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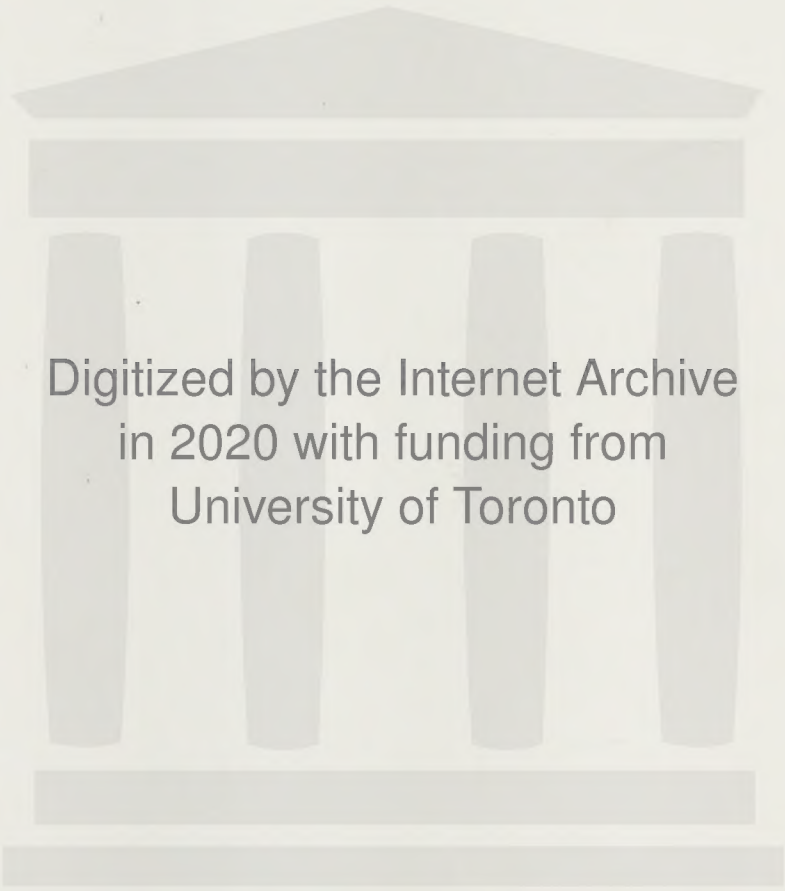
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COMEDY

THE ART AND CRAFT OF LETTERS

COMEDY

BY

JOHN
PALMER

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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THE curse of Babel only fell among men when they learned to laugh. Laughter is the real frontier between races and kinds of people. We are agreed, the wold over, as to what precisely is grievous. Babel has made little difference between the weeping of an Englishman (he weeps more comically than is reputed) and the weeping of a Patagonian. Laughter is another matter. A joke sets all nations by the ears. We laugh in different languages. The Frenchman violently explodes into laughter at something which leaves the Prussian cold as a stone. An Englishman sees very little fun in Alceste. A Frenchman sees in Falstaff no more than a needlessly brutal man. Try to be funny in a foreign land, and you will probably only succeed in insulting or disgusting or annoying or shocking someone. A joke cannot be translated or interpreted. A man is born to see a particular sort of thing; or he is not. You cannot educate him

into seeing it. In the kingdoms of comedy the are no papers of naturalisation.

Here we measure the chief difficulty of t writer who sets out to define, to describe, limit, or to classify the functions of comed How shall we play the interpreter betwe Dogberry and Tartuffe, between Mirabel a Peisthetairus, between Bob Acres and the Hc John Worthing? How shall we affirm, passi from Molière to Fletcher, from Aristophanes Congreve, from Chapman to Terence, that th men were all writers of comedy: that come is a fixed form of art to be recognised, defin and separated from all other forms? Hc shall we make good our right to insist that *T Faithful Shepherdess* is first cousin of *Lysistrat* that *The Rivals* are on speaking terms with t *Menechmi?* How shall we tell the reader th comedy, whatever the tongue or fashion of delivery, is always comedy? How shall encounter his dismay as he passes from t delicate presence of Congreve's Millamant ir the company of the Sausage-Seller of Aris phanes, or of Ben Jonson's Alchemist? Comec

seems to have learned from Congreve, is ainly a thing of manners, of exquisite politesse. hen Aristophanes catches him rudely by the ck and violently kicks him where kicks are ually bestowed. Indignantly he asks whether ese also are the manners of comedy. Or rhaps we have led him into the kingdom of olière—a kingdom of good sense, where the ating sunlight of the comic eye dispels all adows, turning men into the clear likeness of ings neatly painted upon fans in Yokohama. hen, affirming yet again that comedy is always medy, we put him to wander under the moon Shakespeare's forest or the glades of Fletcher. ow shall we answer his bewilderment as he ses himself among folk that no merely sensible an has ever seen ? If *Tartuffe* be comedy, will not exclaim with Pepys that *A Midsummer ight's Dream* is the silliest play ever he w ?

Clearly a perfect clue to the comic labyrinth not easily found. We cannot start on our way th sure signs and definitions—directions that ill carry us unpuzzled through the vast crowd

of comic figures we must meet—Rosalind a
Mrs. Pinchwife, Falstaff and Harpagon, X
thias and Lady Froth. Let us begin where t
light is clearest. Let us begin with Molière.

There was a short period in the history
Europe when everybody talked like a Fren
man. It was largely owing to Voltaire. Cath
ine of Russia read Voltaire upon taxati
Frederick of Prussia corresponded with the m
himself. Bolingbroke made him free of Engl
society. The advantage of French as a civili
language is that it enables almost anybody
explain the universe in a quarter of an ho
Under the clarifying influence of the Gal
idiom even an Englishman can settle proble
with an epigram, bringing to a decisive end t
squabbles of ten centuries in a statement as cl
as a sum in simple practice. Among the ma
English people of the eighteenth century w
realised the advantages of thinking in Fren
was Horace Walpole ; and among the many cl
things his habit of thinking in French enab
him to say was a celebrated and well-w
aphorism concerning comedy and traged

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"Life is a comedy to the man who thinks and a tragedy to the man who feels." To the man of intellect who stands aside looking critically at life as at a procession of amusing figures, life is a comedy. It intrigues the intellect. It is stuff for paradoxes. It is compact of irony and absurd mischance—a festival of fools. To the man of quick feeling, easily vibrating into sympathy with his kind, life, on the other hand, is a tragedy. It touches his sensibilities. It is full of opportunities for sorrow. It is a feast with invisible hands forever writing on the wall. Thus may we expand the cool aphorism of Horace Walpole.

It must be very agreeable to be able to divide yourself up like that—to know precisely when you begin to think and precisely when you cease to feel. Life becomes extraordinarily simple. You perceive that a fellow-creature has miserably blundered, and you say: I will think dispassionately of this man's unfortunate experience, and it is a comedy; I will laugh. Or you say: I will sympathise with this man's unfortunate experience, and it is a tragedy; I will be

moved to tears. But suppose you are not able to see things quite so clearly as Walpole, or Pope, or Voltaire. Perhaps you are not of those happy reasoners who can place man upon the isthmus of a middle state over a dish of Augustan tea. You object to Horace Walpole that, being a simple fellow, you are often puzzled to know exactly where thinking begins and feeling ends; that frequently your thinking seems to be a sort of feeling and your feeling a sort of thinking. Will it not follow that you must frequently hover somewhere between comedy and tragedy? If, in addition to being a simple fellow, you read the poets, and are unlearned in the Greek, you will object that

> "Our sincerest laughter
> With some pain is fraught;"

and that Plato, discussing the ridiculous, talked also of a certain troublesome emotion, a certain *φθόνος*, mingled with the happiest of our merriment. Horace Walpole, of course, has ready a sufficient answer: You, sir, are not a Frenchman; Shelley was not a Frenchman; Plato was not a Frenchman.

But Molière was a Frenchman; and an application to his work of Walpole's epigram will take us into the heart of his genius. It will also serve as an excellent starting-place for discussion. Walpole's epigram has always been popular; and the truth at which it is aimed has haunted critics and philosophers since men began solemnly to ask why they laughed. That laughter is primarily an act of the brain; that it is intellectual, critical, destructive, unfeeling, essentially hostile; that it is divorced in its purest forms from emotion; that it is a judgment or a comparison; something in its essence logical—these propositions are behind nearly all authoritative writing upon the function of laughter in comedy.

The latest and completest form of the intellectual theory of comedy is brilliantly expounded by M. Bergson in an essay upon laughter written only a few years ago. Two propositions concerning laughter come from his pages: (1) that laughter is critical and corrective; (2) that it is incompatible with emotion or sympathy with the object. The

laughter of M. Bergson is society's defeture against excess or extravagance in the individuing It is a social gesture. "In laughter," The Bergson writes, "we always find an unavo his intention to humiliate and consequently cial correct our neighbour." In a word, laugh ious is intelligent criticism of conduct and mann sive It follows, again quoting M. Bergson, t too "the comic appeals to the intelligence pu of and simple; laughter is incompatible w giew emotion. Depict some fault, however triflin , in such a way as to arouse sympathy, fear, ng pity; the mischief is done, it is impossible fo te us to laugh. . . . The comic will come into being whenever a group of men concentrate their attention on one of their number, imposing silence in their emotions, and calling into play nothing but their intelligence." The function of this intelligent laughter (it is the "thoughtful" laughter Meredith desired in his *Essay on Comedy*) is to bring men into line, to keep society broadly true to itself, to restrain its members from wandering out of the beaten way. "Any individual," says M. Bergson, "is

ic who automatically goes his own way
out troubling himself about getting into
h with the rest of his fellow-beings. It is
part of laughter to reprove his absent-
dedness and wake him out of his dream.
Each member of society must be ever
ntive to his social surroundings; he must
del himself on his environment; in short,
must avoid shutting himself up in his own
uliar ivory tower. Therefore society holds
ended over each individual member, if not
threat of correction, at all events the pro-
ct of a social snubbing, which, although it is
ht, is none the less dreaded. Such must be
function of laughter. Always rather
niliating for the one against whom it is
ected, laughter is, really and truly, a kind of
social ragging."

M. Bergson's essay is based almost entirely upon the comedies of Molière. M. Bergson has not explained the laughter of mankind. But he has explained the laughter of the French. Molière laughed in French, and M. Bergson has explained him in French. The laughter of

Molière is undoubtedly the social ges
M. Bergson so brilliantly describes, restra
men within the limits of a middle way.
individual, in Molière, is derided as soon a
excess of character threatens to injure the s
group. People should not be too ambi
(*Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*); too impu
(*L'Étourdi*); too clever (*Les Précieuses*);
exacting (*Le Misanthrope*). The comedie
Molière are all written from the point of
of an entirely reasonable spectator, loo
dispassionately at life from a point of abso
sanity and safety. To a merely mortal uni
the crowd there is something almost exaspe
ing in the unfailing wisdom of Molière.
consummate prudence tempts one to excla
"Can this fellow never make mistakes!" His
comic figures stand before a judge who weighs
their social value to a hair, and corrects in each
the excess which mars the polite and reasonable
citizen. Justice in the comedies of Molière is
always done. There is no intrusion of the man
of feeling or prejudice to mar the even tenour
of his comic way. The temperament of Molière

is completely summed up in the couplet of Philite :

> "La parfaite raison fuit toute extrémité
> Et veut que l'on soit sage avec sobriété."

Molière is always perfectly wise and entirely reasonable. He never fails in good sense, and he seldom rises beyond it. He perfectly fulfils M. Bergson's simple definition of laughter; and he is for that reason an excellent point of departure into regions where the atmosphere is less incumbently clear.

Let us agree to think of *Tartuffe*, *L'Avare* and *Le Misanthrope* as comedy in its purest and simplest form. Many interesting deductions will flow from this concession. There is nothing like *Tartuffe* in the English language, and there never will be. The English cannot write this pure and simple comedy. What precisely is implied in this terrible admission? Pure comedy, as we have seen, is an act of reason. Are we to assume that the English are incapable of an act of reason?

Consider for a moment the astonishment and dismay with which every Frenchman reads

the comedies and tragedies of Shakespeare. What is the secret of the Frenchman's uneasiness—an uneasiness which has steadily persisted through two complete centuries of criticism? From the moment Voltaire discovered that Shakespeare was a drunken savage, Shakespeare has stood as a monument of the gulf that divides the French and English genius. French feeling instinctively returns to Walpole's aphorism. Either, says the Frenchman, I will think about life and write a comedy; or I will feel about life and write a tragedy. I will stand apart and deride the follies of my fellow-men, viewing them purely as an intelligent critic; or I will enter into their hearts and depict their sorrows. But, the Frenchman insists, I will not do these things simultaneously. French criticism has always returned to the position that comedy and tragedy must be kept apart; that it is barbarous in a dramatist to ask for tears and laughter in one stroke of the pen. All good Frenchmen really believe that Shakespeare was drunk when he put the gravediggers into *Hamlet*, the Nurse into *Romeo and Juliet*, and the Porter

into *Macbeth*. Comedy appealing to the intelligence, asking us to look at life as a detached and unfeeling spectator is one thing. Tragedy, appealing to the emotions, asking us to throw ourselves sympathetically into the woes of life, is another. To jump from one appeal to its fellow half a dozen times in five minutes is, to a Frenchman, inconceivable.

The Englishman's difficulty is precisely the reverse. He point-blank refuses to be departmental. You cannot persuade him merely to think. He is incapable of seeing things critically, as a being of simple intelligence, for five minutes together. His feelings actively intrude. Nay, his thought is never that dry, clear thought which uses French prose as a familiar idiom. Offer life to him, comically, as to a purely intellectual spectator, and he at once suspects you of a sinister design upon humanity. Confronted with an act of pure reason, he exclaims that you are an enemy of mankind. Purely intellectual activity he describes as cynical. When, by an accident of history, Englishmen have written pure comedies of intellect, they

have been sent into disreputable oblivion. Every Englishman who knows that they exist agrees that the comedies of Congreve are heartless, alleging as a fault precisely that absence of feeling which M. Bergson has detected in the laughter of the French, and tells us is the philosophic root of the comic appeal.

Passing from Molière to Shakespeare, we come upon a group of plays which instructively serve for an antechamber between the alert and reasonable comedy of criticism, so admirably defined by M. Bergson, and the dubious comedy of English humour which we have yet to describe. Shakespeare has written a group of plays for which no sincerely English critic has been able satisfactorily to account. They are an offence to his worshippers. Shakespeare, they say, was not himself when he wrote them. Greatest of all as a stumbling-block is *Troilus and Cressida*. *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* follow hard upon. All are described as "cynical"—Shakespeare's fit of temper with the world. When the word "cynical" is used by English readers and

critics it is a good rule to suspect pure comedy ; and in this case the suspicion is almost correct. *Troilus and Cressida* is Shakespeare's attempt to write a purely intellectual comedy. These plays, far from being a fit of temper, are Shakespeare's effort to achieve a fit of 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. *Measure for Measure* opens with a promise of comedy as comedy is understood by one who weighs and pictures men with unemotional discretion. Shakespeare puts himself with Molière in the safe way of a golden mean, and brings life to the touch of reason :

Lucio : " Why, how now, Claudio ! Whence comes this restraint ? "

Claudio : " From too much liberty, my Lucio, liberty ;
As surfeit is the father of much fast,
So every scope by the immoderate use
Turns to restraint."

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In Claudio we are offered a comedy of the over-sanguine man, to which is opposed, for a judicial contrast, the comedy of Angelo the precisian. But Shakespeare was too eagerly sympathetic, too easily touched into emotion, too quickly prompted into a perfect understanding of his creatures, too speedily pricked into fellow-feeling, to sustain the detachment of a purely comic writer. Shakespeare was imaginatively too great to write the comedy of pure reason. *Measure for Measure* breaks gradually down as a comedy. Emotion surges upon the barriers erected to keep it out. They break utterly down at last. Shakespeare becomes ever more at one with the people he has created; and, at last, in a play wherein he intended to stand aloof and critically to laugh, there intrudes that most bitter cry of all flesh—a speech at the top of tragedy:

> "Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
> To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
> This sensible warm motion to become
> A kneaded clod . . ."

Shakespeare's comedy now lies in ruins, destroyed by the intrusion of an emotion too deep to live with the laughter of M. Bergson.

Troilus and Cressida is a precisely similar effort of Shakespeare to write the pure comedy of reason. Almost it succeeds. Very few of the figures are killed for comic purposes by the intrusion of a damaging sensibility. But even here feeling is ambushed in every line, waiting only to spring. Shakespeare fails, in the treatment of his principal figures, to sustain the pretence that he is writing purely as an intellectual observer. The comedy of Troilus, the man who loved too much, breaks down. He turns, a pathetic figure at the last. Cressida, Shakespeare's comic presentment, dryly observed, of the wanton, becomes, at parting, one of two thwarted and woeful lovers in the hands of time :

> "Injurious time now with a robber's haste
> Crams his rich thievery up, he knows not how ;
> As many farewells as be stars in heaven,
> With distinct breath and consign'd kisses to them,
> He fumbles up into a loose adieu,
> And scants us with a single famished kiss
> Distasted with the salt of broken tears."

Scattered at large through Shakespeare's plays are several sketches in the vein of pure comedy—Shakespeare's unsuccessful efforts to

divest himself of emotional sensibility; to stand with the critics of life, and laugh as the brain laughs in contemplation of life's absurdity. Malvolio is an instructive instance, because here, again, Shakespeare has broken down. Malvolio becomes almost a tragic figure as the laugh against him is pushed to the extreme. Molière could push the laugh against his creatures as far as hell itself (Don Juan) without disturbing the emotion of his auditors.

But let us no longer dwell upon Shakespeare as one who, even when he tried, failed to write like Molière; for Shakespeare had his reward. Shakespeare did not easily laugh with his brain alone. He laughed with his whole soul—a laughter which M. Bergson's description hardly touches. M. Bergson enables us to walk without losing our way among the folk of Molière and their English kindred. But we are lost among Shakespeare's peculiar people. Falstaff appears, larding the lean earth as he walks along; and we definitely reject all that merely French critics and philosophers can say for our help and instruction.

What, beyond all else, distinguishes the mood in which we laugh at Tartuffe from the mood in which we laugh with Falstaff? Is it not that Shakespeare, presenting Falstaff, makes us feel, even as we laugh, our common humanity with his protagonist? Here is no criticism or hostility; no abeyance of sympathy; no moral prejudice or judgment. Shakespeare's figures are not a criticism of life—no great English literature is that. It is a piece of life imaginatively realised. Falstaff is not judged: he is accepted. Dogberry is not offered as a fool to be ridiculed by his intellectual betters. We are not asked to deride him. We are asked to become part of his folly. Falstaff appeals to Falstaff in ourselves. Dogberry is our common stupidity, enjoyed for the sake of the dear fool that is part of every man. Shakespeare's laugh includes vice and folly in a humour which is the tolerance of nature herself for all her works. This humour lies at the other extreme from the critical laugh of pure comedy. It is the despair of every French critic, and it is the embracing explanation as to why Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* so magnificently failed.

The antithetic temperament of wit and humour is a standing discussion of the schools. The witty man is rarely a man of humour. He is too keenly aware of the follies of mankind; he too easily and clearly stands apart; he too consciously feels himself a spectator of absurdity to be troubled with sudden intoxicating discoveries of a common humanity with his ridiculous kind. The sense of fun in the intellectual jester—in the man from Dublin or Paris—usually stops abruptly short of a sense of his own infirmity. The man of wit—the consciously entertaining person of lively speech and quick intelligence—is usually a solemn fellow at the heart. He takes the world in vain that he may himself be taken in earnest. Mankind is upon the stage; but the man of wit is in front of the curtain. He misses no point of the comedy; but he has no part in it himself.

Falstaff appeals to us in quite another way. Equally with Othello and with Hamlet he appeals to us as all too human with ourselves. We must define laughter anew to include Falstaff. The social gesture of Molière will not serve.

It will not serve for Falstaff. Neither will it serve for Aristophanes, Rabelais, or any of that broad laughter which immemorially has shaken the world since man stood between heaven and earth.

Philosophers have talked of the incongruous or unexpected in laughter. We are tickled, they say, by a pun, because it suddenly presents to the mind two incongruous ideas accidentally united in one word. We are tickled by an impostor, because there is a continuous incongruity between his real and his pretended character. We are tickled by a man falling upstairs, because there is an incongruity between his walking upstairs, which we expected, and his falling upstairs, which is a delightful surprise. We are tickled by any sudden breach of the normal, because there is an incongruity between what ordinarily happens and the thing which actually occurs. All exceptions are funny because, in the very act of suggesting the rule, they also defeat it.

Can we make any use of this ancient idea in the form here presented and expanded ? Primi-

tive laughter has always had a way of turning things about. The Greek Phallic rites out of which grew the comedies of Aristophanes, the Roman Saturnalia, the mediæval Feast of Fools —here, at the beginning of historic laughter, we find the world put topsy-turvy for a holiday. The slave became the master. The solemnities of the Gods were at the heart of man's primitive buffoonery.

Tracking the incongruous to its origin, where do we at last arrive? What is the first of all possible incongruities? What is that mortal contradiction which contains all others? Is it not that man is an angel in the body of a beast? Not till we fell from Eden did we become potentially comic. To be more scientific, not till we left an appreciable gap between ourselves and our prognathous ancestors did we fall beneath the comic eye.

Perhaps the gods on Olympus laughed as laughter is to-day understood by M. Bergson. But only man laughs as Aristophanes or as any vulgar boy has learned to laugh. There can be no such laughter for creatures of mere intelli-

gence. The laughter of Aristophanes is for men who live on beef and bread, and suffer the tyranny of the stool. We laugh away the grossness of flesh. We are creatures of divine intelligence and immortal souls; we reach at beauty; we push spiritually towards heaven; we grasp at infinity and measure the suns of space; but still we are clay that must be voided and fed; that stumbles in the dirt and grows fat. Gargantuan laughter is man's answer to the fate which imprisoned him in blood and bone, submitting the expression of his finest emotions to hazards of the body.

Falstaff is the most vital expression in literature of man's determination to triumph over the vile body. Fatness is in a high sense the first and last joke of this immortal creature. The laughter he inspires is companionable laughter of all who wear the fleshly impediment. Shakespeare has emphasised in Falstaff through every scene wherein he figures the comic disparity between his vast bulk and his nimble spirit. He has submitted Falstaff to every indignity that flesh is heir to. Yet we laugh in-

exhaustibly at this compound of villainous diseases. Falstaff's reputed cowardice, his misadventures with the merry wives, the shifts to which he is put, the pits into which he is thrust —these are Shakespeare's way of emphasising yet further the contrast between Falstaff the merely fat old man and Falstaff the fertile and delectable wit. In him we unconsciously see the image of all mankind as a creature of divine intelligence tied to a belly that has to be fed. We see in Falstaff quick resource in a heavy person ; miraculously deft wit and a spirit unquenchable in clay that would have cumbered and thwarted a less vital being. Falstaff is the image of our triumph as an angel over our body of the beast. He is the laugh, gross and eternal, of humanity imprisoned in the flesh, only comparable in all literature with the giants of Rabelais who drowned Paris unspeakably, and ate and drank like armies.

But we may not linger here with Falstaff, as Maurice Morgann lingered, till we see him round and full, as he lived in Shakespeare's fancy. Seeing him only as the broad laugh of

humanity, persisting so long as men marry and feed, we must pass to a wood near Athens. Shakespeare's "romantic" comedies of the sea and forest are as far removed as Falstaff from the pure comedy with which we started. Again we find no laughter which cannot live with feeling or be edged with sympathy. The comic eye that watches the midsummer wanderers of Athens twinkles with kindest fun; but it loves life too well to correct the world in its folly. Even the immortals of the forest are sympathetic with our silly woes. Here are no social gestures, but human moods and temperaments imagined and conveyed in perfect speech—the radiance and love of women, the finery of youth, the wisdom of princes, and the faith of friends, all subdued to the light of the forest, to the sounds of meadow and sea. Laughter plays through these comedies of Shakespeare over all mortal fancies and feelings, stilled perhaps into silence by a walking shadow, but rippling afresh as the shadow passes. It is another land from that wherein the intellectual spirits walk in clear sun, aware always of their way and of the

journey's end. No enemy hath done this. Shakespeare's laughter is a delicate and vibrant sympathy, including every fool, seeing life itself as a misunderstanding that must pass, as a pageant of the incongruous wherein all beautifully agrees when we embrace it.

We shall not easily escape from this English country to the town where grew the comedy of Congreve. Even if we pass from Rosalind to Millamant, the breach is rude, though here it is least palpable. Rosalind is Shakespeare's portrait of woman triumphant in wit and charm; and Millamant is as nearly her sister as any creature of Congreve can be. The difference between them is the measure of the difference between the comedy of Elizabeth and the comedy of Charles. Romantic comedy yielded in the seventeenth century to the comedy of manners. When Pepys found *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the silliest play ever he saw the date had come of Etherege and his successors.

What precisely do we mean by the comedy of manners? Let us read an exquisite passage

beyond which the comedy of manners has never in any language reached :

Mrs. Millamant : "I won't be called names after I'm married ; positively I won't be called names."

Mirabel : "Names ! "

Mrs. Millamant : "Ay, as wife, spouse, my dear, joy, jewel, love, sweetheart, and the rest of that nauseous cant in which men and their wives are so fulsomely familiar—I shall never bear that. Good Mirabel, don't let us be familiar or fond, nor kiss before folks, like my lady Fadler and Sir Francis, nor go to High Park together the first Sunday in a new chariot, to provoke eyes and whispers, and then never to be seen there together again ; as if we were proud of one another the first week, and ashamed of one another ever after. Let us never visit together nor go to a play together ; but let us be very strange and well-bred : let us be as strange as if we had been married a great while ; and as well-bred as if we were not married at all."

What is the precise comic content of this passage ? Clearly we are as little called to laugh here with Molière as with Shakespeare. Here are no fools to be chidden into prudence ; no vicious excess to be coerced into a sociable conformity. Nor are we invited to laugh at the perpetual comedy of the angel discovering sudden levels with the beast, or feeling an unexpected kin with hempen homespun or with follies of the wise. We reach here another kind of joke.

The real point of the joke is that man is pretending to be civilised. This is the stock joke of the comedy of manners. The elaborate ritual of society is a mask through which the natural man is comically seen to look. The comedy here of Millamant is that she is about to be married as a woman, and that she talks of her marriage merely like a person in society. In the comedy of manners men and women are seen holding the reality of life away, or letting it appear only as an unruffled thing of attitudes. Life is here made up of exquisite demeanour. Its comedy grows from the incongruity of human

passion with its cool, dispassionate and studied expression. Laughter does not here burst rudely forth at a vision of people housed in the flesh, aiming to scale the Empyrean. It ripples forth in ironic contemplation of people born to passion high and low, posing in the social mirror. This is the real justification of the term "artificial comedy" as applied to the plays of Etherege and Congreve. We are born naked into nature. In the comedies of Congreve we are born again into civilisation and clothes. We are no longer men; we are wits and a peruke. We are no longer women; we are ladies of the tea-table. Life is absurdly repeated as a fashionable party. Love is absurdly mocked as a series of pretty attitudes and sayings. Hate is absurdly mirrored in agreeably bitter scandal. Perplexity and wonder are seen distorted in the mechanical turns of a swift and complicated plot. Always the fun lies in a sharp contrast between man civilised and an ambushed primitive creature peeping through. Artificial comedy is our holiday from the sublime and beautiful, from the coarse and the real. It is sublimation of the trivial, turning to

fine art the accidents and trappings of life. It is essential to the comedy of manners that it should be well-gowned. It is the height of the comedy of manners that its protagonists should seriously encounter trifles. When the first civilised woman protested that her lover's embrace had crushed her fine linen the comedy of manners was virtually in being. The most serious discussion of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the only perfect comedy of manners since *The Way of the World*, is a discussion between Algernon and Jack:

> *Jack:* "How you can sit there calmly eating muffins, when we are in this horrible trouble, I can't make out. You seem to me to be perfectly heartless."
>
> *Algernon:* "Well, I can't eat muffins in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them."
>
> *Jack:* "I say it's perfectly heartless your eating muffins at all, under the circumstances . . ."

Algernon: "I am eating muffins because I am unhappy. Besides, I am particularly fond of muffins."

The comedy of manners is life in terms of a muffin. Its essence and breath is under-statement. Life turns to a brilliant pageant wherein all the players are supernumerary. The comedy of manners, in a word, is the natural flower of the civilised life of leisured and clever people as it reveals itself upon the surface. There must be no loud passion or emphasis; but a harmony of agreeable voices "congreeing to a full and natural close."

The comedy of manners touches at one point, accidentally, the comedy of morals. Congreve agrees with Molière in an absence of feeling; but the agreement is only superficial. Molière abstains from passion as a critical spectator who must keep an even scale. Congreve abstains from passion as an artist of the social round, where passion, though it may rebel to judgment, may not rebel to wit. In Congreve there is neither feeling nor morality. There is

only wit, issuing from the rub of intellect and manner. The comedy of manners is "heartless," as all intellectual comedy is heartless; but it must not for that reason be confused with the comedy of morals. Virtually all our critics derive the English comedy of manners from Molière; but this would be a profound critical error even if it were historically justified. It is true that the English comedy of manners sprang to life during a period of French influence; that Etherege, its founder, was an enthusiastic lover of Molière and of France; that many scenes of Molière are bodily lifted and adapted by English authors of the period. But history cannot bridge the gulf between Molière and Congreve. Molière cares in all his plays for prudence and morality. His works will keep a man wise and respectable all his days. Congreve cares only that he shall never be suspected of caring anything at all—that he may successfully wear that attitude of elegant, faint disdain which declares that life is no more than manners and that virtue is no more than raiment. The comedy of manners touches the comedy of

Molière at one point—the absence of feeling; but at all others it flies hastily away. Nothing in the world of Congreve is good or bad, but the delivery makes it so. The root of his comic appeal is in the pretence that man has no feeling deeper than an epigram may carry; no aspiration higher than a fine coat may express; no impulse sharper than a smile may cover; no joy more thrilling than a nod may contain; no sorrow bitterer than a pretty oath may convey.

The dispute as to whether the comedy of Congreve came out of Molière or of Jonson is hardly to be seriously taken. Congreve's comedy is of no period or race. It is the comedy of a class—the class that has leisure to posture before the mirror of time, to rehearse its conversation, to pretend that form and fashion have killed reality. Congreve's comedy was not English, not because it was French, but because it was not national at all. It was written by gentlemen amateurs projecting on to a stage which lived upon their patronage an image of their social adventure. It was not French, because it was cosmopolitan. For the same good reason it was

not English. Certainly it cannot be said that the plays of Congreve struck an English vein. The English playgoer turned from them almost as soon as they were written. Congreve has never faced an English public, nor will he ever face it. He faced an audience of gentlemen, who were equally at home anywhere. We shall shortly see that as soon as the English theatre ceased to be an enterprise run by gentlemen for gentlemen, the comedy of manners was destroyed in favour of Vanbrugh's fellowship and Farquhar's nature.

Congreve's comedy was an episode in our dramatic history, and in some ways it was a mischievous episode. He left to his successors a heritage they could not intelligently administer. A national English comedy might conceivably have grown out of Jonson, humanised by Fletcher. But Congreve killed the comedy of "humours" and the pastoral comedy of pretty feeling, putting in their place something the English have never understood and were unable to continue. Jonson's comedy of "humours" was a comedy of stage types. It was an intellectual comedy of morals of the sort

we have described in Molière; but it was relieved by the broader comic element we have found in Falstaff. Had the comedy of humours persisted, it would have shed its intellectual and critical spirit (Ben was even in his popular time less loved than respected); and would have bequeathed to the English theatre a formula into which our comic dramatists could have poured fun and feeling, laughter and pathos, after their muddled hearts. But Congreve intervened, and from Congreve English comedy made a false start into a foreign wilderness.

What precisely was the mistake of Congreve's successors? We have seen that the essential quality of this Carolingian comedy was that it should be empty of moral meaning and empty of emotion. It rested upon a refusal to take the world as seriously as a moralist or as a man of feeling needs must take it. Unfortunately the English comedy which followed Congreve was modelled upon him without any very clear understanding of his achievement. Vanbrugh and Farquhar tried to turn the comedy of manners into something entirely different with-

out in the least realising what they were about. They tried to introduce morality and sentiment into a comedy which was a non-moral and an artificial pageant of agreeable attitudes. The result was to turn Congreve's moral indifference into something actively disgusting and to disturb the fun inherent in Congreve's conception of life as a procession of people entirely civilised. In place of Congreve's perfect comedy of manners we have an indescribable comedy of conflicting moods and intentions. Too many critics have praised Vanbrugh and Farquhar for bringing back nature into English comedy and restoring its moral tone. Anyone who has lived intimately for an hour with Congreve knows how utterly wrong this is. The comic appeal of Congreve rests upon the pretence that nature has been driven out; that man is emancipated from her rule. Part of this fundamental joke is the derivative absurdity that people are neither good nor bad. They are only witty. Deliberately to improve Congreve by invocation of nature and morality clearly destroys him. Farquhar took a comedy whose spirit was per-

fectly expressed in the last encounter of Mirabel and Millamant, and grafted upon it a comedy whose spirit hovered uneasily between delight in the escapades of his wicked heroes and a desire to justify them as people admirably suited for the normal duties and pleasures of English family life. The main result, equally for Farquhar and his successors, was that they became intellectually contemptible without finding a sincere emotional utterance. Even their feeling is false from the effort it cost them to express it in unnatural terms. The degradation which ensued has to be concretely inspected before it can be believed. Farquhar, who has written some of the most delightful comic passages in the English tongue, sometimes fell into depths unplumbed even in the hybrid comedies of today :

Enter HERMES WOULDBE *unperceived.*

Herm. Would. : " In tears ! perhaps for me! I'll try."

[*Drops a miniature, and goes back to the entrance and listens.*]

. . . . .

Constance : "What's here! (*Takes up the miniature.*) Ha! see, cousin—the very face and features of the man! Sure, some officious angel has brought me this for a companion in my solitude! Now I'm fitted out for sorrow! With this I'll sigh, with this converse, gaze on his image till I grow blind with weeping."

Amelia : "I'm amazed! How came it here?"

Constance : "Whether by miracle or human chance, 'tis all alike; I have it here; nor shall it ever separate from my breast. It is the only thing could give me joy, because it will increase my grief."

Herm. Would. (*coming forward*) : "Most glorious woman! now I am fond of life."

This is the strain—false and unrealised—that has persisted in English comedy to this day as a result of trying to force sentiment into alliance with mockery and indifference. It spoils the comic form into which it is compelled against the hair; and it can come to no reasonable

fruition of itself, set there to grow in a foreign soil. It merely mars the witty company it keeps.

How Vanbrugh and Farquhar killed comedy in England; how Sheridan was her body-snatcher, and Goldsmith a fortunate accident, will again be touched on when at our journey's end we ask why comedy to-day is virtually extinct. There is yet another province to invade.

It is a natural result of the refusal of the Englishman to laugh simply as a detached censor of public morals, intellectually aloof and wisely judicial, that, when at last he essays the satirical vein, he passes all mankind in ferocity. His comedy, when it becomes critical, becomes bitter. An Englishman undertaking to be a critic of his kind feels compelled to fortify himself with an animus. There is in the critical laughter of an Englishman a personal rage with the object of his ridicule. He is incapable of a disinterested hostility. He cannot like Molière hate an impostor with a hatred purely detached. He does not understand the purely intellectual passion of a simple observer. When he laughs

critically, he laughs with Swift and Wycherley and Chapman. He stifles his anger, but dips his pen in gall. His comedy becomes an indictment—passion stilled into a cutting irony, coldly passionate, mercilessly twitching away the garment and exposing the shame of his victim. The finest masterpieces in this kind of comedy are found among the Elizabethans. Perhaps the finest of all is Chapman's *The Widow's Tears.* The most brutal of all is Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer.* At its height this type of comedy rises far beyond the levels where Molière inhabits. *The Widow's Tears,* for example, penetrates to the heart of our human comedy. It is irony made visible. Its greatest scenes, deplored by all polite essayists to whom these comedies have been shamefully abandoned, disgust only those who are afraid to see life as an excellent nettle and to grip it hard. But there is another side to our English satiric comedy. Where it is the fruit of an honest and simple character looking things in the face, seeing with fearless eyes nature stripped, cruelly naked, we have in *The Widow's Tears* a master-

piece of comic irony. Where, on the other hand, it is the fruit of a malignant puritanism, dredging into the filth of human nature to feed its disgust, unveiling our secrets with a prejudice to find them hideous, we have in *The Plain Dealer* an abominable caricature of life's justice. From a hatred of life and a revolt against the power of the earth no art can grow. Every artist, in spite of himself, is a positive fellow. He believes in the earth, even though he beats it in despair. He pierces into the hearts of men, because fundamentally he knows he will find there nothing he cannot face. Wycherley was not of this great company. His deliberate essay in satire is a stab in the dark at mankind, a cry of rage that means no more than that an angry and bitter man is reviling a disagreeable image of his own devising.

We have wandered now too long at ease among the provinces of comedy. It is time to ask what principles ensue for the benefit of comedy to-day. Except for Wilde, no name more modern than Sheridan has yet been mentioned. Neither precept nor example has yet

been adduced to help the modern Englishman to smile intelligently in his comic theatre. We have yet to see how it strikes a contemporary. It is, of course, impossible to discuss at large the achievements of the great modern European writers of comedy—Tchekoff, Hamptmann, Ibsen, Schnitzler. It would require more than this short epilogue of a desultory essay. In these few remaining pages let us quite simply ask whether a moral cannot be drawn for our English comedy to-day from the comparison already so obstinately suggested between the comedy of criticism and the comedy of humour.

If there be anything in our analysis of the English temperament, in the contrast we have discovered between the laughter of Molière and the laughter of Shakespeare, it should follow that English comic writers would be wise to leave purely intellectual comedy out of their reckoning. We have seen that even such English comedy as brings the world to judgment is touched with passion, that it turns naturally to irony, and that irony is a resource of the passion-

ate man. He calls down his climbing sorrow, but it works beneath his smiling. English critical comedy will ever be clouded with emotion. It persistently contradicts the aphorism of Walpole, the theories of M. Bergson, the need of the Latin mind to stand safely from the victims of ridicule and laugh intellectually in their despite. It is useless for the English comic theatre to strain, as lately it has strained, after foreign models, and to stand upon pure reason. Its inevitable failure in this direction is already written. The English comic writer who essays intellectual criticism in comedy must rise to inaccessible heights of laughter whereon comedy and tragedy meet above the reach of ordinary men; in a word, he must rise to the heights of a comedy like *The Widow's Tears*—or he will sink to utter ruin. Let only the giant who is passionately driven to that mountain-top dare brave it. The normal English practising playwright of this generation were best to avoid all laughter at humanity's expense.

Let him be content to create again the comedy of humour. It is his natural manner. Since the

Englishman is incapable of an act of reason let him embrace his destiny, deny in the face of Europe that thought and feeling are divisible, proclaim that kinship with the fool is a first necessity in the painting of folly, that it is the author's *métier* to love whom he chasteneth, that his model shall be Shakespeare's way with Hermia and Rosalind, not Molière's way with the *Précieuses Ridicules*. Only when the English comic writers honourably consent to surrender their strictly intellectual pretensions as disciples of Molière and Ibsen shall we restore sincerity, consistency and vigour to English comedy. The mischief is that English dramatists have from the time of Vanbrugh insisted upon learning in an unnatural school. Vanbrugh and Farquhar found in the English comedy of manners a form perfectly adapted to the expression of the "heartless" attitudes of Etherege and Congreve. They accepted a form which had perfectly served the purpose of their predecessors and turned it to purposes directly antithetical and destructive of its spirit. Congreve's plays, for example, were based upon a deliberately

unemotional treatment of sex. There is no sex feeling—no appeal to Aphrodite in the plays of Congreve and Etherege. On this depends the whole force of their comic appeal and their moral harmlessness. When Vanbrugh and Farquhar introduced passionate love into these plays they used for their purpose a vessel which would not contain their liquor. What Vanbrugh and Farquhar did with Etherege and Congreve, every Englishman to-day who writes sex plays for an English theatre does with his French models. He unintelligently accepts a stock foreign formula, and wrecks it utterly in the application. Vanbrugh and Etherege introduced into the ingenious hazards of Congreve's mechanical plots a vein of sentimental and moral reflection that turned Congreve's beautiful puppets into tiresome and extremely crude imitations of the English taxpayer. Similarly, to-day, an English adapter, working from French models utterly unsuited to authors teeming with morality, sentiment and romantic idealism, produces farcical comedies and comical farces which are the despair of every critic who desires

fitness and correspondence between the form of art and its content.

Consider more particularly the theme of which nine-tenths of the comedies produced in London to-day are wholly commonplace variations—the theme of sex. There are several ways of dealing comically with sex; and English comedy usually falls between them all in helpless confusion. There is the Grangousian way of treating sex as a perennially gross accident and necessity of the flesh—the capital instance of our damnation as immortal spirits compelled to utter ourselves grotesquely in blood and bone, but finding in that damnation a way of laughter whereby to accept it. This is the comic way of all that broad, intimate comedy of life which now is no longer printed, but lingers still in every house where men and women live with the barriers down; lingers too in every boudoir and smoke-room where women or men find severally their honest fun. Such treatment of sex peeps furtively out of our comedy; but our authors are too much afraid of it to turn it to any fruitful purpose. Falstaff no longer

treads the English stage save as an historic ghost ; and it is at present useless attempting to recover him. Some day, perhaps, when the theatre once more believes too fervently in the souls of men to be afraid of their bodies, Falstaff will come back to us, speaking the language of a new century. For the present universal vulgar comedy is extinct.

If sex be not comically treated in the fashion of Gargantua's birth, we are driven next to the modern way of the Palais Royal. We have only to understand why seventeenth-century England and modern France have perfectly succeeded in this particular comic vein to realise why English authors to-day invariably fail. The comedy of sex in this kind rests, roughly, upon an assumption which no good modern Englishman writing for the modern English theatre dare honestly and without veiling accept — the assumption that men and women are polygamous by nature and monogamous by necessity. If this assumption is to be taken as a joke and lead to laughter, we must clearly avoid anything in the way of emotion or romance. The

comic treatment of sex in social comedy must be passionless. In a comedy of sex there must be no sex feeling. The infidelities of a husband are laughable only so long as they serve as a conventional formula for as many comic accidents, situations, difficulties, evasions and devices as can be crowded upon the stage in a given time. Breaches of the seventh commandment are only funny so long as they are never serious. This may sound like a pleonasm ; but it is rarely realised by English authors who write the modern comedy of sex. They do to-day with their French models precisely what Vanbrugh did with Congreve. Vanbrugh found a comedy of sex, dryly conceived, entirely unemotional, Aphrodite not admitted, sex used merely as a comic convention upon which an ingenious plot was able to turn. He found in his models stage-directions, such as *Offers to throw her down*, meaning no more, so far as sex excitement went, than *Walks left centre*. He found a comic hero tumbling the wife of his friend with as little sex significance to the deed as though he were tumbling upstairs or losing his watch

and chain. Vanbrugh accepted this comic machinery, but turned it from the colourless, dispassionate purpose it had served to something wholly different. Congreve's witty hero, neither good nor bad, glad nor sorry, becomes in the plays of Vanbrugh and his successors a man of like passion with ourselves instigating us actively to sympathise with his seduction of a pretty woman. Congreve's witty heroine, neither moral nor immoral, chaste nor charitable, becomes a woman yielding to temptation whose melting mood we are invited to share. Congreve's indecencies were witty and agreeable postures of a puppet folk. Vanbrugh's indecencies are Aphrodisiac. Congreve treated sex as something dryly impersonal. Dr. Johnson was wrong when, morally indignant with Carolingian laxity, he said that adultery freely took place in the comedies of Congreve as part of the action. As well talk of adultery between Dutch dolls as between the men and women of the comedies of Congreve. Sex in Congreve is a battle of the wits. It is not a battlefield of the emotions.

Congreve, in a word, knew what the modern French comic writers also know—that any suggestion of love as an individual and romantic passion between people presented sympathetically destroys the comedy of sex. The modern English adapter of French comedy, looking with an English and a watery eye upon its ingenious hazards, sees men and women whose course of true love never did run smooth where their French authors saw only agreeable figures of fun. The romantic touch of an English word, the sentimental touch of an English player, the eagerness of every English audience to believe that charity covers a multitude of sanguine misdemeanours—these combine to make of an honest French comedy of sex an unspeakable compound of villainous suggestions. The result is only a little less terrible when the English authors, instead of adapting French plays, write according to French forms and ways. Our native English comedy to-day is not natural to the English temperament. It has no reference to anything which the English author has to express. The French employ it to

convey a purely dispassionate comedy of sex which no Englishman is capable of reproducing ; and Congreve employed it to convey a comedy of manners which has only once been repeated since Congreve wrote *The Way of the World*. The modern English author seeks to employ it for a comedy of humane sentiment and domestic humour which, being directly contrary to its original purpose, it invariably spoils. The hero of French comedy is the protagonist of a fantastic Alsatia where the decalogue is suspended. The English author takes this pleasant person, and presents him as a moral casuist, breaking the laws for our fun, but tediously explaining that, being not so bad a fellow after all, he is the most eligible suitor of the play for a virtuous and happy marriage.

It is pitiful how obstinately the English comic theatre has stuck to a formula it has never learned, and will never learn, to use. English people in a theatre try harder to be wicked than any decent citizen has ever tried to be good. Vanbrugh did not know that Congreve's heroes were neither good nor bad. He thought they

were bad ; but they were the fashion of his early days. So Vanbrugh took them ; put in a few extenuating words and circumstances ; and offered them to the English public to be morally condoned. The English public fastened upon the extenuation and ignored the rest. They soon got used to pretending that they liked this naughty fellow, and allowed him at the last without misgiving to embrace the prettiest woman in the play to a curtain of slow music. The habit has persisted to this day. Sheridan spoiled his genius for comedy by carelessly complying with the fashion. He found comedy a tumbled ruin—Farquhar's heirloom. Instead of clearing the ground, and building a house for his needs, he adapted the ruin and spoiled his genius. His plays are a perplexing blend of the dispassionate and the sentimental. His moods and scenes jostle like strangers in a crowd. He blindly accepted a convention and worked carelessly within it at half pressure. This applies less to Goldsmith ; but Goldsmith's triumph was strictly personal. He left no model and he did not find a disciple.

Comedy

For two centuries English comedy has lived in a foreign house. Wilde found it still fumbling with a formula which baffled it. Wilde wrestled with this formula through three evil plays—plays full of absurd contradictions and miscarriages—emotional crises alternating with a comedy recalling Congreve in its holding of emotion at arm's length. At last Wilde, in the teeth of his impossible inheritance, flung up the pretence that he was an emotional Englishman, and worked the pure formula of Congreve in *The Importance of Being Earnest.* Wilde found his way out of the confusion of modern English comedy, but he did not emerge at the English end. English comedy has to take the opposite direction. Wilde eliminated the sentiment and sympathy with which he had permitted his earlier plays to throb, because he instinctively knew that his sentiment and sympathy were false. Most of our English authors to-day know that their sentiment and sympathy are true, and that these precious qualities are finding only an imperfect medium in the comedy they affect to write. These authors must eliminate

the pretences they inherit from Congreve and the Palais Royal.

It must not be imagined that the comedy of sex alone is affected. Sex is but an instance. The English attitude towards the whole of life is emotional and sympathetic. The English are incapable of intellectual detachment. They are uninspired by the pure fantasy of a world where the emotions of every day are suspended. When we create a fairyland, the fairies are of our own earth. Titania and Oberon echo the discords of human love; the malice of Caliban reverberates in the cavern of our primitive and passionate selves; we desire with Bottom in the ass's head to be scratched, to eat heartily of wholesome and sweet hay. Conceivably we may repeat the comedy of manners as Congreve conceived it; but we shall repeat it only for the delight of a leisured few who are able to live their comedy in places where life passes as a lively pageant of social and intellectual encounters; but for English people at large we have to take up the heritage of Shakespeare, to abandon our fruitless effort after the pure comedy of reason, to

let our laughter freely flow from a sense of our common humanity with fools. Where Shakespeare failed, the modern Englishman will not succeed. He will never write intellectual comedy according to the intellectual formula ; and, were he to succeed in writing it, he would not obtain an audience.

Possibly it is a misfortune that Great Britain is an island ; but it is not wise to rebel against our destiny. Insular we are, and insular we shall remain so long as we have a national temperament and a national art. English comedy cannot successfully walk in the sun. It suspects the clarity of good prose. Pure comedy is a foreigner and will not be naturalised. English comedy, indeed, is like English prose—it is not the pure and simple thing. There will be simple comedy in England when there is simple prose. Are we to wait and hope for this day, or are we peacefully to rest poetical ?

What precisely is this proffered choice ? It is a choice between selling our birthright for the privilege of being an inferior foreigner and accepting the heritage of the greatest names of

the greatest extant literature in the world. It is the glory of our English tongue that it is hardly possible to make with it a plain and intelligible statement. There is not an English word unclouded with an association, an image, a suggestion grasping at the indefinable and troubling its simplicity. A Frenchman can say what he means: he has evolved the art of writing plain French. An Englishman cannot say what he means: there is no such thing as plain English. A Frenchman cannot catch at the infinite in harmonies and rhythms of speech, in words that are steeped in centuries of vague emotion, in lines that beat with a rhythm of the feet of expired generations. His verse is simply better prose than the prose he usually writes—more clearly and neatly cut. His Alexandrine is an excellent device for the conveying of good sense, diaphanous and transcendental. He says only what is worth saying and what is intelligible. The Englishman, on the other hand, cannot clearly say anything that is worth saying unless it be too deep for words.

Comedy

It is impossible to understand an Englishman unless he is saying something so obvious that it need never have been said. As soon as he begins to say something worth saying he becomes incoherent. His prose when it is worth reading is not prose at all. He cannot speak rationally of love or hatred or jealousy. An aphorism does not express him unless he is pretending to be continental. He cannot talk; he can only sing. Sainte-Beuve talks clear good sense about books and people; but Charles Lamb hums a jolly tune. Molière clearly explains the jealousy of Arnolphe; but Shakespeare sings the jealousy of Leontes. If we are to write pure comedy, we must find another language. Only a foreigner can clearly express anything really important. An Englishman, if he is not a genius, can only feel unutterable things, say they are indescribable, and leave them to the poets.

Ibsen and Molière can put together their comic creatures, adding trait to trait, presenting them for our intellectual inspection, talking of them in excellent prose, leaving nothing in doubt,

defining all things. We shall not receive their works. We know instinctively that things which can so clearly be expressed and understood are not worth expressing or understanding. Ibsen presents us with a provincial interior of which every detail is faithful and well conveyed. We turn away, untouched and cold. But when Shakespeare puts the content of this painful comedy in five lines, we brood ecstatically :

> "To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time ;
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death."

The intellectual content of these five lines is commonplace. Everything English that can be clearly expressed is commonplace. Yet, though Ibsen has presented this petty pace from day to day with an intellectual clarity, a reasonable force and coherence that provokes our admiration, we know that Shakespeare's commonplace is better. Shakespeare's lines are commonplace prose ; but they are magnificent poetry. We

know that in all the English utter the real content of their words is not in the things they describe and define, but in the indescribable and indefinable things they suggest.

We can only accept the position that pure comedy alone is the daughter of Thalia, if we also deny that the English can, except by accident, achieve it. If comedy, first to last, be the social gesture of M. Bergson with which we began, if it be only the thoughtful laughter of intellectual people desired by Meredith, if it be pure reason in pure prose, then let the English theatre shut the doors upon its comic dramatists and not suffer them to play the fool even in their own house. But if we admit that English laughter lives in good fellowship and in the shadow where walk the English poets, then let us accept our inheritance in Arden, turn from our doors the foreign invader, and insist with Shakespeare that, even as we watch the comedy of our petty human paces, only such things are worthy to be said that cannot clearly be said. Let us continue to laugh without exactly

knowing the reason. Let us insist that reason has no seat in this distracted island; that an Englishman is either a genius or a fool; that, even when an Englishman is a fool, he usually fits the celebrated definition of a good Tory: He is one of those d——d fools who are usually right in the end.

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