith therefore suggests an analogy with the recalcitrant material on which comedic novelists set to work in order to elicit their world of reciprocally enlivening diversities. To judge from their recurring preoccupations (preoccupations of the emerging commercially-based society in which the naturalistic kind of English novel came to maturity), this monolithic *prima materia* is embodied in four principal human concerns, much as that of the mediæval alchemists was made up of the elements of water, fire, earth and air. It can emerge from an obsession with the *past*, with prescriptive ideas inherited from religion, parentage, environment (both physical and social), sexual rôle-playing, legislation and taboo. When any particular interpretation of these forces becomes immoveable and absolute it turns into an idol – that is to say, a limiting assertion of finality where no real finality exists. Novelists of all kinds rebel against the monolith's restrictive pressures, through one comic procedure or another attacking its usurped authority over the individual's freedom, which is also their own freedom to imagine and invent. Even while acknowledging its potent force, comedy demonstrates the absurdity of that usurpation: from the controlled ironies of Jane Austen to the rumbustious scorn of Kingsley Amis the social monolith is a staple target for English comic fiction.

The monolith likewise establishes itself in the awareness of the *present*, revealed both in a subjection to current fashions, prejudices and attitudes, and in an exaggerated estimate of the claims of personality and self-expression. The two tendencies are in reciprocal relationship: if the claims of society become excessive, then those of

its rebellious members will become excessive in their turn – in itself a matter for comedy, as novelists have realised in a whole range of characters, from Dickens's Harold Skimpole to Angus Wilson's Harold Calvert. Comedy is nothing if not self-scrutinising, its turning of the tables being in perpetual revolution.

It is natural to protest at such a constant dance of relativities: if the absolute is not to be located within human nature or human institutions, then let it be known as fate, a philosophical concept which dignifies the apparently inevitable. Once again the monolith emerges: the *future* is to be predictable; regularity, law, logical consequence, right reason are in complete control. But comedy questions even these apparently self-evident monolithic certainties. It draws attention to, and thrives upon, the factor of surprise, that element of sheer chance which upsets all sense of the dependability of a foreseeable predestination. It does not resist, but welcomes, disruptive incursions – as happens in a whole succession of fictions from those of Henry Fielding to those of Evelyn Waugh.

In doing this, comedy appears to point to a supersession of the awareness of past, present and future alike. Such a state of *timelessness*, however, is a postulate which can itself turn monolithic and impose a tyranny of absolutes that extends to prescriptive structural and categorical requirements. But this is a monolith that the more idiosyncratic novelists dismantle in the knowledge that comedy 'has to be recognised as a matrix term that embraces miscellaneous impulses, which can be sensed empirically as effects before they are regarded as intentions'.¹ Accordingly, writers from Sterne to John Cowper Powys have made comedy out of the veridical pretensions of the literary mode they at the same time master and embrace.

Comedy exposes the fallacy inherent in every monolithic interpretation of human experience: it refutes exclusiveness, points out inconsistencies, and harmonises them in a renewed pattern of relationships. It deconstructs the monolith in order to breathe life into it. By its very nature a monolith is both dead and deadening, so that we find monolithic outlooks breeding monolithic institutions, and monolithic institutions nurturing monolithic minds. In personal relationships the monolith may be detected in the self-centredness that refuses to acknowledge the autonomy of others; in social ones it is evident in the inflexible prejudice, the tabloid opinion, the defensive idolisation of the past. It is potential in the monochrome temperament and in every simplistic and compulsive attitude which inhibits personal, political and social harmony.

To perceive that static quality as comical is to challenge the monolith's evaluation of itself: what provokes the comedic action is its apparent immovability. Dickens's novels are full of examples of this process, usually through his use of the narratorial voice, a kind of vocalised Trabb's boy perpetually at his command. And if the young man Pip, encased in snobbery and all his smart new clothes, suffers torments from the derision of Trabb's boy, yet it is that very tormentor who in due course helps to save him from incarceration by the murderous Orlick. *Great Expectations* abounds in such teleological ironies.

This perception of comicality (in whatever shape – character, function, creed or social organism) is developed through a variety of procedures. The monolith can be analysed by presenting it to itself in *parody*, a mirror image which highlights its absurdities: a good deal of eighteenth-century comedy is of this kind, the tradition continuing to the present day, not only in the novel but also in the review sketch and the art of mime in musical and balletic form. Or one can dismiss monolithic pretensions more aggressively, refusing to take them seriously by outraging them in *farce*: slapstick humour is irreversible and fatal to self-arrogated dignity. Alternatively it is possible to take the monolith *ironically* at face value and thus invite its pretensions to betray themselves, the most devastating incidence of this procedure being Swift's *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of poor People in Ireland, from being a Burden to their Parents or Country; and for making them beneficial to the Publick*. Pressing the arguments of commercial logic to the limit, this pamphlet proceeds inexorably to demonstrate that the best use for the children of the Irish poor will be to fatten them and sell them off to the rich as food. The anonymous author protests his own disinterestedness: 'I have no Children, by which I can propose to get a single penny; the youngest being nine Years old, and my Wife past Child-bearing.'

But the literal-mindedness of the majority being what it is, such a methodology is always in danger of backfiring; it is safer and thus more frequent to confront the monolith openly by means of *satire*. Satire presupposes a congenial audience, and is more readily assimilable than irony – hence its proliferation in journalism and shorter forms of fiction. The detachment it involves, however, gives way to a more personally engaged exposure of the monolith's pretensions – *burlesque*. Burlesque grapples with the monolith at close quarters, both through the disrespectful exaggerations of caricature and through the outraging of good taste in 'black' or 'gallows' humour, with its element of collusive relish. (The comical anguish in Samuel Beckett's

plays and novels displays this tactic definitively.) It is possible, however, to disallow the monolith's pretensions altogether. This is the attitude of *wit*, for wit is an airy refusal of those claims, one which offers an alternative model of reality, composed of elements which the monolithic point of view keeps separate from each other: whereas farce thumbs a nose at the monolith, wit laughs it out of court. But the true fulfilment of comedy is found in the attitude of *celebration*, one which corrects the monolithic vision by allowing its claims on terms other than their own. While celebration accepts that monolithic attitudes exist, it ignores their self-referential grounds for requiring people to acknowledge that existence.

The perception of diversity

On account of its openness to on-going dissection, a novel tends to evade the solicitations of the monolithic point of view. In English fiction especially, with its diversity and its favouring of pragmatism over academic theory, the categories of tragedy and comedy are seldom exemplified in exclusive form. The number of pure comedies (as distinct from humorous novels) is not large. For if the majority of novels contain elements of the comic, the distillation of pure comedy is usually muddled by the demands of plot, suspense and theme. There are of course innumerable self-styled comic novels, but these are not quite the same thing: they confine themselves to particular aspects of comedy, being farces or satires or burlesques rather than comedies in their totality. *Tristram Shandy*, *Emma*, *Barchester Towers*, *The Egoist*, *Ulysses* may be placed in the latter category, but not *Great Expectations*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *Howards End* or *Brideshead Revisited*, rich in various kinds of comic material though they may be. Similarly, among those English novels at one time or another reckoned as canonical, not many are fundamentally tragic: *The Bride of Lammermoor*, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and three or four more of Hardy's novels, the majority of Conrad's, *The Good Soldier*, *The Death of the Heart* – not many others come immediately to mind, and even of these the majority contain elements which qualify the controlling tragic vision.

The concept of comedy being itself at the service of the comedic process, it can diversify and enrich a novel that would otherwise be monolithically regarded as a tragedy. No better instance of such a modulation can be found than in one of the earliest examples of an

intentionally tragic novel, Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747–49). The argument that the act of reading is an evaluative process in itself is certainly applicable to this monumental work, which, being written in epistolary form, comments upon its own means of progression as it goes along.

It describes an attempt to undermine a potential monolith – the absolute chastity of the nineteen-year-old heroine, the younger daughter of a mercenary and unimaginative landowning family in Hertfordshire. Her resistance to an avowed seducer, Lovelace, is maintained against all odds, not least of them her family's equally unyielding determination that she shall marry against her own interests in order to further theirs. The upshot is tragic in the fullest dramatic sense: Clarissa's rape by Lovelace results in her death of grief at this outrage to her being. But that death is swallowed up in a moral victory. Belford, her violator's comrade, undergoes a change of heart, while the ravisher himself is inconsolable, paying with his death at the hands of Clarissa's avenging champion. Virtue is rewarded, if only by its own probity.

Powerful though its tragic and dramatic aspects are, the book would not retain its hold upon later generations were it not for the comic undertow provided by the letters and attitudes of Lovelace and, to a lesser extent, of Clarissa's confidante, Miss Howe. With her high spirits, indignation at her friend's ill-treatment, and caustic attacks on the oppressors, Anna Howe provides an emotional safety-valve in the enormously protracted progress of Clarissa's story; she allows for readerly participation and for the voicing of a point of view other than the heroine's single-minded adherence to personal integrity and familial duty. But a more potent occasion for the reader's involvement comes through the collision of two monolithic behavioural compulsions – Clarissa's adherence to the dictates of propriety (taken in its most serious sense), and Lovelace's obsession with his own reputation as a rake. For it is one of the grimmer ironies of this novel that the ostensibly 'liberated' worldling should in fact be the slave not only of a need, where women are concerned, to notch up scores, but also of his self-deception in proposing to 'test' the virtue of the one he pretends to love. His personal tragedy is that he does in his own fashion love her, but is incapable of behaving in a manner consonant with what love requires. There is, however, an ambiguity attendant upon Lovelace, whose irresistibly robust and knowledgeably witty letters provide *Clarissa* with its underlying comedic element. 'Underlying', however, does not mean 'repressed': the comedy, the reversal of