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BERGSON'S THEORY OF THE COMIC IN  
THE LIGHT OF ENGLISH COMEDY

BY

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BERGSON'S THEORY OF THE COMIC IN THE LIGHT  
OF ENGLISH COMEDY

## I

From Plato onward many of the world's greatest thinkers have attempted to tell the meaning of laughter. It is not surprising that the thing has proved alluring, for whereas a true theory of laughter might add little to our enjoyment of the comic; it would, nevertheless, help us to understand the nature of life and mind. But although laughter is perhaps the lightest of human possessions, it is the most difficult to capture for examination. Neither philosopher nor literary critic has given us a wholly satisfactory account of the comic. One difficulty is that so many things are true of comedy; it is hardly less confusing than life itself.

Possibly if the occasions of laughter were the same for all men it would be easier to determine the basal element of the comic. Can any single principle explain such varied characters as Falstaff and Tartuff, or as Bob Acres and the sad-eyed fool in *King Lear*? The prosperous joke of one generation awakens no enthusiasm in the next. Pepys, we remember, called *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the silliest play he ever saw, and few Frenchmen enjoy the porter scene in *Macbeth*. *The Spanish Tragedy*, written to purge men's minds by pity and terror, now awakens only their mirth.

Nevertheless, from time to time, attempts have been made to explain the baffling problem of the comic. The latest and perhaps the most ingenious work upon the subject of the ludicrous is Bergson's volume upon *Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Bergson's main thesis is that the laughable is "something mechanical encrusted on the living." This explanation is suggested by his general philosophy. Life, according to Bergson, is a continual change of aspect; and the comic begins where the spirit no longer enlivens matter. All forms of the ludicrous are due to the substitution of the rigidity and monotony of a machine for the pliancy and variability of an organism. "The attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine."<sup>1</sup> With remarkable deftness, Bergson traces every variety of laughter to the detection of rigidity in life's flux. A grimace is funny because it suggests the rigidity of matter beneath the skin.

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<sup>1</sup>*Laughter*, p. 29.

Words are ridiculous if we try to fit an absurd idea into a well established phrase-form or to take a figurative meaning literally. The passers-by laugh at the absent-minded man who stumbles over a brick in the pavement. He should have checked or varied his movements, but, like a machine, he continued on in a straight line.

The comic intrusion of the purely conventional at the time of tragedy is illustrated by a remark of a Member of Parliament. After questioning the Home Secretary in regard to a terrible murder that took place in a railway carriage, the Member observed: "The assassin, after despatching his victim, must have got out of the wrong side of the train, thereby infringing the Company's rules."<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, Bergson calls attention to the comic in character, the essence of which is a lack of harmony with social environment. Society demands that we be alert to our immediate surroundings. We laugh at Don Quixote because his thoughts of heroes and chivalry prevent him from shaping his conduct in accordance with the usages of men. In short, we laugh at any inelasticity of mind and character as well as of body. For example, the individual who exhibits persistent vanity, is comic, because life demands the cautiousness of modesty.

Bergson lays down three principles which he regards as fundamental. In the first place, he states that "the comic does not exist outside of the pale of what is strictly human. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable."<sup>3</sup> Bergson is surprised that this important fact has not received greater attention from philosophers; however, it seems doubtful whether the observation deserves the emphasis he gives it. It is true, of course, that we must express a thing in terms that we know. Bergson tells us that we laugh at an animal only after we detect in it some human expression or attitude. Clearly the monkey amuses us because we see in it a caricature of humanity. Likewise, the frog has been found ridiculous because it suggests human characteristics. Indeed, it is probably true that no other animal has amused people so widely separated by time and space as has the frog.<sup>4</sup> In the *Rigveda* frogs appear as comic figures. Here they are made to represent Brahmins;

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<sup>2</sup>*Laughter*, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup>*Laughter*, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup>See Everett, *Poetry, Comedy and Duty*, p. 100.

apparently because the din of their croaking suggests the meaningless chant of the priests. The poet also compares the monotonous cries of the frog with the clamor of the school boys who repeat, without thought, the words of the teacher. In this burlesque hymn to the frogs, which usually has been interpreted as a satire upon the Brahmins, we read:

Resting in silence for a year,  
As Brahmins practising a vow,  
The frogs have lifted up their voice,  
Excited when Parjanya comes.

When one repeats the utterances of the other  
Like those who learn the lesson of their teacher,  
Then every limb of yours seems to be swelling,  
As eloquent ye prate upon the waters.

As Brahmins at the mighty soma offering  
Sit round the large and brimming vessel talking  
So throng ye round the pool to hallow  
This day of all the year, that brings the rain-time.<sup>5</sup>

In the Greek poem "*The Battle of the Frogs and the Mice*," the peaceful little frog is made to take the part of a warrior. It is not only its croaking, however, that makes the frog ridiculous. With us, its comic character is due largely to its appearance which suggests both human folly and human wisdom.

It is remarkable how far-reaching Bergson's theory is. In literature at least, we find that the mirth-producing animal almost always suggests some human attitude or expression. Nevertheless there are times when the human resemblance vanishes and the beast appears comic in its own right. To most people, for example, the grave and dignified cow in its own sportive mood is comical although it suggests no human attitude. We laugh when we see one animal performing the task of another—an ox in shafts or a mule running a race.

Why is the donkey generally held to be ludicrous? Do we find in him some human expression? It seems simpler to say that the donkey is ridiculous because of the contrast between the small and gentle looking beast and his powerful voice and stanch determination. Again, his ears, although they serve their purpose well enough, seem to us far too large.

Bergson, to the contrary notwithstanding, the field of the comic is as wide as life itself. People are amused by a discord in music and a lack of harmony in color. Even in the land-

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<sup>5</sup>*Rigveda*, VII, 103, translated by Arthur A. Macdonnell.

scape, we sometimes detect an unexpected image which excites our laughter. The amusing appearance of a tangent touching a circle made Schopenhauer merry and Democritus laughed at the universe.

The second principle that Bergson lays down, is that laughter is incompatible with emotion or with sympathy with its object. "Depict some fault," writes Bergson, "however trifling, in such a way as to arouse sympathy, fear, or pity; the mischief is done, it is impossible to laugh. . . . The comic will come into being whenever a group of men concentrate their attention on one of their number, imposing silence on their emotions and calling into play nothing but their intelligence."<sup>6</sup>

As laughter is a social gesture by which society avenges itself for liberties taken with it, it always implies a certain callousness, even a touch of malice. If we open our hearts to any subject we cannot be merry over it. When we turn to English comedy, however, we shall see that it is difficult to eliminate feeling from all forms of laughter.

The third point is that laughter belongs to men in groups. We all know that it takes more than one to enjoy a joke. We must be in the secret to enjoy the fun. "A man who was asked why he did not weep at a sermon when everybody was shedding tears replied: 'I don't belong to the parish.' What the man thought of tears would be even more true of laughter."<sup>7</sup>

The social significance of laughter is the central idea of Bergson's investigation. Every mode of life in its proper nature is ever-moving, never repeating, and whenever we find anything mechanical in human actions or words, we recognize it as non-adaptive and a fit subject of ridicule. Language only "becomes ridiculous because it is a human product modelled on the forms of the human mind."<sup>8</sup> If language were fully alert it would completely evade the comic. However no language is so subtle with life that it contains nothing rigid and it is the function of laughter to detect the automatism and correct it.

"Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter society avenges itself for liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore

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<sup>6</sup>*Laughter*, p. 139, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup>*Laughter*, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid*, p. 129.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid*, p. 197.

the stamp of sympathy or kindness."<sup>9</sup> It is the function of laughter to keep society safe and sane and to restrain each individual from shutting himself up in his own peculiar ivory tower.

According to Bergson, comedy occupies a middle ground between art and life. The object of true art is to give individual pictures of life; whereas comedy is concerned with types and depicts characters we have seen before and shall recognize again. "What the artist fixes on his canvas is something he has seen at a certain spot and on a certain day at a certain hour, with a coloring that will never be seen again."<sup>10</sup>

Comedy is also excluded from art because it seeks social improvement; whereas genuine art is disinterested. Art seeks "to brush aside utilitarian symbols, the conventional and socially accepted generalities, in short, everything that veils reality from us, in order to bring us face to face with reality itself."<sup>11</sup> However comedy does not come into existence until men are freed from anxiety of self preservation and regard themselves as works of art.

Bergson has shown us that the detection of rigidity is a cause of laughter. However it is difficult to see that he has accounted for the vast field of the comic. He has not told us why we laugh at the artless blunders of children; nor has he explained the laugh of victory or of pure joy. It is true that we laugh at rigidity in the midst of life's flux; but we also laugh at spontaneous actions when a certain restraint is expected. The first laugh gives us social service and the second relaxation.

The comic is often in the very opposite of rigidity; it is in freedom contrasted with the immutable laws of nature. Indeed, laughter frequently accompanies the relief from pressure. For example, Plautus gives expression to the joyous relaxation of the Roman people after the severe strain of the Second Punic War and we find a similar relief from tension in the literature of the English Restoration.

Without doubt, laughter is a social gesture; but Bergson attaches too great a significance to its utilitarian value. The fear of ridicule may force men to mend their ways; but the dread of arousing anger or pity has a similar effect. Although laughter has value as a social corrective, this is not its essential

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<sup>10</sup>*Laughter*, p. 161.

<sup>11</sup>*Laughter*, p. 157.

feature. The true comic spirit is less concerned with correction than with joy.

Bergson's illustrations show admirably how his theory works; nevertheless the reader occasionally suspects that the way has been artificially cleared of obstructions. Bergson also gives some striking examples of forcing a theory upon unwilling facts. Indeed it takes all his ingenuity to convince us that we laugh at a negro or a red nose because of its rigidity. Bergson tells us that although the black or the red color is inherent in the skin, nevertheless, in our imagination, it is artificially laid on. A black face is one covered with soot or smoke and a red nose has received a coating of vermillion. Do we not rather laugh at the red nose because it suggests a certain human weakness? Although this weakness is not amusing in itself; nevertheless it is funny to see a man unwittingly advertise his own shortcomings.

At the close of his essay Bergson finds a small place for sympathetic laughter. Like a dream, laughter brings relaxation and relieves us from the strain of living. We abandon logic and social conventions; we join in the game. We soar above the actual facts of life and laugh at them. Bergson, however, reminds us that this view of laughter is a very fleeting one; we must return to the actual world in order that we may correct its follies. But Bergson gives insufficient weight to laughter as a liberation from the hard facts of life. Perhaps in the end, laughter is this and only this.

In his analysis, Bergson has confined himself almost entirely to French comedy, particularly to Molière. It is not difficult to detect the mechanical rigidity in Molière's characters. Arnolphe's undue eagerness to protect himself from a faithless wife makes him utterly blind to the consequence of his gross selfishness. Harpagon, the miser, is unable to see the result of his action upon his son. The teacher of M. Jourdain flies into a passion just after he has shown the evils of anger. When an individual's intelligence fails to inform him of his real character, we have a rigidity that resembles physical awkwardness. It is the rigidity that makes a failing comic; even a virtue is funny if it lack flexibility. Alceste, though an honest man, is a comic character because he refuses to take the world as he finds it.

Furthermore, the plays of Molière have the social significance which Bergson calls the leading idea of his investigation.

The laugh of Molière is always directed against the wayward individuals who wander from the path of custom and common sense. The effect of his comedy is to teach us to avoid awkwardness and excessive individuality. In *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, he ridicules the ambitious burgher who attempts to rise above his station; in *Les Précieuses*, he shows the folly of distrusting plain speech and of seeking an unusual form of expression. Molière repeatedly turns his laughter upon the practice of medicine in his day. He shows us the ridiculous doctors who disregard facts and give their constant attention to form and mechanical application of rules.

The comedy of Molière is further marked by the absence of feeling which Bergson finds essential to all laughter. "Molière never wrote, nor wished to write anything but comedies which were comedies from beginning to end," says Sarcey.<sup>12</sup> Molière always amused his audience; he was able to deal with the most serious vices and still make them laughable. His laughter is unmingled with pity, scorn, or any other emotion.

Bergson's essay has admirably described the comedies of Molière. Beyond a doubt, the laughter of Molière is the "social gesture" which aims to keep society sane and safe; and, moreover, his plays are entirely free from sentiment or sympathy. Molière exhibits the high esteem for reason and the regard for men in society which is characteristic of the French cast of mind and Bergson has given him a Gallic explanation. But can his theories be satisfactorily applied to English comedy?

## II

Taine virtually tells us that the English have no true sense of the comic. If we agree with Bergson that comedy is from first to last an intellectual criticism of life and manners we must accept this opinion. The English have romantic comedies, comedies of humors, and comedies of manners, but of detached comedies, wholly of the intellect, they have almost nothing. Congreve, it is true, abstained from emotion but Congreve never truly held the English public. An Englishman perceives a comic incongruity and he will either treat the infirmity with sympathetic humor or deride it with sarcasm; he seldom stands apart and gives judgment without bias.

It is unfortunate that the word comedy must designate so many things. It may refer to the broad satire of Aristophanes,

<sup>12</sup>*Papers on Playmaking*, IV, p. 52.

the wise laughter of Molière or the gentle chuckle of a Shakespearean fool. Indeed, smiles may differ even more than laughter and tears. In his *Essay on Comedy*, Meredith has described the mission of the comic spirit. Whenever, the critic says, men "wax out of proportion . . . whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice, are false in humility or mined in conceit, individually or in bulk—the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. This is the Comic Spirit."<sup>13</sup> The first part of this quotation applies to all comedy, for the basis of dramatic comedy is the imperfection found in human life. The attitude, however, varies; the silvery laughter is not given to all. We may withdraw to a cosmic watch tower and laugh critically at mortal fumbblings; or we may feel our kinship with foolish man and laugh sympathetically at our common blunders. Again, our laughter may be combined with an eagerness to expose the meanness and dullness of men.

In English drama and other literary forms, laughter is usually mixed with emotion. It is either combined with fierce denunciation as in satire, or tempered by the infusion of positive kindness as in humor. The satirist is always influenced by a destructive motive; it is his business to condemn and reprove. However, the reformatory purpose is not the essential element in satire; the indispensable feature of the satiric spirit is the desire to deny and destroy. Pope frequently declared that he used his verse for "Truth's defence"<sup>14</sup>; nevertheless he employed satire largely to ruin the reputation of his enemies. Frequently there is far less gayety than bitterness in the satiric laugh. However, satire like all forms of art, demands a certain detachment from emotion; the satirist must control his personal indignation in order to present the victim in such a manner that he may excite the laughter of contempt.

There is a marked difference between the English and the French satire. Although the French satire is flavored with the spice of malice, it has not the malignity and scorn which characterize the satirical writings of the English. Indeed, when an Englishman writes satire, he seems to excel all the world in his bitter irony and personal rage. In Pope's clean-cut epigrams we detect an underlying malice and vindictiveness.

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<sup>13</sup>Meredith, *An Essay on Comedy*, pp. 82-83.

<sup>14</sup>*Epilogue to the Satires*, Dialogue II.

Molière ridicules the morals of his day but his laughter is marked by good nature and gayety; Wycherley's cry of rage destroys the fun of his comedy. Swift's writings were undoubtedly the expressions of a cosmic anger and he seemed eager that all men should feel the pain that he felt. Voltaire, however, probably felt no deep grudge against the universe. He was born in the century and nation that exactly fitted his genius and he clearly derived a certain satisfaction in exposing the absurdity of men. Taine tells us that the English demand that vice be not merely scratched but torn and tortured as well.<sup>15</sup> Probably no one ever felt the wickedness and the folly of men more clearly than Shelley. Yet he failed to write good satire; his cry was too shrill. He felt human weakness too keenly to experience aesthetic delight in portraying it.

In satire, our laughter is marked by a disagreeable sting; in humor, it is mixed with sympathy. We recognize in each particular error a common human weakness; and, though we may laugh gayly at human folly, we feel our kinship with the fool.

The odd characters of Goldsmith and Dickens excite our mirth, yet we welcome and caress them. The blending of the serious and the playful is rarely attained by Latin nations. Both Taine and Scherer tell us that humor as we understand it, is a product of the *triste nord*. Most Frenchmen like to keep their gayety and gravity distinct. In the English literature of mirth we find examples of detached laughter; fragments of it are everywhere. Nevertheless, there is always danger that a troublesome emotion may intrude in our gayest moments. The English comic writer rarely sustains the attitude of the calm judge; he laughs with the bitterness of Wycherley or he tempers his laughter with the kindly fun of Goldsmith.

There are scenes in Shakespeare in which comedy and tragedy are overlaid; we laugh and cry at the same time. This close connection between the comic and the tragic has puzzled men since they first began gravely to ask why we laugh. Almost any discordant thing may become the scene of comedy as well as tragedy. There is hardly a tragic incident that may not to certain persons, at certain times, appear comic. Everett reminds us that even so shocking a crime as the murder of one's grandmother and the attempt to get a price for her

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<sup>15</sup>*History of English Literature*, Vol. IV, p. 173.

body becomes amusing in Anderson's story of "The Great Klaus and the Little Klaus."<sup>16</sup> We laugh merrily at "Pyramus and Thisbe" in *The Midsummer Night's Dream* but in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare thrills us with the same catastrophe of two lovers. If we could only forget the disastrous result, we should frequently laugh at the colossal folly presented in tragedy. For example, if we could lose sight of the complete ruin in *King Lear*, we might laugh to see human weakness work out so inevitably and logically.

Truly the comic spirit demands a light touch. Push it far and the comedy crumbles into ruins. Bergson traces the genesis of laughter to the intrusion of the mechanical into action. Yet doubtless to Bergson there is no descent so lamentable as the descent from life to mechanism. Falstaff is a typical comic character, but if we watch him as old age advances and his intellect declines our amusement disappears. Comedy has been likened to a flower which grows on the side of an abyss and must be gathered with a fearful joy. The comic writer must look neither to the past nor to the future; he may present a hypocrite but if we watch hypocrisy seize upon an individual or witness the full results of his folly, we are not amused. Perhaps it is some such thought that made Plato write in the last paragraph of the *Symposium* that "the genius of comedy was the same as that of tragedy, and the true artist in tragedy is an artist in comedy also." Plato merely threw a light upon the subject and then left it forever. We shall never know what arguments put Agathon to sleep that winter morning; but the suggested relationship between comedy and tragedy fascinates and perplexes us.

It is probable that no writer ever had a keener appreciation of the meaning of comedy than Ben Jonson. He always held that the comic spirit was primarily an agent of correction and discipline and boldly announced that he would strip the ragged follies of his day "with an arméd and resolvéd hand." It was Jonson's theory that eccentricities affect the entire character and to such qualities he gives the term "humors." This emphasis of an odd and narrow trait often leaves the rest of the character somewhat shadowy and his stern determination to mend the ways of men tends to make his humor arbitrary and rigid. Dryden said of Jonson: "One cannot say that he wanted wit, but rather he was frugal of it." Nevertheless, his

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<sup>16</sup>*Poetry, Comedy and Duty*, p. 165.

comedy proves that he knew men as well as books. His appeal is to the intellect and he stands as a detached censor and wisely judges human weakness. Perhaps if his comedy had persisted we might have had a purely intellectual English comedy. But Congreve appeared and the English comedy of humors disappeared.

Jonson's doctrine that the theatre should be a means of edification did not trouble Shakespeare. We are rarely asked to be mere critical spectators and pass judgment on morals and manners. In writing his comedies, Shakespeare received little help from his predecessors and was obliged to seek his own formula. In groping for a satisfactory pattern for comedy he passes through a series of experiments. He tries in turn, witty dialogue, mechanical arrangement of situations, and the unexpected misadventure to get his comic effect. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, which is supposed to be his first original play, Shakespeare excites our laughter almost entirely by jests and witticisms. The *Comedy of Errors* was written soon after *Love's Labour's Lost* and here the fun is chiefly due to mistaken identity and complications in the plot. In the *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Shakespeare depends upon surprise to amuse his audience. In spite of the success of these earlier ventures, Shakespeare had not really discovered a framework adequate to his genius.<sup>17</sup>

It may be noted however, that, in these earlier plays, Shakespeare places himself steadfastly on the side of prudence and worldly wisdom and to some extent he makes ridiculous the excesses of character. For example, in *Love's Labour's Lost*, he shows the folly of making mere erudition an absolute end and turns the light of ridicule upon almost every variety of affectation in speech. The learning of Don Armando, "a refined traveler from Spain," consists of "a mint of phrases in his brain," and the ignorant Castard uses words and phrases which he does not understand. Even the speech of the lovers consists in conceits and pompous pendency. In some respects *Love's Labour's Lost* suggests *Précieuses Ridicules* and the *Femmes Savantes*, although at this time Shakespeare is clearly inferior to Molière as a dramatist. In ridiculing the affected speech of his day, however, Shakespeare himself is more concerned with the brilliancy of his dialogues than the veracity

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<sup>17</sup>See Brander Matthews, *Shakespeare as a Playwright*.

of his characters. But though he delights in his skill in playing with words, yet he rises above it with a laugh and leaves it "by degrees."

In his first plays Shakespeare was seeking a formula which he finally achieved in the romantic comedies. He has learned the value of contrasts, and constantly reminds us that our joys are purchased by our tears. Behind Portia, is Shylock, and dark intrigues cast their shadows upon the happy lovers. Like Beaumarchais, Shakespeare suggests that it is necessary to laugh quickly lest we weep. The ideal atmosphere of these plays is far removed from the well-defined comedy of Bergson. In these plays of forest and sea, we perceive our hope and aspiration rather than our follies and shortcomings. Our interest is primarily aroused in behalf of the love intrigues and laughter is not the end.

Shakespeare's nearest approach to the intellectual comedy is *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Troilus and Cressida*. Lovers of Shakespeare have always been puzzled by these plays, which are empty of dramatic power and repellent in treatment. There is hardly any of the joyous gayety which marks his earlier comedies. Why should Shakespeare have written these plays? John Palmer suggests that these comedies are "Shakespeare's effort to achieve a fit detachment. He is trying against the grain of his nature, to stand apart from his creatures, to play the absolute just judge of Molière, to see them in the light of simple intelligence."<sup>18</sup> And dull as these plays are, as dramas, they give an intellectual pleasure in discovering motives and discerning character. In *Troilus and Cressida*, very few of the comic characters are damaged by the intrusion of emotion. But in the end, the main character demands our sympathy. The foolishly-romantic Troilus becomes a pathetic figure at the last and the comedy is ruined. *Measure for Measure* starts as pure comedy, but it ends with a bitterly satirical cry which anticipates Swift. Shakespeare's imagination is too great; he cannot simply present folly as an amused spectator. He is impelled to explore it. The victim of our laugh touches our sympathy. The laughter of Molière, on the contrary, bears hard upon his comic characters and leaves our feelings untouched.<sup>19</sup>

Here and there on the pages of Shakespeare we find char-

<sup>18</sup>*Comedy*, p. 19.

<sup>19</sup>See John Palmer, *Comedy*, pp. 20-22.

acters whom we may judge with unemotional discretion and occasionally there are scenes which remind us of the critical comedy of Molière. However, Shakespeare's best comedies are never the "social gesture" which bring men into line. There is an abundance of humor, but little criticism of contemporary life. We laugh at the stupidity of Dogberry or Falstaff, but we enter into their folly. We cannot judge Falstaff from the point of view of common sense. The laughter of Shakespeare is not chiefly an agent of correction nor the chastiser of social lapses. Nor is the theatre of Shakespeare primarily concerned with common sense and worldly wisdom; rather is it a place of enchantment.

### III

It has been questioned whether the artificial comedy which followed the Restoration was a derivation from the French stage or a continuation of the English comedy of humors. In either case the appeal is to a small artificial set rather than to the race. The Restoration comedy presents life as a pageant or panorama; it does not reflect English nature and far less human nature. Everyone is familiar with Lamb's defense of the artificial comedy. He tells us that the life there represented bears no relation to the life we know. We are to think of the characters as denizens of a fairy world, rather than as creatures of flesh and blood. We go to the play in order "to escape from the pressure of reality."

This view has been attacked by a century of critics. Macaulay, for example, has declared with vigor and authority that the Restoration Comedy was immoral in character and intention. Dulled by common sense, he was unable to get Lamb's point of view; and moreover, he had no desire to enter fairyland. Although a student of history, Macaulay was willing to judge a whole period of English literature by the moral standards and prejudices of his own day. However as long as the Restoration writers presented dispassionately an artificial world there is no moral significance in their comedies. We are in a play mood and accept the conventions. But when Wycherley breaks into a passionate satire the fantastic world vanishes.<sup>20</sup>

Still if we admit that the Restoration comedy represents only fairyland, its value as a criticism of contemporary manners disappears. In spite of the fact that Congreve and Vanbrugh

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<sup>20</sup>See *The Plain Dealer*.

consider themselves moral reformers, their plays have no power to bring about self-correction in the spectator. Indeed, the Restoration Comedy fulfills Bergson's definition in but one particular, the entire absence of feeling. The enjoyment of the artificial comedy is purely intellectual. The writers of this period have slight concern for prudence or morality. It is amazing that they could borrow so heavily of Molière and catch so little of his spirit. Their chief interest was a verbal felicity and clever repartee.

The plays that followed the Restoration comedy testify to a natural reaction from the gayety and cynicism of the seventeenth century. Unfortunately the moral awakening was purchased at the cost of dramatic decay. The comedies of this period are characterized by sentimental affection and contain nothing that really provokes a laugh. Their classification depends almost entirely upon the dénouement, which is usually of a sudden character at the end of the last act; both probability and mirth are surrendered to sentiment.

The sentimental comedy did not yield its prominence until the days of Goldsmith and Sheridan. In Goldsmith's *Essay on the Theatre; or a Comparison Between Laughing and Sentimental Comedy*, we find a sane condemnation of the sentimental comedy. Goldsmith reminds us of Aristotle's definition of comedy as "a picture of the frailties of mankind, to distinguish it from tragedy, which is an exhibition of the misfortunes of the great."<sup>21</sup> He further tells us that in the sentimental comedy, virtues rather than faults are presented and our interest is awakened more by the distresses of pity than by the follies of men. "In this manner we are likely to lose our great source of entertainment of the stage; for while the comic poet is invading the province of the tragic muse, she leaves her lovely sister quite neglected."

In Goldsmith's two comedies, *The Good Natur'd Man* and *She Stoops to Conquer*, the excesses of sentiment give place to hearty English laughter. Nevertheless, Goldsmith's comedies can hardly be called an intellectual criticism of conduct. At times he uses the very language of the sentimental comedy; though we remain none the less convinced of his sincerity. "I love everything that's old," says Mr. Hardcastle, "old friends,

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<sup>21</sup> *Westminster Magazine*, Dec., 1772.

old times, old manners, old books, old wines, and I believe you'll own, Dorothy, I have been pretty fond of an old wife."<sup>22</sup>

Sheridan carries on the crusade against the insincerity and affectation of the sentimental comedy. But although he thrusts sentiment into the background, he never quite rids himself of it. The ending of both *The Rivals* and *The School for Scandal* is moralized. In Charles Surface's last speech, he says to Maria, "But here shall be my monitor—my gentle guide—Ah! can I leave the virtuous path those eyes illumine?" The scenes between Faulkland and Julia are in part a concession to those who preferred these stilted characters to such dangerous novelties as Mrs. Malaprop or Bob Acres. It is also true that Faulkland is a "humour" character in whom self-centered love has become comic; nevertheless, many times his language is rather an echo of the "genteel comedy" than a satire upon it.

Bergson tells us that comedy imposes silence upon the emotions; yet in the dialogue between Lady Teazle and Sir Peter we are frequently tempted to pity the worthy husband. There is a touch of true sentiment when Lady Teazle overhears Sir Peter's generous plans for her welfare.

A character is not comic says Bergson, "unless there be some aspect of his person to which he is unaware, one side of his nature which he overlooks; on that account alone does he make us laugh."<sup>23</sup> We notice that Sheridan's comic characters unwittingly reveal some characteristics of which they are unaware. Sir Anthony flies into a passion although he considers himself a master of coolness. Mrs. Malaprop prides herself upon the use of the language which she so grossly abuses. Bragging Bob Acres reveals his eagerness to keep himself whole every time his courage is challenged. Joseph Surface's love of appearances is so strong that he altogether loses sight of his character. Sir Fretful Plagiary invites with mock humility the criticism which he spurns when it is offered. It is unconsciousness of his weakness that makes the character funny in our eyes.

On the whole, perhaps, Sheridan's comedies are the nearest approach to detached comedies that we find in English literature. Although he may on occasions lightly touch our sympathies, the tears never fall; we are not embarrassed by the distresses of virtues nor are we made indignant over the vices

<sup>22</sup>*She Stoops to Conquer*, Act. I.

<sup>23</sup>*Laughter*, p. 146.

of the men and the women he portrays. Though in Sheridan's laughter we find little that resembles the stern moral purpose of Jonson, or the sound judgment of Molière; nevertheless he has a serious feeling for the purpose of his art. He himself tells us that the correction of the foibles and follies of society is the true purpose of the comic muse. He always gives us a hearty laugh at the absurdities of life.

Still Sheridan's comedy fails to fulfill Bergson's definition of laughter. He is never entirely free from the damaging sentimentality which mars all English comedy; nor does he give an intellectual pleasure in discerning motives and characters. The laughter of Sheridan is in no sense the social gesture which brings men into line. He does not deal with follies that are really harmful to society. Molière is able to clothe everything, even the affections and passions which destroy society, in laughter. This is not Sheridan's gift. Lydia Languish's romantic ideas, Sir Anthony's fits of temper, and Mrs. Malaprop's "derangements of epitaphs" are relatively harmless and accidental qualities.

"Profoundly comic sayings," says Bergson, "are those artless ones in which some vice reveals itself in all its nakedness."<sup>24</sup> With Molière "peculiarities of language really express peculiarities of character." Falstaff's retorts also receive their effect from their relation to his character; it is the living character rather than the wit which amuses us. Sheridan's epigrams, on the contrary, rarely throw light on the character who speaks them. Most of them can be removed from the context without damage to the meaning. Indeed we know, that when Sheridan was writing the plays, he frequently transferred sayings from one character to another. Lady Teazle's answer to Joseph that it meant "parting with her virtue to gain her reputation" was an original *mot* of Sir Benjamin's. Also Joseph's retort that Snake had not enough virtue to be faithful to his own villainy was first intended for Lady Sneerwell. The effect of these epigrams is to give an added intelligence to most of the characters. Probably no writer with a high regard for his characters could have been guilty of such inconsistencies.

Sheridan who has a sense of humor as well as wit tells us that he is "not for making slavish distinctions and giving all

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<sup>24</sup>*Laughter*, p. 147.

the fine language to the upper sort of people." If servants speak as cleverly as their masters and talk of Jupiter, "Heaven forbid that they should not in a free country."

To some extent, however, Sheridan's epigrams do suggest individual peculiarities. All of Joseph Surface's aphorisms testify to his false character. "With serious and noble air," he gives depths to his conversation by quoting ethical maxims. Again, Sir Peter's response to Lady Teazle is both witticism and jest of character:

"LADY TEAZLE: For my part, I should think you would like to have your wife thought a woman of taste.

"SIR PETER: Ay—there again. Zounds, madam, you had no taste when you married me."<sup>25</sup>

Sheridan's comedies may add little to the stability and improvement of society, yet he never fails to amuse his audience. He does not stand aloof from his creatures and calmly judge their failings. His survival is due largely to the animation of his dialogue and the brilliancy of his wit. Mrs. Malaprop was not the first to use verbal improprieties to produce mirth, but no one else has so ingeniously misapplied words. Nor is Malapropism all that Sheridan has given to the English language. Many of his phrases have become proverbial—for example, "Easy writing's vile hard reading," "I'm told there is very snug lying in the Abbey," and "I leave my reputation behind me." Everyone is familiar with the thrust at the bombastic tragedy:

"The Spanish fleet, thou canst not see because  
It is not yet in sight."

In the days that followed Sheridan, gravity settled upon English life and manners. Men lived in their homes rather than in clubs and comedy treats of men and women considered in groups. Also, in Victorian days, men had a reverence for nature and a high appreciation of facts and these qualities do not stimulate mirth. Among the group of major poets, it is Byron alone who sees the absurdity in life. Yet Byron's verse lacks moderation and restraint; and, moreover, he is frequently animated by personal spite. English society has banished him; and he, in turn, exposes its shams and pretenses.

In the nineteenth century the English people did not take their drama seriously. They attended the theatre "to escape from their lives" rather than to see them portrayed. For a

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<sup>25</sup>*School for Scandal*, Act 2, Scene 1.

generation *The Lady of Lyons* and *Money* delighted both playgoers and actors.

Toward the end of the century, however, plays of merit were produced and cordially recognized. In the eighteen-nineties, Oscar Wilde wrote four successful comedies. Although Wilde had vigorously protested against the current belief that "the drama's law, the drama's patrons give," yet in the first three plays, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband* and *A Woman of No Importance*, he was willing to secure success by meeting the requirements of his audience. He saw that the English public wished to weep as well as to smile and he freely employed emotional crisis and conventional expressions of sentiment. Even with his characters, he took no risks, but selected those that experience has found popular. It is difficult to believe that Wilde found much satisfaction in these plays. Surely he did not share the pleasure of the audience at the return of Lady Windermere to her husband and child. He had some consolation, however, for he was able to demonstrate his ability to write witty dialogue. Perhaps it was the public appreciation of his sparkling conversation that made Wilde bold enough to throw aside emotional appeals and conventional plots. *The Importance of Being Ernest*, though a trivial farce, is Wilde's best comedy. The laughter of this play satisfies Bergson's definition in one particular; it arouses no emotion whatever. On the other hand, it does not hold the threat of correction, which to Bergson, is the essential function of comedy.

Shaw has been called by a French critic, the twentieth century Molière.<sup>26</sup> Although such a comparison seems to exceed the limits of reasonable praise, there is, perhaps some truth in the analogy. The comedies of Shaw, like those of Molière, show the mechanical and rigid in our thoughts and feelings. There is this difference, however, Molière believes that our civilization is founded upon common sense; and in his plays he laughs at the wayward individuals who wander from the path of custom or who injure the social group by their excess of character. We learn that a man should not be too ambitious, too hard to please, or too mechanical. But Shaw attacks the normal itself; instead of living in a free atmosphere, we are bound by prejudice and convention.

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<sup>26</sup>Harmon, *Bernard Shaw*, New York, 1916.

Obviously, it is Shaw's intention to do more than merely to amuse us. "When a comedy is performed," he writes, "it is nothing to me to see the spectators laugh; I want to see how many of them, laughing or grave, are in the melting mood." Nevertheless, Shaw is unable to arouse fruitful thoughts or actions. There is good fun in the plays. We delight in their absurdities; but they do not bring the melting mood.

We might extend the list; but it is doubtful whether we should find a single writer whose plays not only amuse us, but also effectively ridicule our follies and deformities. There are modern comedies of genuine merit, which contain witty dialogues and amusing situations. But we fail to find comedy which continues comic and still "affords a moral."

Perhaps Meredith's novels, more satisfactorily than any English comedy, illustrate Bergson's theory of the comic. In his *Essay on Comedy*, Meredith agrees with Bergson in two important particulars; that the appeal of the comic is to the intellect and its primary aim is the correction of folly. Meredith restricts the meaning of the comic to those humorous works that appeal to the mind, and the names of few English writers appear on his pages. Possibly, he would have been wiser, if he had looked to his own novels for his material. Undoubtedly his chief concern is to make us think. We learn to recognize ourselves, respectable as we are, in the sentimentalist, the egotist, and the snob. Meredith tells us that "comedy watches over sentimentality with a birch rod" and keeps society pure and sane. Yet the task laid upon comedy is too heavy. It takes hardly less wit to perceive Meredith's comic characters than to present them. The great mass of foolish people must go uncorrected. It has been suggested that Meredith could have profitably followed Molière's reported custom of reading his writings to his housekeeper.

It appears that Bergson's theory of the comic admirably explains the alert and reasonable comedy of the French. But had he chosen his examples from Fielding and Goldsmith, he would have had greater difficulty in showing how his definition works. By universal consent Molière represents comedy at its best; his laughter is detached and critical, untouched by prejudice or feeling. The laughter which Harpagon excites is purely of the mind; but we find no character like Harpagon in English literature. If we agree that laughter is essentially

intellectual, then we must grant that the English cannot write pure comedy. Yet it is well for us to think of Bergson's definition. It reminds us of our neglect of the discipline, which well-defined comedy would give us. Undoubtedly, the sentimentality, which we find in Anglo-Saxon countries, destroys the capacity for self-criticism.

Yet history has shown the folly of following foreign models. If, by chance, an Englishman writes a purely intellectual comedy, it does not hold the public. Judged as a comedy, *The School for Scandal* is better than *The Rivals*, yet the latter has won a greater popularity because it is more English. But if we do not have comedies intellectually detached, nevertheless, we have our comedies and we must accept our drama as it is written. As Bergson's simple definition does not explain English comedy, we must seek further if we hope to find the clue to English laughter.

#### IV

Horace Walpole's epigram: "Life is a comedy to the man who thinks and a tragedy to the man who feels" expresses an idea that lies behind almost every discussion of laughter. Yet it does not really apply to English comedy. We remember that Walpole lived in a period when all Europe was under French influence. A Frenchman is able to stand apart as a disinterested spectator and calmly depict men's follies. But when an Englishman attempts to picture human failings, his emotions intrude. Sarcy tells us that it was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that a single French comedy presented situations in a manner to bring tears to the eyes of the spectator. "You may search all Molière, all Regnard, all Dufresny, all Dancourt, and the rest of the dramatists of the beginning of the eighteenth century, without finding in them a scene which is not in the key suitable to comedy."<sup>27</sup> In later French comedy gayety and gravity are occasionally mingled. For example in Rostand's "heroic comedy," *Cyrano*, there is a touch of sadness. Yet, the pure laughter of the Gallic comedy is rarely abruptly silenced by the breaking in of pathetic scenes.

The writers of French comedy have the advantage of using a language that is clear and rational. The clarity of almost every English word is obscured by vague associations. We value English less for the clear statements we can make with it, than

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<sup>27</sup>*Papers on Playmaking*, IV, p. 52.

for the indescribable things that we suggest with it. As Shaw has pointed out, if we paraphrase Shakespeare's "Life's but a walking shadow," it becomes absolutely commonplace and loses all its significance.

We have seen that in illustrating his theory, Bergson has held fast to Molière and Labiche where comedy is clearest. It also appears that if we transport his theory to the other side of the channel we meet a multitude of conditions not covered by his description. The perfectly satisfactory clue to the comic has not yet been found. No theory really counts for the various comic characters that we meet in the literature of mirth—Harpagon, Mrs. Malaprop, Faces, Millamant, and Dogberry. If the comic is defined anew, it should not be defined so sharply that it will be denied the range that properly belongs to it. It should be defined so that it will include the wistful smile of Cervantes at departing chivalry, "the old Gallic gaiety" of Rabelais, and even the joyful laugh of Beatrice which is described as being "so gladsome that in her countenance God Himself appeared to rejoice."<sup>28</sup>

A satisfactory explanation should make clear that any action or character is ridiculous if it conflicts with social preference. The ridiculous is something out of time and place, some error in truth or propriety. Bergson reduces all forms of the comic to the substitution of mechanism for variability; but society demands not only pliancy but a certain amount of repression as well. The entrance of rigidity into the mobility of life may be laughable but we are also moved to mirth by spontaneous action when the needs of society demand routine. Laughter affords temporary relief from the uniformities of life. With children the rigid rules are lifted by play, but older people depend upon laughter. It is a joyous relief to leave the world of rule and order and to get a glimpse of the "region where the absurd holds sway."

Bergson tells us that laughter is killed by the intrusion of emotion; but it is impossible to exclude feeling from all forms of mirth. The definition of laughter should not rule out sentiment or sympathy. Sometimes laughter is joined with the tenderest affection. For example, Plato frequently ridicules the overprominence of youth in the dialogues, yet the picture of youthful aspiration is always mingled with modesty and

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<sup>28</sup>*Paradiso*, xxvii.

sweetness of spirit. Truly Plato must have been charmed with the beauty and hopes of youth. In the *Protagoras* we remember the young Hippocrates is speaking of his own high intellectual hopes just as the morning light reveals his blushes.

It is a common tendency for writers on laughter to speak of its corrective function. Perhaps no force is more powerful in revealing false values and preserving that which the years have found valuable. It is a wise suggestion that our divinity schools should offer courses in the great masters of comedy and moreover carve upon the pulpits, together with the lean Gothic saints, the warning finger of Aristophanes and Molière. Nevertheless, laughter has a more genial social utility than mere moral purgation. To laugh together secures a unity of spirit and promotes good fellowship among men. The ethical value of laughter is not primary. It is a health-giving force bringing refreshment to the mind and body. The comic spirit does not always force us to collect follies, sometimes it summons us to play.

Bergson has emphasized the social quality of laughter, but we must not forget that there is also the individual laughter. At times, we carry our ideas and perceptions to some calm retreat and reflect upon them. There, in retirement, mirth is generated. We laugh gently at mortal fumbblings including absurdity of our own endeavors. This form of laughter is a peculiarly individual possession and calls for no response from others. It lacks entirely the corrective function of the usual social laughter. Sometimes it seems even anti-social in its character; for we often smile at customs which society has found useful. Yet in this gay solitude we learn to shape our relations to the world and to find comfort for the bitterness of failure.

A true theory of laughter must take account of its limitations. Comedy always demands an amazing lightness of touch. No incongruity can be comic to the core. It should be remembered also that the spirit of comedy does not leave the earth; it is a guide to the middle course and ends where common-sense ends. It opposes both asceticism and sensuality. On one hand, it denounces the exploitations of the body at the expense of the soul; on the other, it ridicules the attempt to shut the soul in "the splendid isolation of the mystics." Comedy is a protest against the unusual; and seeks to prevent us from too completely leaving the basis of common-sense. If we

leave the path of custom we run the risk of being ridiculous. The comic appeal is not so much to the conscience as to judgment. We do not venture into the presence of the deepest truth with a jest; nor does comedy give the vision without which life is impossible. On dignified and solemn occasions the comic spirit does not appear, save as uninvited guest. If a noble character is made ridiculous, straightway his grandeur is shattered. Yet perhaps, even here, the comic has its purpose, for it is often the happy task of the lover of mirth to show the wise man that he too belongs to our common humanity.

Humorous old Isaac Barrows has given us the best reason why the explanation of the comic has been so baffling. In his definition of the facetious he replies "as Democritus did to him that asked the definition of man, 'tis that which we all see and know, and one better apprehends what it is by acquaintance than I can by description. It is, indeed, a thing so versatile and multiform, appearing in so many shapes, so many postures, so many garbs and so variously apprehended by so many minds and judgments, that it seemeth no less hard to settle a clear and certain notion thereof, than to make a portrait of Proteus, or to define the figure of the fleeting. Sometimes it lieth in pat allusion to a known story, or in seasonable application of a trivial saying, or in forging an apposite tale; sometimes it playeth in words and phrases, taking advantage from the ambiguity of their sense, or affinity of their sound; sometimes it is wrapped in the dress of luminous expression; sometimes it lurketh under a similitude. Sometimes it is lodged in a sly question, in a smart answer; in a quirkish reason; in a shrewd intimation; in cunningly diverting or cleverly retorting an objection. Sometimes it is couched in a bold scheme of speech, in a tart irony; in a lusty hyperbole; in a startling metaphor; in a plausible reconciling of contradictions, or in acute nonsense. Sometimes a scenical representation of persons and things, a counterfeit speech, a mimical look or gesture passeth for it; sometimes an affected simplicity, sometimes a presumptions bluntness giveth it being; sometimes it riseth only from a lucky hitting upon what is strange, sometimes from a crafty wrestling of obvious matter to the purpose; often it consisteth in one knoweth not what, and springeth up one can hardly tell how. Its ways are uncountable and inexplicable, being answerable to the numberless rovings of fancy, and windings of language. It is, in short, a manner of speaking out of the

simple and plain way (such as reason teacheth and knoweth things by) which is a pretty surprising uncouthness in conceit or expression, doeth affect and amuse the fancy, showing it in some wonder and breeding some delight thereto."<sup>29</sup>

But although our theories go astray, our senses make no mistake. If I laugh the thing is funny. Laughter may elude analysis, yet there is no subtler interpreter of the human spirit. It is mere flash upon surface, an illusion of truth.

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<sup>29</sup>Quoted by Hazlitt, *English Comedy Writers*, p. 27.

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