

ROGER B. HENKLE

Comedy and Culture

England 1820-1900



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TO MY MOTHER
AND IN MEMORY OF MY FATHER
FOR THEIR LOVE
AND SUPPORT

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Preface

I am indebted to Brown University for several summer stipends that made possible work on this book, and thus indebted to Richard Salomon, whose generosity provided for the stipends. I wish also to acknowledge the assistance of the staffs of the John D. Rockefeller and John Hay Libraries of Brown, the Reading Room of the British Museum, and the Widener Library at Harvard. The following journals have kindly granted me permission to reprint, as part of chapter five of this book, portions of my articles: The Virginia Quarterly Review (Winter 1973) for "The Mad Hatter's World," Critical Quarterly (Summer 1974) for "From Pooter to Pinter," and MOSAIC (Summer 1976) for "Spitting Blood and Writing Comic."

There are several people whom I particularly want to thank for their support during the writing and consideration of this book. Jerry Sherwood of Princeton University Press has been a deeply appreciated source of guidance and confidence from the first moment of its submission. My colleagues William Vanech and Robert Scholes have kept the faith. Dana R. Buchman not only gave me help with the book but also enthusiasm and continuing commitment to it which I have greatly appreciated. Tam Curry of Princeton University Press has done a splendid job of editing. And of course, my children Tim and Jennifer must be thanked for putting up with everything.

I told the students in my classes on British comic writers at Brown University that I would follow standard professorial procedure: I would appropriate all their ideas and then thank them for being "a valuable sounding board" for my thinking. They were a valuable sounding board, though it is possible that you may not think there is enough in here to have been worth stealing in the first place.

Three people are owed especially profound thanks. First, Donald Gray of Indiana University, whose readings of my book manuscript were a model of critical professionalism. Rarely does one have a reader who devotes as much attention to every aspect of argument, evidence, and expression, whose suggestions are so "right," and whose appreciation for what I am trying to do is so gratifyingly clear. He has guided me in making a number of important changes in the presentation of this book.

*Ian Watt of Stanford has exercised the most significant intellectual and critical influence on my work. Not only is his *The Rise of the Novel* the inspiration for all studies in literary developments in a social context, but his wisdom about approaches, premises, and interpretations has been invaluable to me. I suspect I am no longer even conscious of the extent to which I have drawn upon his rich appreciation of English literature, especially the comic novel, or upon his wit and perception, but I am distinctly aware of how much I owe him for his support, generosity, and shrewd insight.*

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Carol, who has encouraged and sustained me in the long years of work on this book. I have appreciated her faith in me more than I can say, and she has been a marvelous source of perspective and common sense. Of course, there have been some incidental benefits to her. Occasionally, when I paced around expounding to her my latest Great Thoughts about comedy, she found these insights so stimulating that she fell asleep.

Comedy and Culture

Introduction

The great superiority of France over England is that in France every bourgeois wants to be an artist, whereas in England every artist wants to be a bourgeois.—*Oscar Wilde*

The genesis of this book lies in an observation by the British critic L. C. Knights that “profitless generalizations are more frequent in criticism of comedy than in criticism of other forms of literature.”¹ Knights made that remark in 1933, before the rich and valuable studies of comedy by Northrop Frye, Susanne Langer, and Arthur Koestler were published, so the indictment is less valid than it once was. But the premise of his complaint still holds: most of what has been written about the nature of comic expression neglects the literary, individual, and social contexts within which that expression occurs. We still tend to speak about comedy as a general concept, an idea, or a theory that somehow may be applied to writers as diverse as Rabelais, Jane Austen, and Kafka. We embrace such broad notions as the “comic rhythm,” the “mythos of comedy,” or the “comic spirit” and then struggle to adapt them to individual works of various tones and manners, of various times and cultures. The general concepts are undeniably provocative; and they enable us to identify the larger structural patterns and attitudes of characteristic comic works, such as *Tartuffe*, *Don Quixote*, and *Huckleberry Finn*. But they do not account for the perceptible differences in the nature of the comedy in each

literary product. Nor do they allow us to discover why a writer chooses *comic* expression. Or why that expression should be so exuberant in some instances and so restrained in others.

The key questions that we need to ask about comedy cannot be adequately answered until we examine comic works within specific literary and cultural frameworks. We can account for the tone of a comic expression, for its manner of presenting its material, only if we can locate the writer's position in his society and discover what he is responding to, if we can understand his *use* of comedy. Abstract declarations about the function of the comic—as a means of undermining the social fabric, or conversely, as an accommodation to the prevailing social order—are relatively insubstantial unless we can watch the writer at work, maneuvering among the shibboleths and sacred assumptions of his day, coping with his own inhibitions, and breaking free into art and wit. Comedy is by nature highly self-reflexive; it operates through diversions and evasions that reflect the ambivalence or plain equivocation of the writers. Its very techniques, such as parody and paradox, betray these complex and often self-opposing impulses. It exaggerates, distorts, inverts, and plays with its material.

This book, then, is a study of comic writing along the lines that Knights suggested—within a specific social and literary context. It examines English comic writing, particularly in prose, that appeared during the years 1820-1900. I chose this time span for several reasons. The 1820s and 1830s, the pre-Victorian decades, were years of change into a new social order. They marked the acceleration of the Industrial Revolution, the period in which the image of the modern city was composed, the years in which vast numbers of people moved up and down the scale of the middle class evolving new life styles. The literary situation was unstable and reflected other spheres of instability. Against this stands a period of almost legendary solidity—the Victorian era. Though the Victorian period was a time

of considerable intellectual ferment, its dominant sense of progress and affluence furnishes a special kind of backdrop to comic expression. Finally, in the later decades of the nineteenth century, dissatisfaction, disengagement, and forms of what we have come to call "alienation" surfaced with greater frequency and growing boldness, especially among intellectuals and artists. In the 1880s and 1890s, something of the pre-Victorian dandyism and extravagance reasserted itself, but the comedy at the end of the century was agonistic, antibourgeois, and experimental.

Nineteenth-century England was a logical choice for this sort of study for another reason as well: it was one of the most fertile periods of comic literature. It was the time of Dickens, Thackeray, Lewis Carroll, Meredith, and Wilde; it was the setting in which comic journalism enfranchised itself; it was the milieu in which the tone ranged from radical cynicism to indulgent humor. Although the atmosphere was apparently uncongenial to original comic theatre, it was one in which comic prose flourished as never before.

The receptivity of the Victorian age to comedy raises issues of comedy's social workings. Martin Turnell, in discussing French literature during the nineteenth century, argues that the English differed from the French by never using comedy to attack their social institutions. According to Turnell, the English comic emphasis on affectation, hypocrisy, and eccentricity implied that the underlying soundness of the English way of life would reassert itself if excesses in individual behavior were corrected.² Turnell writes from the vantage point of French letters where the estrangement of the artist from the middle class was established early in the nineteenth century and reigned as a governing principle for Baudelaire, Balzac, Flaubert, and their followers.³ By comparison, Thackeray does indeed seem to be evasive, and Dickens too willing to gloss the evils of society in ideals of domestic virtue. Until the end of the century, though, English writers strove to speak to the

middle class and probably adjusted their comedy accordingly. Wilde's epigram, quoted at the beginning of this Introduction, insinuates that the impulse to fall in line with the bourgeoisie gripped the mind of every English wit. All the more reason, I suggest, to explore the uses of comedy in expressing middle-class concerns and anxieties.

The writers I shall discuss were all "middle-class" in family background, in schooling, or in achieved social position. Their audience was also predominantly middle-class, although it tended to divide late in the century. And they wrote essentially about their sense of position within and with respect to the middle class. However imprecise the term "middle class"—the British historian G. Kitson Clark suggests that the best definition may simply be that "it was made up of those people who thought themselves to be middle class and were allowed by their neighbors to be so, or were accused of it"⁴—as we examine the comic expression of the Victorian period, the term will appear to comprise a certain set of concepts about one's positions and aspirations. Indeed, the differentiating factor between middle class and lower class may be that quality of *Angst* about one's possibilities, one's failures or dissatisfactions, or one's life style that makes up so much of comic expression.⁵

Let me also say that I am well aware of the dispute among sociologists of literature over the question of how representative artists are of their social positions or the attitudes of their social class.⁶ I must stress, however, that it is not my objective to try to define the complex attitudes of the English middle class through the expressions of these writers, nor even to assert that they are adequately representative of all the aspects of that shifting, multifaceted body. My objective is to define the workings of comedy—its operations and its internal uses by a group of writers who, however influential they may have been (and surely Dickens, Thackeray, Carroll, and Butler were highly influential), were engaged in expressing what they perceived to be the social and cultural concerns of the time. Because it is

comedy we are exploring here, the crucial factor is the *writer's* perception of what constitute middle-class cultural concerns or attitudes—how he defined those values and modes of living and how he responded to them.

Appropriately enough, it is also the writer's attitude that determines when a work is comic. Most of the theories of comedy—those of Freud, Langer, Henri Bergson, Koestler, Meredith—speak as if it were the attitude of the audience that is the ultimate determinative factor. Clearly comedy must have an attuned audience (and in many instances, as Meredith, Freud, and Bergson insist, a highly sophisticated audience), but the disparities among what men find amusing are so great—especially in the last two centuries when we are being asked to laugh at human wretchedness and grotesquerie—that audience response serves as a highly unreliable criterion. One man's rich human comedy can be another man's death of the soul. Consequently, all theorists must look as well for some constants in form (such as Frye's opposition between "free" and "blocking" characters) or in behavior (such as Bergson's "mechanical" encrusted on the "human"). *The* critical factor, though, is the attitude toward the subject matter that is transmitted to the audience by the artist. An assessment of the attitude, almost the intention, of the author, can thus be postulated from such admittedly elusive factors as tone, strategy, and intensity.

We can determine that an author's attitude is "comic," in my definition, if he has not approached or treated his material in a way designed to elicit from his audience the most potentially serious response to the subject matter. A comic attitude can be discerned when the text, enlightened with outside, contextual evidence, shows that the author is handling his subject in ways that (1) avoid emphasizing or intensifying its more psychically upsetting aspects or (2) reduce the intensity of the reader's confrontation with its social implications. After all, the selection of a comic approach is governed by a resolution to insinuate one's view-

point without “preaching” or challenging the reader to make a committed response, and to enhance the pleasures that come from use of entertainment or play of wit. We will see how subtle this insinuation becomes as we look closely at mid-century domestic humor.

A comparison of Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with his letter-memoir *De Profundis* provides a graphic example of the difference between a comic and a serious attitude in nineteenth-century English literature. Written within a few years of each other, both books take up Wilde’s hedonistic relationships with young men; but one, *Dorian Gray*, stylizes the emotions in lavish strokes of paradox and arch wit, while the other presents a bleak and peevish journal of human agonizing. *Dorian Gray* is a novel of moral reform manqué; when the feelings of the hero in decline are presented, they are melodramatically overwrought, illustrating Wilde’s dictum in his essay “The Decay of Lying” that when life, with its tedious morality, encroaches on a work of art, it creates bad art. *De Profundis*, though, a protest of Lord Alfred Douglas’s betrayal of Wilde, is in deadly earnest—page after page in the horrible clarity and banality of total recall:

At three in the morning, unable to sleep, and tortured with thirst, I made my way, in the dark and cold, down to the sitting-room in the hopes of finding some water there. I found *you*. You fell on me with every hideous word an intemperate mood, an undisciplined and untutored nature could suggest. By the terrible alchemy of egotism you converted your remorse into rage. You accused me of selfishness in expecting you to be with me when I was ill; of standing between you and your amusements; of trying to deprive you of your pleasures.⁷

We cannot mistake the author’s attitude here; this material has been invested with its most personally profound psychic consequences.

It is important to keep in mind that comic treatment of

an issue does not mean that the artist considers it a matter lacking importance and serious implications. Rather, he makes a strategic choice to present serious concerns in a way that transmits the effect obliquely or ambivalently. Samuel Butler's late-century bombshell against the Victorian family, *The Way of All Flesh*, was written largely in intervals of recrimination and despair. Butler himself privately admitted that a "sense of grievance" informed the novel. No reader can fail to share in his condemnation of Father and Mother and Sunday Religion, but Butler consistently softens the impact of the reading experience through the wry comments of a narrator who urges us to be urbane and relativistic about all things.

The strategy of the author may shift within a single work, often reflecting a change in attitude during the course of the work. This appears to have happened in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, when an attempt to vivify a life of adult self-indulgence—the selfish pleasures of whimsical behavior and games by one's own rules—turns into an outburst of authorial anxiety. The casual anarchy of Wonderland is suddenly seen to be vulnerable to the worst excesses of despotic will. What transforms a comically conceived existence into a nightmarish one is the insistence by the authority figures in the book (the Queen of Hearts, for example) that some vaguely criminal or immoral "meaning" must be attached to acts previously considered innocent and meaningless. This is a crucial change in attitude—from one that treats behavior as inconsequential and playful to one that emphasizes meaning and discomforting social or psychological consequences.

Clearly context is essential in enabling us to identify these shifts of authorial position. But there are some more objectively discernible factors that offer insights into the author's intent. Comedy transmits a characteristic vision of life—the *comic* view of human behavior. In order to explain this view, I shall draw upon some observations that Frank Kermode has made in his book *The Sense of an Ending*, a

book not about comedy, but about the need in Western man to put arbitrary beginnings and endings upon the slices of time in his life.⁸ Kermode adopts a term, "fictions," from Hans Vaihinger that I find valuable in discussing comedy. He defines the term not in the more limited sense of literary creations, but as notions that people invent to live by, or concepts that they consciously employ in order to explain or structure portions of their everyday lives and activities. These notions or concepts are "fictive" because they are temporary "working beliefs" that are understood (at some point at least) to be *created* for convenience in organizing or imaginatively grasping human activities. Some of these fictions only mark off small islets of individualistic behavioral indulgence, such as "hobbyhorse riding," while some can be the governing principles by which careers are justified and psychic defense structures are built. It is only when they are no longer provisional, no longer treated as fictive visions, that they become ossified into what Kermode calls "myths," that is, beliefs that people begin to accept as true or permanently desirable.

In a later chapter of his book, Kermode discusses the dilemma that Jean-Paul Sartre presented to himself in his novel *Nausea*. "The absurd dishonesty of all prefabricated patterns" (fictions) offended Sartre, yet the reality of a life without any patterns imposed upon it was ultimately "nauseous" to him, for it left man in the viscous, changing, amorphous flow of contingency, where human matter and human consciousness were subjected to disorienting chaos. Thus, although Sartre found it finally necessary to create fictions in order to live humanely, he found it equally necessary to realize that such patterns were fictive and only operational if one were to avoid sterility and self-delusion. Others writing about the nature of comedy have emphasized comedy's treatment of the changing, contingent elements in life. Bergson argues that we laugh when a man has fallen into patterns of action that are not flexible

enough to withstand the upsets of human existence. Susanne Langer makes an eloquent case for a "comic rhythm" that depicts life as "physical or social events occurring by chance and building up the coincidences with which individuals cope according to their lights. . . . Destiny in the guise of Fortune is the fabric of comedy; it is developed by comic action, which is the upset and recovery of the protagonist's equilibrium, his contest with the world and his triumph by wit, luck, personal power, or even humorous, or ironical, or philosophical acceptance of mischance."⁹ George Santayana stresses the same aspect of comedy: "This world is contingency and absurdity incarnate . . . Existence involves changes and happenings and is comic inherently."¹⁰ Northrop Frye contends that comic plots move the action toward pragmatically free social situations.¹¹ Meredith's evocation of the comic spirit, "an oblique light, followed by volleys of silvery laughter," is his typically ornate way of describing life's flux operating on the rigidified fictions—the "myths"—of a culture, "whatever is overblown, affected, pretentious, pedantic, fantastically delicate."¹²

Yet comic works themselves are often highly complicated structures of ingenious or artificial behavior, and our enjoyment of them often lies in their very complications. When Face and Subtle in Jonson's *Alchemist* pile higher and higher their precarious house of cards, their deceit and disguise, our delight is not only in the inevitable debacle that will occur but in their contrivances. We appreciate the ingenuity and even the misled commitment of moral and immoral schemes. In nineteenth-century examples, consider our letdown when Pecksniff is humiliated, when the Anglo-Bengalee Disinterested Life Assurance Society's fraud is found out, when Quilp and Uriah Heep must skulk away from the scene. Elaborate plans and exotic constructs constitute a large proportion of the subject matter of comedy, and it is often the connivers, the perpetrators

of farfetched hoaxes, the would-be empire builders who attract us through their vitality. There is something splendid in self-centered human intelligence.

Freud accounts for the effects of tendentious wit—that is, wit that carries in it an attack that is normally inhibited by the superego—by suggesting that the pleasure is attributable in large part to the complicated, oblique manner of presentation in which the tendentious thrust of comedy is clothed. *The more devious the route to the laughter, the richer its cathexis.* Hence we do not simply want to see life in all its randomness triumph; we do not simply await the flow of contingent reality breaking down human constructions. Our pleasure is found as often in the building up or digging in of men making their own “permanent” fabrications. Indeed, we cannot account for the success of Dickens’ great comic inventions—Mrs. Gamp with her habitual bottle on the “chimley piece” and her imaginary admirer Mrs. Harris, or Pecksniff’s reflexive piety as he places his fingertips together in the form of a church and gazes eloquently heavenward—by contingency and absurdity alone. We must include that other aspect of the comic vision, the emphasis on fictions, for many of our favorite comic characters are entrenched in their hypocrisy and self-protective patterns of behavior, which are hardly what Susanne Langer could call open, flexible, or life-celebrating.

If we realize, however, that the objective of almost all comic works in the last two centuries has been to make us understand that most of our habitual and self-defensive behavior is made up of fictions, in Kermode’s sense, then we can see why comedy incorporates both the random chanciness of human existence and all manner of elaborate constructs and devices. Comedy’s particular vision of life, and what it seeks to transmit to us, is that once a social code or a line of conduct ceases to be treated as a fiction and is instead sanctified and taken seriously by a society, or by influential individuals in it, then existence grows oppressive

and sterile. Comic works characteristically expose pomposity and smug self-deception (what Frye calls the ritual bondage in which so many authority figures find themselves) and undermine dull and inhuman mores. By toppling those authorities and delving cynically into the covert sexuality that lies behind decency, or the timorous greed that lies behind calls for "responsibility," comedy encourages us to understand what is masked by rigorous, somber approaches to human behavior. Somehow the attitude that we can define as "noncomic," the tendency to see things in their most serious and consequential terms, contains the potential of freezing and stultifying human response and leads, comic writers tell us, to a vision that will prove painfully inflexible. Hence the pulse of chancy reality surges through comic works, opening up the society to change and adjusting its concepts so that all the psychologically necessary patterning of human behavior can be conceived as the building and adjusting of fictions. Comedy causes a culture to look at itself in a new way.

There is, finally, another aspect of comedy that I intend to trace through the nineteenth century. There appears to be a process in the nature of comic invention that generates some of comedy's characteristic forms. The process has three discernible phases, and although the phases admittedly overlap and different phases predominate in different periods of literary history, they are present in most comic works. The first phase is one of destruction or reductiveness; the second phase, one of elaboration and experimentation; and the third, one of closure of the comic development.

We are most familiar with the first phase, for almost all comedy seems to need to launch an attack on the fictions that have become myths and on the rigid social situations and literary conventions that are choking off the breath of free imaginative development. Thackeray and Dickens conspicuously began their careers with parodies of writing styles that had become stultified or mannered. The burden

of distrust that comedy had to bear in a Puritan culture arose from the suspicion that comic treatment was randomly destructive. And indeed, the very origins of formal comic expression did lie in rites of fertility and spring in which old gods were symbolically dethroned, the relics of the dead seasons immolated, and the spontaneous anarchy of Saturnalia let loose. Hence, this first stage is one in which the techniques of blasphemy, ridicule, parody, mimicry, exaggeration, and grotesque reduction predominate.

The appeal of the destructive phase, the heady sound of crashing chandeliers and broken glass and of air being let out of stuffed shirts is almost too great to control at times, and there are many writers who let it spin out of control so that it dominates the entire work. Alvin Kernan observes that in conventional satires, an absolute frenzy of indignation and attack often envelops the narrating persona.¹³ In fact, the distinction between comedy and satire inheres in the modifications that comedy makes in its destructive operations. As we shall witness in Jerrold and Dickens, two angry men who could hurt with their words and whose iconoclastic delights could often come close to getting out of hand, comic writers are restrained at some crucial point by their ambivalence toward their own positions and usually toward the objects of their attacks.

This necessary modification that comedy makes in its reductive operations is described by the psychoanalyst Ernst Kris:

Things which simply arouse anxiety or unpleasure cannot be adapted to comic expression—to attempt to do so may produce an uncanny effect—until they have been reduced in intensity and undergone some degree of working over. A measure of elaboration is a prerequisite of comic expression, and at the same time comic expression accomplishes a measure of elaboration.¹⁴

Kris is talking here of the kind of lessening or deflecting of impact that I mentioned earlier as defining a comic attitude

in an author, but he is also pointing out that the essence of comic expression is a "working over" of material, enabling the writer to handle it with control and poise. This serves the purpose of taking into account any ambivalence the comic artist may feel about the justice or propriety of his attack; an ambivalence that occurs frequently in middle-class writers criticizing their own affluent societies from the inside. It is the "wit work" of which Freud speaks that enhances the pleasure we get from tendentious wit. This is the point, in Arthur Koestler's formula, where the "higher forms" of comedy shade over from attack to artistic discovery.¹⁵

The very nature of comedy, then, forces it beyond the first stage of pure antagonism and reductiveness into artistic experimentation. I call this second phase the "elaborative" phase, drawing on Kris's terminology. The author's preoccupation with art grows in this phase, for it is here that he tends to flex his creative powers and experiment with new ways of playing with his subject matter. Listen to a description of this process from Wilde's *Dorian Gray*: Lord Henry "played with the idea, and grew willful; tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy and winged it with paradox. The praise of folly, as he went on, soared into a philosophy. It was extraordinary improvisation. He was brilliant, fantastic, irresponsible." Having started with the conviction that sterile fictions need to be exposed as fictions and paralysis overcome, and having found that only through the transforming techniques of comedy is this achieved, the comic artist irresistibly seeks to continue the metamorphosis. By turning things on their heads, by dissolving and reconstituting, by riding the crest of change, they can ensure the vitality of humane values of freedom and creativity.

Consequently, the writer's impulse toward more and more elaboration strengthens as the creation goes on, just as the caricaturist finds himself dashing off one quick variation after the other. Gulley Jimson, the artist-comic hero of

Joyce Cary's comic novel *The Horse's Mouth*, says that "when you get inside, you get something that goes on going on—it's creation." In this phase, the writer dives into his own art, and self-parody and involution seize his writing. Dickens sensed these impulses strongly, and we can observe it in the delight he takes in elaborating his own inventions—the urge to keep Quilp on yet another dastardly mission and to give us another vignette of Mrs. Gamp—and in the analytically self-parodic aspect of it. "I think it is my infirmity," he said, "to fancy or perceive relations in things that are not apparent generally. Also, I have such an inexpressible enjoyment of what I see in a droll light, that I dare say I pet it as if it were a spoilt child."¹⁶

Yet Dickens went on to assert, "I . . . never give way to my invention recklessly, but constantly restrain it." The elaborative phase is likely to be the most exciting one for the artist, offering the potentiality of discovering new forms through experimentation, but it has alarming tendencies. The metamorphosis may get out of hand so that nothing holds together in any form that may be called artistic. Comedy is by its nature often anarchic, which can be disturbing to artists like Dickens and Carroll who value order. It is so close to "play" (as we shall see) that the artist may feel he is spinning a web out of his own insides and find the indulgences trivial or senseless. A writer who is highly conscious of a social responsibility may find himself playing too fast and loose with the ethical and social assumptions of his time. Dickens' restraint of comic elaboration is an example of the third phase in the comic process—that of closure.

Closure can be dictated by various considerations reflecting various emphases. It can be a reaffirmation of the normal or recognizable social order, freer than the one that the comic vision first attacked but in no sense radically reformed or changed. It can be a retreat back to the status quo, indicating that the comic venture was one of escape or whimsical imagination—a cry of anguish, perhaps, but nothing consequential. It can be an aesthetic closure, the

adoption of an ending that brings the action or character development to a point of rest or that fulfills the governing image. It can be, as is the ending of *Dorian Gray*, a mock denouement, following the patterns of the hackneyed literature it has been parodying. Or it can be only the most perfunctory of closures, as those of Nabokov's novels are, in which the possibilities for elaboration remain indefinitely open; the book ends, but not the comic vision.

The attitude of the individual artist toward the form of his work is ultimately the determinative factor in deciding the nature of the closure, and whether to emphasize the reductive phase or the elaborative phase. Any generalizations, therefore, about historical changes in the emphasis of comic literature will be risky. We can suggest, though, that in a socially conscious period in which there is a certain suspicion toward artistic revel and improvisation, the elaborative phase will not predominate and therefore writers will be inclined to put a firm, socially responsible ending on their comic explorations. If, during such a period, there is uncertainty or cynicism about vestigial mores and social forms, comic works may be characterized by their reductiveness. During the unstable times of the pre-Victorian Regency, for example, the literature shows the strains of a reductive attack on old forms, coupled with the need to explore new modes of life, and yet a very pronounced social self-consciousness. Hence the works from this period, which we study in chapter one, are circumscribed, for all their elaboration. The artistic play is not allowed to follow its own tendencies. Though it is often self-parodic and involuted, it is not so in a creative way. It does not spring from the artist's instinct to follow his own inventions and whims in the search for new fictions and fresh artistic formulations. These writers compulsively return to conventional morality and relatively stereotyped literary visions. They probe the frontiers of their own art only haltingly, for they are writers of very limited creative expansiveness.

Thackeray and Dickens, on the other hand, are capable

of great expansiveness, and in the work of both men, we can see that their creations transcend the old formulas. As mordant social critics, they first of all excel in the reductive operation; but as acutely self-conscious fabricators, they move on to richer elaborations. Yet in Thackeray's great comic novel *Vanity Fair*, Becky Sharp's comic freedom and exploitation of sterile social fictions must apparently be curtailed because of her author's reluctance, finally, to renounce social order. The ambivalence that prompts the elaboration must, at last, idle down to vacillation and ironically uncommitted poise. Dickens, however, does not concede to his time: his comedy unfurls as he brilliantly metamorphoses his material, pressing further and further into analytical parody and transmogrification. But Dickens is bent on dominating his world with an embracing moral and social vision. He will not permit himself to give way entirely to the effusions of his natural creativity, even though he stretches his broad canvases more and more in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* to accommodate it all—hence the arbitrarily imposed endings of his novels, all the teeming comic life swiftly bottled and corked. He is a child of an earlier, more puritanically self-controlled generation of comic writers.

Closure in Lewis Carroll's Alice books reflects an anxiety lest comic anarchy get out of hand. There is some of this to Dickens' thinking, but his writing shows none of Carroll's use of elaboration as a means of conceiving an alternative life style, free of the incursions of modern Victorian social responsibilities. Dickens' great advance in the uses of the elaborative phase of the comic process was to open up the possibilities for the transformative powers of art, while the characteristic expansion of the elaborative phase in the writers of the 1870s was to explore new life styles. The latter innovation is principally a form of social rather than artistic elaboration. As the major artists feel themselves more alienated, their agonistic reductiveness evolves more rapidly into experimental behavior patterns. This devel-

opment in the internal forms of comedies continues through the end of the century to the point at which we find, paradoxically, that elaboration in life styles has begun to turn life into art.

Consequently, as major comic artists become less faithful to the commonly apprehended social realities and more inclined to think of human existence in terms of what I have called the comic vision—a contingent, ever-changing reality dissolving old fictions and prompting new ones—the reductive phases and elaborative phases intermingle and we get the impression of constant elaboration. Closure is dictated in these writers by aesthetic impulses rather than a need to return to social norms and responsibility. For example, Meredith and Butler are less inclined to resolve their stories with endings that affirm the hallowed English institutions and relationships. And as a result, their endings often strike us as weak, half-hearted. But Wilde solves the problem with patently artificial conclusions that are mock endings. And Beerbohm simply lets the pattern of elaboration continue forever; we are constantly turning over the dilemma of Enoch Soames' existence, and the "truth" of A. V. Laider's lies.

The formal properties, therefore, of comic works—the nature of the closure and the emphases on the elaborative rather than the reductive—reflect the changing uses of comedy during the nineteenth century. This provides an organizing principle for the study of this literature in this time span. As we turn now to the decades immediately preceding the Victorian period, we can observe the tensions within the comic phases begin to build.

1820-1845: The Anxieties of Sublimation, and Middle-Class Myths

The triflers of any epoch are an invaluable evidence of the bent of the public mind.

—*Thomas Love Peacock*

I

The dominating fictional phenomenon in England during the 1820s and 1830s was the novel of high fashion and coxcombry that came to be known as the Silver Fork novel. Its origins could perhaps be traced to the late eighteenth-century novels on manners, but nothing of a literary nature could quite account for its sudden popularity. The fashionable novel reflected the volatile social change of the times and the excited interest in aristocratic mores. The appetite of the growing middle-class reading public for glimpses behind the boudoir doors of the upper crust and into the gaming rooms of Crockford's, The Cocoa Tree, and other famous exclusive clubs was so keen that it loosed an onrush of novels under such titles as *The Diary of a Désennuée*, *Marriage of High Life*, and *Flirtation*.

In retrospect, these novels, whose mission was to unfold the shocking and absolutely fascinating intrigues of high society, seem to be rich grounds for the comic. The topics—the self-conscious pretensions of the nouveau riche and the jaded aristocratic establishment—were ripe for satire, playfulness, and exaggeration. The characteristic pro-

tagonist of a Silver Fork novel was an ambitious young man with delicately exquisite features, carefully rehearsed wit, a smattering of useful knowledge carelessly displayed, and audacious pretensions. Disraeli epitomizes the qualities in his young beau, Charles Annesley:

But his manner was his magic. His natural and subdued nonchalance, so different from the assumed non-emotion of a mere dandy; his coldness of heart, which was hereditary, not acquired; his cautious courage, and his unadulterated self-love, had permitted him to mingle much with mankind without being too deeply involved in the play of their passions. . . . Perhaps the great secret of his manner was his exquisite superciliousness, a quality which, of all, is the most difficult to manage.¹

Usually the younger son of a propertied family and therefore of limited prospects, the Silver Fork hero apprentices himself to a socially prominent dowager who schools him in the arts necessary to attract both attention and the infatuation of the bored wife of a wealthy earl. His story is only a thin pretext for the real attractions of such fiction, however—the firsthand glimpses of the amorous maneuverings that take place behind the façades of the great houses of London and the cynical insights into the machinations of politics at a time when social connections were the entrees to power. Though everything is presumably drawn from reality, nothing is genuine. *Ton* is all: the material is the quicksilver of light social comedy.

The most influential work of the genre, Edward Lytton Bulwer's *Pelham, or the Adventures of a Gentleman* (1828), begins with the promise of such comedy. Pelham disposes of his own youth in persiflage, convincing us that he is quite capable of retailing any horrid anecdote about his family. When he was a lad, for instance, his mother is said to have looked over her lists of engagements at the end of an unusually dull social season and, having "ascertained that she had none remaining worth staying for, agreed to elope

with her new lover."² In an excess of passion she got up at six o'clock in the morning to effect her escape. Discovering that she had left behind her favorite china monster and her French dog, however, she returned to fetch them. She appeared just as her husband had discovered her absence and was engaged in performing a ritual of his grief for the benefit of the servants ("he was always celebrated for his skill in private theatricals"). Although secretly anxious to be rid of her, Pelham's father was compelled for the sake of form to insist that his wife stay. Thus, Pelham mournfully reports, he was condemned to endure life with both a father and a mother.

A good beginning, certainly; it is precious, wicked, deceptively casual. But Bulwer suffers from the curious infirmity that beset almost all of the Silver Fork novelists: he does not have the nerve to treat his material comically. From the very beginning, the high-fashion writers apologized for the illusions and wit that made up the piquant sauce of their offerings. Robert Plumer Ward's *Tremaine* (1825), which along with Thomas Henry Lister's *Granby* (1826) established the vogue, opens on the defensive. Ward admits that his account of the boudoir crises and elaborate affectations of Regency high society may have played too loosely with morality. He hopes, though, that the reform of his rakish hero at the end of the novel serves as a "moral antidote" to all the colorful and social evils with which he has entertained us. He frets over his tone, wondering whether it "may appear extraordinary and little suited to the gravity of many of the subjects discussed." A mock "editor" asks rhetorically whether "the author was correct in his half-jesting, half-serious supposition that he was writing a treatise on moral philosophy, not a novel."³ Ward resolutely keeps himself astraddle the issue of whether his account of the beau monde should be morally didactic or amorally comic, and then worries about its effect on his audience.

And sure enough, before long, Bulwer's Pelham begins

to fall into the tedious habit of mulling over the ethical questions we assumed he had long left behind him. He loses his engaging insolence, behaving less like the infamous puppy he was bred to be and more like a stiff hero from some eighteenth-century novel of moral uplift. To our dismay, we learn that we misconceived him all along: "Beneath all the carelessness of my exterior," he announces, "my mind was close, keen and inquiring; and under all the affectations of foppery, and the levity of manner, I veiled an ambition the most extensive in its objects, and a resolution" (179). Bulwer seems to have disguised the nature of his novel: what began as light, amoral, and comic, suddenly purports to be a study in character reform and the wages of frivolity. Yet in truth the novel becomes neither sort of book; rather, it oscillates between embellished vignettes of high society posturing and pedestrian solemnities about social responsibility. Like Ward, Bulwer refuses to settle on his own designs for his book and allows his tone to range all the way from satire to sentimentality.

According to Mrs. Catherine Gore, whose *Cecil: or, The Adventures of a Coxcomb* (1841) was probably the last great triumph of the vogue, the problem facing the Silver Fork novelist is to maintain one's nerve. "To make a good flip-pant writer," she announces ironically in her book's preface, "he must have acquired an easy versatility, a nice mixture of courage and caution, the one to startle his reader with some strange fantasy, the other to steer clear, while in his rapid course, of what may be dangerous."⁴ Mrs. Gore's prescription would seem to produce a novel of mixed literary manners; and in fact, *Cecil*, like *Pelham*, is a work of strangely varied comic and "serious" effects. Mrs. Gore is just near enough to the Victorian period, however, to favor a weightier moral than her predecessors.⁵ Cecil pays more dearly for his careless foppery, and we are rather moved by his genuine remorse when his impulsive determination to take his brother's only son on a furious ride through the

forest results in the boy's accidental death. It is a moment fraught not only with significance but also with poignancy. It is a more telling indictment of superficiality and recklessness than we usually find in Silver Fork novels. But Mrs. Gore can no more keep the pitch than can Bulwer or Ward; no sooner does she become serious than she pulls herself up abruptly and launches into a set of fabulous adventures on the Continent, leaving behind all the pathos of Cecil's carelessness. Interestingly, Mrs. Gore brings Lord Byron into her novel as a character at this point. Byron was, after all, an appropriate presiding spirit for Silver Fork fiction because in both his life and his work he dramatized the agonies of ethical self-doubt and the joys of vaunting hedonism. Byron's self-mockery and his own conflation of posture and true nature emblemize the predicament of the English high-fashion novelists, who could be sure neither of their positions nor of their tone. "Tragedy,—comedy,—farce (what shall I call it?)" Mrs. Gore asks of the behavior of one of her characters. It is a good question.

Thus, it is almost logical that in *Pelham*, Bulwer grows so haplessly deaf to his own key that he must interrupt his narrative occasionally to remind the "sagacious reader" that some of his text is "writ in irony" and some in "earnest." Presumably his audience well understood that *Pelham*'s extensive recitals of "maxims on dress" were not to be entirely accepted as the author's guidelines when they included such recommendations as "keep your mind free from all violent affectations at the hour of the toilet," and such observations as "there may be more pathos in the fall of a collar or curl of a lock, than the shallow think for." Yet Bulwer could never be sure and laced his subsequent editions with frequent disclaimers. And no wonder, for one of the lasting effects that *Pelham* had upon its time was to change the manner of dress. Bulwer's book is credited with influencing a major change in the color of men's evening clothes: from plum to black. Bulwer was obliged to state in

the second edition of *Pelham* that "if mistaking the irony of Pelham, [young gentlemen and young clerks] went to the extreme of emulating the foibles which that hero attributed to himself—those were a thousand times more harmless . . . than . . . the mawkish sentimentalities of vice." But the clerks and young bucks found their new affectations rather pleasant. And the entanglement grew even more complex: Bulwer, a reserved and, to some, insolent young man, appeared to act the part of Pelham himself and was constrained for several years to deny publicly that he had made himself the heroes of his novels. When the youthful Benjamin Disraeli, who always carried off his self-expression with unchecked verve, appeared in canary waistcoats and velvet trousers, he half-facetiously claimed he did so in response to the spirit of *Pelham*. Bulwer thus found himself mocked by the fictions of his own tour de force.

The social novelists thus became ensnared in their social effects. Their own exploitation of the volatility of the times increased their attractiveness to certain rather impressionable or reckless souls. Henry Colburn, the most successful publisher of Silver Fork novels, indulged in shameless puffery, hinting in his blurbs that secrets of royal chambers were being disclosed and that his books were thinly fictionalized "portraits of living characters." As a matter of fact, this was often the case. Thomas Henry Lister's character Trebeck in *Granby* was so much like Beau Brummell that the latter swore "Lister must have known those who were intimate with me." Robert Plumer Ward was a lawyer and M.P. with numerous political and social connections that furnished real-life inspirations for his fictional scandals. Lady Charlotte Bury, author of *A Marriage in High Life* and *The Lady of Fashion*, was the daughter of the Duke of Argyll and lady-in-waiting to Caroline, the Princess of Wales; and one naturally assumes that the tidbits and general outlines of behavior in her novels were drawn from the most genuine of sources.

Novels like *Pelham* generated not only imitative behavior,

but a chain reaction of "literary" events that took on their own cultural significance. For example, Bulwer was plagued with an inauthentic "second series" of *Pelham* that appeared in the disreputable journal *The Age* and created almost as great a rage as the original. Also, scandal sheets modeled after Silver Fork novels flourished with manufactured details and speculations about the prominent and notorious. When Disraeli finally presented an "inside" glimpse into the operations of these very cheap sheets in *The Young Duke*, we turn almost a full circle—fiction exposing the true nature of newspapers that imitate the novels that purport to expose real life.

Thomas Carlyle found the entire situation so disgusting that he identified "Dandyism" as one of the besetting ills of the age. Grumbling over the "moon-calves and monstrosities" that it inspired, he expressed a fear that they would take on life. "What is it that the Dandy asks? . . . Solely, we may say, that you would recognize his existence: would admit him to be a living object."⁶ Hollow, a set of walking fine clothes, the literary dandy was not yet a reality, but he symbolized the modern difficulty in differentiating the false from the substantial in human nature. Carlyle used *Pelham* as his special whipping boy, and Bulwer, exasperated that he was being persistently misread, was hurt and perplexed that the philosopher could have so misconceived the intentions of his book.

To a certain extent, it was not a purely literary problem after all. The Byronesque oscillations in mood—the posing and affectation, the mixed hedonism and moralism—had an actual foundation in the life that the fashionable novels studied. Something was happening in the 1820s and 1830s that Silver Fork dandyism and recklessness was accurately reflecting. Bulwer, for all his casualness as a novelist, could be a perceptive social critic. In the highly influential study of national character *England and the English* (1833), Bulwer reflected on his times:

The novels of fashionable life illustrate feelings very deeply rooted, and productive of no common revolution. In proportion as the aristocracy had become social, and fashion allowed the members of the more mediocre classes a hope to outstep the boundaries of fortune, and be quasi-aristocrats themselves, people eagerly sought for representations of the manners which they aspired to imitate, and the circles to which it was not impossible to belong . . . Hence the three years' run of fashionable novels was a shrewd sign of the times.⁷

The social historian-critic Maurice Quinlan agrees with Bulwer that a "revolution in manners occurred during the first quarter of the century." He finds it permeating every social stratum. The causes were "an expanding population, the advent of the industrial system, and the consequent increase in national wealth [that] afforded opportunities for many enterprising individuals to improve their economic condition."⁸ "There is a continual ferment going on," Charles Greville noted in his memoirs, "and separate and unconnected causes of agitation and disquiet which create great alarm but which there seems to exist no power of checking or subduing."⁹

The nature of the changes in manners as people began shifting their social positions was unusually frenetic during these decades. The peace after the Napoleonic Wars left the English in a euphoria that found a ready outlet in self-induced excitements. Extensive social adjustment was made necessary as urbanization and a certain amount of rural economic dislocation put people into new situations for which the old styles of life seemed inadequate. The adjustments were particularly noticeable within the middle class, which was increasing in proportion and in its own sense of respective wealth. Ward, musing over his unstable times, says, "Not that I think the world worse now than it has been for perhaps the last hundred years. The upper

and lower classes I should say are certainly not so; I am not so sure of the middle."¹⁰ The contemporary critic R. H. Horne finds a great deal that is excessive in Mrs. Gore's *Cecil* but allows that "she excels in the portraiture of the upper section of the middle class, just at the point of contact with the nobility, where their own distinguishing traits are modified by the peculiarities of their social position. . . . All this external tumult, wrong-headed and hollow-hearted, proud, sensitive and irritable."¹¹ Many in the middle class had suddenly come into wealth and into the opportunities for leisure, and it is they who turned to the aristocracy—and to literature about the aristocracy—to discover manners and modes of life that would somehow befit and signify their new stations. The very rapidity of rise in class, and the corresponding danger of sudden plunge in fortunes, exacerbated the social turmoil. Bulwer notes:

These mystic, shifting, and various shades of graduation; these shot-silk colours of society produce this effect: That people have no exact and fixed position—that by acquaintance alone they may rise to look down on their superiors—that while rank gained by intellect, or by interest, is open but to few, the rank that may be obtained by fashion seems delusively open to all. Hence, in the first place, that eternal vying with each other; that spirit of show; that lust of imitation which characterize our countrymen and countrywomen. . . . As wealth procures the alliance and respect of novels, wealth is affected even where not possessed; and, as fashion, which is the creature of an aristocracy, can only be obtained by resembling the fashionable; hence, each person imitates his fellow.¹²

The Silver Fork novel, then, reflects the tenor of one segment of contemporary society, while purporting to mimic it for the purposes of ridicule and moral example. No wonder Bulwer kept confronting the irony of seeing his