CHAPTER 3

As the comic is the intuition of the absurd, it seems to me more conducive to despair than the tragic. The comic offers no way out - Ionesco: *Expérience du théâtre*

I am separated. What I am separated from - I cannot name it. ... Formerly it was called God. Today it no longer has any name - Adamov: *L'Aveu*

I'm sorry it wasn't a unicorn. It would have been nice to have unicorns - Stoppard: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

3 COMEDY

3.1 Samuel Johnson once observed that "comedy has been particularly unpropitious to definers" (in Lauter, 1964, p. 254). This idea has had frequent and rueful support up to the present day. Kronenberger (in Felheim, 1962, p. 198) says that "there is nothing at which the comic spirit must smile more than our fickle and inconstant notions as to what constitutes comedy". Merchant (1972) is of the opinion that "comedy is profoundly difficult to define in the abstract ... but in concrete terms, in particular moments in literature when definition is set aside, the comic is not difficult to detect. Indeed, it confronts us with its own especial view of life, its peculiar intensity alongside the intensity of the tragic vision" (p. 49).

Lauter, in the Introduction to his collection of essays on comedy (1964, p. xv), claims that there "has been precious little agreement about the objects of comic theory, let alone about the nature of comedy itself", and he elaborates on this statement by saying that "functional analyses of the comic are far more common than literary discussions" (p. 375).[1)]

1. This idea will be explored in detail in the section on philosophical, psychological and anthropological invasions into the field of literary comic theory.

He is supported in this idea by Wimsatt (1955) who states unequivocally that the literary critic should "reveal that his expertise is not specifically that of the anthropologist and mythologue, but that of the literary critic" (p. 21).

3.2 The object of discussion: comic drama

The first obstacle in the way towards a lucid definition of comedy is contained in the fact that there is little critical consensus as to the field of study. Few people have been able even to agree on the object of study. It would perhaps be a good idea at this stage to make a statement of "critical policy". This thesis is going to deal with dramatic literature, with stage comedy (and not with jokes or clowns or any of the other peripheral concerns cluttering up the popular view of what constitutes comedy). Theories dealing with other literary forms (such as the novel) will not be excluded from the consideration of critical theories, but will not be given equal weight with theories dealing specifically with dramatic literature. Thus the inquiry will be directed at the *artistic object*, the *artefact*, the *play*, and will not centre in subjective audience responses to the play such as laughter.

3.3 Invasions from the fields of philosophy and psychology: Laughter and catharsis

Laughter has been the response most closely associated with comedy from its earliest and crudest origins.[1] Modern critics have increasingly sought to maintain their aesthetic distance from laughter in dealing with comedy, but laughter has proved to be a particularly tenacious and clinging accompaniment to any consideration of comedy.[2] Laughter theory has been the spearhead of the invasion by philosophy, psychology and even to some extent physiology into the field of literary criticism. Although I regard laughter as essentially a tangential concern in dealing with comic theory I do propose to deal with it in some detail so as to put the concern with laughter (and by logical extension, catharsis) into some sort of perspective.

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1. "Some of the funniest lines in history have been the agonized attempts by the world's smartest people to define the nature of laughter... The philosopher trying to define laughter is as hopeless as a doctor trying to take an elephant's pulse by holding its toe" (Kroll, 1976, p. 40).

2. Calderwood and Toliver (1968) claim that "comic theory from Plato to Arthur Koestler has been regularly seduced away from the objective properties of comedy to pursue the elusive nature of laughter" (p. 163). This is echoed succinctly by L.C. Knights when he says rather testily that "once an invariable connection between comedy and laughter is assumed we are not likely to make any observations that will be useful as criticism" (in Lauter, 1964, p. 432). Schilling (1965), writing about comic vision in the modern novel, echoes this by saying that "the theory of the comic, blurred as it is by psychological analyses of laughter, remains one of the permanently unsolved problems of literary study" (p. 12).

Looking at the long association of laughter with theory of comedy brings one to the interesting con= clusion that laughter is regarded more often as an inherent part of comedy in those views which deal with comedy as a corrective and where laughter is thus regarded as a scourge.

A second point to mention at this stage is that as comedy has increasingly been accorded a more sophis= ticated position in the literary hierarchy, so stress on laughter theory has diminished considerably, to the extent that it is now critically respectable (and even commonplace) to object to the bad effects of "identifying [comedy] with laughter" (Rodway, 1975, p. 11).

The theories of comedy which have laughter as a prop are also closely concerned with the concept of catharsis; this is the area where philosophers, psychologists and physiologists have invaded literary theory with confusing results.

A number of theories of laughter and catharsis will be dealt with briefly. The discussion will be wound up with an evaluation of reservations expressed by various literary critics.

The very earliest theories held firmly to laughter as a *sine qua non* of (corrective) comedy. Plato, in the *Philebus*, states that comedy mixes pain and plea= sure. He equates ignorance and ridicule with evil,

and "when we laugh at what is ridiculous in our friends, we mix pleasure with envy, that is, our pleasure with pain, for envy has been acknowledged by us to be mental pain, and laughter is pleasant, and we envy and laugh at the same moment" (in Lauter, 1964, p. 8). Plato gives this idea wider than literary significance, however, when he finds that this is true also of "the entire tragi-comedy of human life" (p. 8), quite apart from the literary forms of tragedy and comedy.

In the *Laws* Plato pleads for man's getting to know the *uncomely* and the *laughable* in order to arrive at the truth through viewing opposites (in Cooper, 1922, p. 110). (Plato also stipulates that "slaves and hired strangers should imitate such things" - the ridiculous on stage - and a comic poet should not be allowed to ridicule the citizens upon pain of punishment.) His well-known wariness regarding the role of the poet in society thus enters into his concern with laughter as well.

Aristotle is more concerned with the literary aspect of comedy. His work has been examined perceptively and in great detail by Lane Cooper (1922) whose interpretation of Aristotle's theory as expressed in the *Poetics* (also via the *Tractatus Coislinianus*) will be considered briefly. Cooper has fleshed out Aristotle's admittedly scanty pronouncements on comedy significantly, referring also to the *Nicomachean Ethics* to find clarification and justifica-

tion for his interpretation.

"Whether simple or compound, the effect of comedy for Aristotle would be the pleasure aroused by the right means in the right sort of spectator" (Cooper, 1922, p. 60).[1] Aristotle's view is that in comedy emotions of anger and envy are suitable ones to be purged. "Now it is obvious that, if you succeed in making an angry or envious man laugh with pleasure, he ceases for a while to be angry or envious" (Cooper, p. 67).[2] Cooper also comments on the significant fact that in tragedy emotions are purged by the re= presentation of *like* emotions, while in comedy it can be done by the representation of wildly disparate emotions. He also feels that the "comic catharsis may be more direct, and more violent, too, than the tragic" (p. 67).

Various other early philosophers can be brought into the argument. Tzetzes (in Lauter, 1964, p. 33) claims that comedy "is an imitation of an action, ... purgative of emotions, constructive of life, moulded by laughter and pleasure". Quintilian, quoted by Cooper (1922), comments on the "despotic

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1. This idea has great significance if one keeps in mind Meredith's proviso about the ideal comic audience, as well as the views of Hoglund and Langer regarding the mood of the audience (all these views are discussed in more detail later).

2. In dealing with this theory it is important to note that those things begetting comedy or the comic cause dispro= portion - a disproportion rectified only when the improper emotions have been purged.

power" of laughter, as it "often changes the tendency of the greatest affairs, as it very frequently dis= sipates hatred and anger" (p. 93).

This sort of view prevailed in fairly intact form up to the Italian Renaissance. Lauter (1964, p. 40) quotes a defence of Terence which is very typical: "Just as tragedy purges men's minds, through terror and pity, and induces men to abstain from acting wickedly, so comedy, by means of laughter and jokes, calls men to an honest private life". This essen= tially Platonic view was, for a long time, hard to shake off.

On the cathartic effect of comedy, Feibleman (1939) quotes Jamblichus of Chalcis as having said that the "forces of the human emotions in us, if entirely restrained, bestir themselves more vehemently; but if stirred into action gradually and within measure, they rejoice moderately and are satisfied; and, thus purified, they become obedient, and are checked with= out violence" (p. 86). He also indicates an aware= ness that laughter and comedy are not complete paral= lels. "The awareness of comedy goes deeper than those ebullient emotions which, ever ready for laugh= ter, lie waiting at the surface of human emotions" (p. 86).[1)]

1. Even Tzetzes finds a somewhat more than merely didactic purpose for comedy: "To lay bare the fictions of the af= fairs of everyday life, with a view to founding that life more firmly, may be taken as an excellent brief account of what the comedian tries to accomplish and of what the pur= pose of comedy essentially is" (in Feibleman, 1939, p. 92).

In the Prologue to *Ralph Roister Doister*, Nicholas Udall proclaims happily that "mirth prolongeth life, and causeth health" (in Lauter, 1964, p. 113). The comic, in his estimation, is constituted of mirth and virtue "in decent comeliness", and the play in question is one "which against the vainglorious doth inveigh, whose humour the roisting sort continually doth feed" (p. 113).

Ben Jonson, while conceding the didactic element in both tragedy and comedy, nevertheless sounds an early dissenting note when he declares that "the moving of laughter [is not] always the end of comedy" (in Lauter, 1964, p. 139). He even seems to anticipate Meredith's insistence on a suitable audience[1] when he says that "jests that are true and natural seldom raise laughter with the beast, the multitude. They love nothing that is right and proper" (Lauter, p. 140).

Freud's exposition of wit and humour[2] has always been regarded as an important contribution to comic theory, although more than one critic has commented caustically on the indigestibility of the awkward

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1. "A society of cultivated men and women is required, wherein ideas are current, and the perceptions quick, that he [the comic poet] may be supplied with matter and an audience" (in Sypher, 1956, p. 3).

2. Prinsloo (1970) states that "although the title refers to *wit*, Freud is really concerning himself with the comic, and makes some cogent remarks on this topic" (p. 29).

Teutonic jokes collected by Freud to support his views. Freud's ideas, of course, are useful mainly in considering the concept of catharsis which is thought to occur within the framework of the comic. (Bentley has remarked that Freud's theory, since christened psycho-analytical, escaped being called 'cathartic' by a hair's breadth.)

Cooper (1922) makes an absorbing analysis and inter= pretation of Freud's theory. "The comical appears primarily as an unintentional discovery in the social relations of human beings. It is found in persons, that is, in their movements, shapes, actions and characteristic traits" (p. 77). He links Freud to the Aristotelian tradition that "comedy provides for the audience a harmless discharge of emotions which, when pent up within the individual, occasion various sorts of distress or irregular and imperfect activi= ty. Comedy, like the Roman Catholic confession, affords an outlet for disturbing emotion, and for disquieting remembrances that lie, sometimes fester= ing, at the bottom of the soul" (Cooper, 1922, p. 78).

No consideration of laughter theory would be complete without referring to Bergson's enormously influential book (1911). He speaks of both *comedy* and *laughter*, but his concern is more with the *laugh* and the *laugher* than with the art form, *comedy*, itself. His concern for the social milieu of laughter prompts him to say that "we are probably right in saying that comedy lies midway between art and life. It

is not disinterested as genuine art is ... it turns its back upon art, which is a breaking away from society and a return to pure nature" (p. 170).

His stand is taken on the fact that "laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society *avenges* itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness" (p. 197). This idea is further elaborated in his description of laughter as a sort of social gesture, so that, "by the fear which it inspires, it restrains eccentricity, keeps constantly awake and in mutual contact certain activities of a secondary order which might retire ... softens down whatever the surface of the social body may retain of mechanical inelasticity ... this rigidity is the comic, and laughter is the corrective" (pp. 20-21). A little later he comes to his now-famous formulation that the comic issues from "the mechanical encrusted on the living" (p. 37). (This idea will be explored in more detail in 3.5.2.)

Bergson also refers to a movement of relaxation implicit in comedy and laughter, what may be loosely regarded as a kind of catharsis. But the relaxation is short-lived - it comes from a temporary abandonment of logic. We accept the invitation to take it easy. "For a short time, at all events, we join in the game. And that relieves us from

the strain of living. But we rest only for a short time. The sympathy that is capable of entering into the impression of the comic is a very fleeting one" (p. 196).

Towards the end of the essay Bergson goes on to concerns that seem curiously contemporary as he comments on the evanescent quality of laughter. Earlier he uses the image of froth and foam on the surface of sea-water to evoke the nature of the relationship between the comic and the darker underside of life as he sees it. Now he maintains that "laughter comes into being in the self-same fashion. It indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life. It instantly adopts the changing forms of the disturbance. It, also, is a froth with a saline base. Like froth, it sparkles. It is gaiety itself. But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty, and the aftertaste bitter" (p. 200).[1)]

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1. This irresistibly recalls Kronenberger's words to the effect that "at the heart of high comedy there is always a strain of melancholy, as round the edges there is all gaiety and ebullience and glitter; and Schiller was perhaps right in regarding high comedy as the greatest of all literary forms" (in Felheim, 1962, p. 197).

   Likewise, Schopenhauer has commented on this ambiguous nature of laughter and comedy: "Thus [comedy] declares ... that life as a whole is thoroughly good, and especially is always amusing. Certainly it must hasten to drop the curtain of joy, so that we may not see what comes after ..." (in Lauter, 1964, p. 371).

Marie Collins Swabey deals with comic laughter from a viewpoint that is outspokenly philosophical, her intention being to "distinguish comic laughter from such varieties as infantile, drunken, hysterical, or nonsense laughter" (1961, p. v).[1)] She further elucidates this by maintaining that "what is really important ... is that in the laughter of comic in= sight we achieve a logical moment of truth; while metaphysically, through some darting thought, we de= tect an incongruence as cancelled by an underlying congruence ... in short, perception of the ludicrous helps us to comprehend both ourselves and the world, making us, at least in the highest reaches of humour, feel more at home in the universe by aiding in the discernment of values" (p. v). (Swabey's considera= tions are less abstract than those of most philoso= phers dealing with comic laughter, as she bases her observations on actual analyses of the works of Aris= tophanes, Shakespeare and Molière.)

Swabey does not acknowledge comic catharsis: "Of course, nemesis is often traceable in comedy in so far as events follow by cause and effect along with a certain retributive action, yet it does not rouse the moral sense to the depths or call forth a cathar= sis of the emotions through pity and fear as does tragedy" (p. 135).

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1. Hegel (in Lauter, 1964, p. 351) has said that "as a rule it is extraordinary what a variety of wholly different things excite human laughter".

Ernst Cassirer (1951) makes a number of very pertinent remarks on *catharsis*. He regards art not as an imitation but as a "concretion of reality" (p. 143). We may view life, then, from a comic rather than from another perspective, and "become observant of the minutest details; we see this world in all its narrowness, its pettiness, and silliness. We live in this restricted world, but we are no longer imprisoned by it. Such is the peculiar character of comic catharsis. Things and events begin to lose their material weight; scorn is dissolved into laughter, and laughter is liberation" (p. 150). Cassirer observes that the Aristotelian theory of catharsis does not imply a change in the emotions and passions themselves but in the soul of the perceiver. "In this world [of tragedy and comedy] all our feelings undergo a sort of transubstantiation with respect to their essence and their character. The passions themselves are relieved of their material burden. We feel their form and their life but not their encumbrance" (p. 147). Thus, in commenting on *King Lear* he maintains that "art turns all these pains and outrages, these cruelties and atrocities, into a means of self-liberation, thus giving us an inner freedom which cannot be attained in any other way" (p. 149).

Arthur Koestler (1964) has made one of the most painstaking and provocative analyses of laughter, humour and the comic. He perceptively isolates many of the most teasing problems confronting the commentator on the comic. While his concerns are philosophical

and psychological, his work does throw some valuable light on the creative process, an understanding of which in turn contributes to an understanding of the process of the comic.

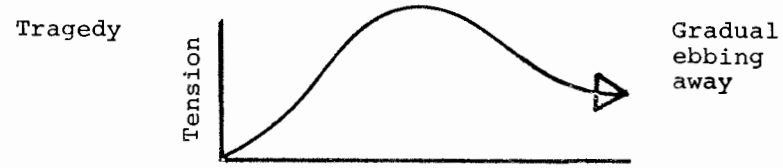
He provides a provocative implicit explanation for the constant critical concern with laughter in comic theory by maintaining that the perception of the humorous constitutes a creative act. This will then imply a greater audience involvement and per= haps account for the inability of many commentators to distinguish between artistic object and subjective audience responses in dealing with the phenomenon of comedy.

He puts laughter into some sort of interdisciplinary perspective. "Humour is the only domain of creative activity where a stimulus on a high level of complex= ity produces a massive and sharply defined response on the level of physiological reflexes" (p. 31).

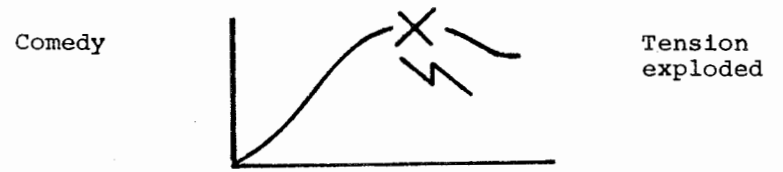
He also comments illuminatingly on the elusive nature of comedy by using a particularly apt image. "The bacillus of laughter is a bug difficult to isolate; once brought under the microscope, it will turn out to be a yeast-like, universal ferment, equally use= ful in making wine or vinegar, and raising bread" (p. 32).

Koestler pays a great deal of attention to the con= cept of catharsis. He compares tragic and comic

catharsis graphically. In tragedy he finds that the tension increases until the climax is reached, after which it ebbs away in a gradual catharsis as "horror and pity accomplish the purgation of the emo=tions" (p. 34).



In comedy, tension mounts, but never reaches its ex=pected climax. The ascending curve is brought to an abrupt end: dramatic expectations are debunked and the logical development of the situation is de=capitated. The tension is thus suddenly relieved and exploded in laughter.[1)]



(Koestler's view of the bisociative process leading to this explosion will be considered in the section on comedy and incongruity.)

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1. This explanation would seem to account for the comic suc=cess of funny incidents, jokes and so on. In a *comic play*, however, it would seem more feasible to accept that the cumulative effect of such relaxations of tension must be somewhat different, effecting perhaps ultimately what Olson (1968) has called *katastasis*, change, rather than a literal catharsis, which cannot be regarded as a continu=ing and sustained process (p. 16).

The mood or the character of the *laugher* has also been brought into the discussion. Suzanne Langer (1953) has observed that in appreciating a good comedy, any personal, subjective mood has *no effect whatsoever*; "once in the theatre the play possesses us and breaks our mood" (p. 363).

Hoglund (1973), on the other hand, does not go along with this. He feels that "however much a viewer's mood may be broken by the devices in a play his basic attitudes, or preconceived expectations, must be maintained throughout the play for laughter to be possible" (p. 317). This follows on his basic question as to whether anything is intrinsically laughable.[1] He also echoes Koestler's view of the complexity of the laughter trigger when he says that the extent of laughter is determined by many variables, such as state of mind, extent of insight, degree of identification and the extent of malicious enjoyment.

Allardyce Nicoll takes this consideration even further. In commenting on the way in which laughter

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1. In this respect Wimsatt (1955) has made a valuable observation. He feels that the laughable is just what you laugh at, in other words, "why do I laugh when my opponent trumps his partner's ace? When the wind blows off the parson's hat? When an old blind beggar stumbles and spills his pencils all over the street? ... I don't know. Maybe I don't laugh. But a Fiji Islander would. He will laugh when a prisoner is being roasted alive in an oven ... Civilized society discourages cruel jokes and brutal laughter, but what primitive society does is more important. Not what I laugh at but what I don't laugh at is the critical clue to my laughter" (p. 1).

theory tends to contaminate theories of comedy, he finds that "the truth is the laughter itself arises from the fact that in the theatre we become part of an assembled audience, that we are set in the social atmosphere in which laughter luxuriates. Some re= cent studies of audience psychology, indeed, seem to demonstrate that what might be called the force of the laughter is conditioned by the very size of the audience" (1962, p. 118).[1)]

Schilling (1965) also underlines the subjective na= ture of the laughter yardstick. "The term 'funny' is not critically respectable; it relies on personal response, and has no meaning to other than the indi= vidual who uses it ... everyone's comic sense is his own and not that of someone else" (p. 14). This ties in again with the earlier suggestion, based on Koestler's view of the creative aspect of humour. Each individual response will thus be in a certain sense a unique creation and will therefore by impli= cation exclude any complete similarity in response. Shakespeare seems to have had that in mind when he wrote that

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1. In fact, he quotes empirical evidence to the effect that a counting of actual laughs and a measurement of their du= ration at several performances of the same play have shown a definite correspondence between these and the number of persons in the auditorium - with the number and length of laughs decreasing in direct proportion to a decrease in the number of people in the auditorium.

A jest's prosperity lies in the ear
Of him that hears it, never in the tongue
Of him that makes is.

(*Love's Labour's Lost*, Act V)

While laughter as such would seem to have been put in its place as an inessential adjunct of comedy, the concept of catharsis has continued to engage critical attention. Feibleman (1939) finds that "laughter is thus a release of sorts from the limitations of the human lot, a recognition of the fact that obstacles in the path of improvement are not impossible ob= stacles, a recognition which itself to some extent renders them not impossible" (p. 191). He thus ac= cords the catharsis theory a limited, an implied, validity.

Kronenberger also talks of the imperfection of man and the fact that through laughter we do not destroy idealism: we approach, in fact, a little nearer to the ideal. "If through laughter at others we purge ourselves of certain spiteful and ungenerous in= stincts that is not quite the whole of it ... " (in Felheim, 1962, p. 195).

Northrop Frye places the concept of catharsis within the framework of myth and ritual which underlies his whole concept and definition of comedy. "The ritual pattern behind the catharsis of comedy is the resur= rection that follows the death, the epiphany or mani= festation of the risen hero" (1971, p. 215). (Frye's ideas will be discussed more fully in the section on comedy and myth.)

Bentley (1964) regards a phenomenon which may be called catharsis through humour as a release, a relaxation. In laughing, suddenly, "inhibitions are momentarily lifted, repressed thoughts are admitted into consciousness, and we experience a feeling of power and pleasure, generally called elation. Here is one of the few forms of joy that can be had, so to speak, for the asking. Hence the immense contribution of humor to the survival of the species" (p. 230).

Elder Olson (1968) is an avowed Aristotelian. He deals in some detail with the problem of laughter and the ridiculous. He proposes to isolate the effect of comedy and decides that "we can dismiss laughter as a physical effect from our discussion; it is only an unreliable external sign of a particular *internal* - I mean *psychic* - phenomenon which is our real concern. The identification of laughter with this phenomenon stems only from our tendency to associate an effect with its most frequent cause" (p. 11). He comes to the conclusion that the emotion he is in search of, the one conducive to laughter, is produced at the moment when the ridiculous and the ludicrous come into play. "Both involve our anticipation of a standard of seriousness, supposedly applicable in the present instance, together with a manifest opposition to it which destroys that supposition". He then proceeds to define that emotion as "a relaxation, or as Aristotle would say, a *katastasis*, of concern due to a manifest absurdity of the grounds

for concern" (p. 16). This *katastasis* he further circumscribes as not being "so much a question of laughter as of the restoration of the mind to a certain condition ... the *transition* to this state was effected through a special kind of relaxation of concern: a *katastasis* ... of concern through the annihilation of the concern itself" (p. 25). In evaluating Aristotle's use of the term Olson concludes that comedy "has no catharsis, since all kinds of the comic - the ridiculous and ludicrous, for example - are naturally pleasant ... comedy removes concern by showing that it was absurd to think that there was ground for it" (p. 36). He finally decides that "the comic function is less one of producing laughter than one of producing a lighthearted=ness and gaiety with which laughter is associated" (p. 40).

In contrast to this sanguine view there is the much more mordant view prevalent in much contemporary comic theory and expressed by Kerr (1968) which amounts to comedy not being "a *relief*, it is the rest of the bitter truth, a holy impropriety ... It is the proud criminal finally throwing up his hands and 'admitting everything'" (p. 28). He even extends this idea significantly by claiming that the "pain of comedy is possibly more protracted and more frustrating than that of tragedy, because it does not know how to expel itself ... comedy, making capital of the absurdity of seeking transformation, must forever contain its pain ... Tragedy *uses*

suffering, comedy can only live with it" (p. 339). He acknowledges the possibility of emotional change but also points out the limitation, because "transforming anger into laughter abates the anger temporarily, slightly, it does not remove its causes. The causes fester, seek expression in any which way, generate activity ... " (p. 340).

One of the most explicit concerns with catharsis has been expressed by Koestler, whose theory of catharsis in the comic ties in with his concepts of the creative process. His idea of catharsis is based on the "comic effect" which he regards as a bisociative culmination of two formerly incompatible matrices: a culmination which explodes the tension that has been generated. He defines the term *bisociation* by making a distinction between the routine skills of thinking on a single plane and the creative act, which operates on more than one intellectual plane simultaneously. Bisociation occurs when "two habitually incompatible matrices" are abruptly crossed, so that there is "an abrupt transfer of the train of thought from one associative context to another. The *emotive charge* which the narrative carried cannot be so transferred owing to its greater inertia and persistence; discarded by reason, the tension finds its outlet in laughter" (p. 60). Following on this explosion of tension, he finds the "slowly fading afterglow, the gradual catharsis of the self-transcending emotions - a quiet, contemplative delight in the truth which the discovery

revealed ... the cathartic reaction is an inward unfolding of a kind of 'oceanic feeling', and its slow ebbing away ... [catharsis] tends towards quie= tude, the 'earthing' of emotion" (p. 89). Koestler is therefore still of the "benign" school, of those critics and philosophers believing in the beneficent effect of catharsis, of a laugh "doing the good". Thus, while his ideas are sound and thought-provoking and his style irresistible,[1)] he still deals broadly (and philosophically) with "the comic" rather than with literary comedy. His ideas may therefore be used as a fascinating adjunct to the understanding of the comic process but cannot be regarded as literary criticism.

A very recent critic (White, 1978) deals in much more acerbic terms with the concept of comic cathar= sis. Increasingly modern critics (such as Kerr) very persuasively attribute to comedy the traditio= nal functions of tragedy. White decides that "as tragic purgation fades, comedies of corrosion offer new kinds of solace; those produced by sardonic derision" (p. 12). This mockery procures relief

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1. Cf. his description of laughter: "... to find the expla= nation why we laugh may be a task as delicate as analysing the chemical composition of a perfume, with its multiple ingredients - some of which are never perceived, while others, sniffed in isolation, would make us wince" (p. 62).

(cf. Kerr, p. 28).[1] Unlike Kerr, however, he feels that "savage comedy has the capacity to purge. Most kinds of humor purge us in some degree. With tragedy virtually disappearing from modern stages, savage comedy's rapacious and upsetting humor may well be a necessity" (p. 16).

Heilman (1978) gives the following valuable perspectives on the idea of comic catharsis: "It is possible that the catharsis ... occurs but is not wholly terminal, that the aesthetic exercise leaves some trace, that the elimination of emotion evoked means not its traceless vanishing but a minutely altered responsiveness that reduces the limitations inherent in a nonexperience of comedy. This possibility would permit the assumption that an experiencing of comedy, the more so if it were habitual, could be thought of as cathartic, and yet also as contributing to the civility which is the ground of a beneficent continuing society. Yeats alludes to 'the sense of comedy [that] John Eglinton called "the social cement of our civilization"'" (p. 252).

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1. Berger (1961) maintains that "comic catharsis presents us with a fleeting image of man transcending his finitude and, if only for a brief moment, gives us the exhilarating idea that perhaps it will be man after all who will be the victor in his struggle with a universe bent on carrying him" (p. 212). This idea, expressed by an avowed Christian, is radically different from the nihilistic views held by most contemporary critics.

3.4 Disposing of the invasion

In concluding this discussion, it would be well to quote L.C. Knights' cautionary words: "Only a morbid pedantry would be blind to the function of laughter in comedy, but concentration upon laughter leads to a double error: the dilettante critic falls before the hallucination of the Comic Spirit, the more scientifically minded persuade themselves that the jokes collected by Bergson and Freud have something to do with the practice of literary criticism" (in Lauter, 1964, p. 443). Thus, while Merchant advocates a "hurried disengagement" from involvement in psychology, sociology or metaphysics (p. 6), one has to acknowledge the presence and the function of laughter and catharsis in comedy and assign them their proper places.[1)]

Therefore, on the basis of Koestler's idea of the creative qualities inherent in humour, it should be possible to postulate the idea that the seemingly insoluble link between laughter and comic theory is the result of a particular creative activity. The emotions evoked in an audience by tragedy would of necessity be more uniform than those evoked by comedy.

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1. Heilman says that "the most we can say for laughter is that it is a frequent symptom of the comic" (1978, p. 17).

Tragedy deals with a far narrower spectrum of passion and emotion, thus a more sharply defined one.[1] In vicariously entering the world and the spirit of the tragic play, then, the audience responds fairly uniformly, exhibiting fear, pity, awe and other *equivalent* emotions.

The audience at a comedy, however, because a comedy represents the *diversity and complexity*, the *disparateness* of human life, as it is inextricably bound up in society, is confronted by an almost impossibly wide spectrum of possible emotions and responses. Audience response is much more *immediate, diverse, individual* (not to say *unique*) and intense.[2] What is most important, however, is that each individual in the audience, because of a basically different frame of reference, and because of the wide field covered by comedy, enters into an individual interpretive (thus creative) contract with the play. Granted, there will be a central meeting

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1. Cf. Cooper's contention that in tragedy emotions are purged by the representation of *like* emotions, while in comedy it can be done by the representation of wildly disparate emotions (p. 66 above).

2. Athene Seyler (quoted in Corrigan, 1976, p. 760), feels that "comedy is simply a point of view. It is a comment on life from outside, an observation on human nature ... Comedy seems to be standing outside a character or situation and pointing out one's delight in certain aspects of it. For this reason it demands the co-operation of ... the audience and is in essence the same as recounting a good story over the dinner-table". This is the sort of approach that has largely led, in my opinion, to the unfortunate confusion of laughter theory and theory of comedy.

ground, but because of differing individual responses, culminating in laughter of varying intensity and texture, each response will be felt to be intimately connected with the artistic object, the comedy itself. Because a comedy traditionally has been regarded as a means to evoke laughter, the response and the artefact will tend to become confused, as the sense of comedy of the audience is an important consideration.[1)]

The function of laughter in comedy cannot and should not be repudiated, but should rather be relegated to its proper sphere. It is ultimately an *inessential adjunct* of comedy. Olson's identification of a particular state of mind conducive to laughter is important, because in contemporary comedy one is also made aware of a particular state of mind, but then not one all that conducive to laughter, or at least not carefree laughter. In much modern comedy the laugh as follow-up to the induced state of mind of the audience has disappeared, and has been replaced by a sometimes sickening and breathless awareness of a yawning void

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1. Heilman (1978) quotes some "apparently unpremeditated words by Anthony Burgess" which to his mind compactly describe this phenomenon: "Comedy has a meaning in terms of - not of content, but effects: elation, acceptance of the world, of the fundamental disparateness of the elements of the world. The test is, it makes one, if not laugh, at least consider laughing. One feels one can push on" (pp. 47-48). This is the more traditional view - nowadays one is left with the idea that one has to push on and keep on pushing on, gathering some sort of impetus from the very hopelessness of the situation.

or abyss, a sort of spiritual vertigo. The sobbing intake of breath, the stunning metaphorical blow to the solar plexus, the abrasive touch - these have become the physiological manifestations of an awareness that is raw, unshielded, uncompromising, but still somehow, forlornly but illimitably compassionate.

Jack Kroll, writing in *Newsweek*, reflects this situation by referring to a sister art: "Today, our best comic-film makers, like Woody Allen and Mel Brooks, evoke laughter, but it's the metallic laughter of people who are connoisseurs of neurosis" (Kroll, 1976, p. 41).

3.5 Comedy

The ensuing theoretical disquisition on comedy will be undertaken under various headings decided on after a study of comic theory. These headings represent the areas of greatest apparent critical concern. The aspects covered in this discussion will run the whole gamut from "permanent truths" to "variable [aspects of] superstructure" (Heilman, 1978, p. 7). Some sort of progression in the argument is intended in the discussion, as the discussion will start on the traditionally acceptable aspects of comedy and gradually develop to include a discussion of concepts dealing more particularly with contemporary ideas

and relationships of comedy.

3.5.1 Comedy and society

This aspect of comedy is chosen as a starting point for the discussion because the relationship between comedy and society is the one irrefutable and undisputed commonplace of criticism of comedy. Comedy is securely conceived of as originating *among* men, aptly described by William Blake in the following terms:

> Great things are done when men and mountains meet;
> This is not done by *jostling in the street*
> (quoted in Potts, 1949, p. 49)

Comedy is the jostling in the street, the jockeying for a viable position, the striving to establish and maintain social relationships.

One of the most enduring views on the interrelationship between comedy and society is the one held by Bergson in his famous essay on laughter. If one should equate laughter with comedy (as he does) the following is significant: "To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one ... Laughter must ... have a social signification"

(p. 7). He further refers to laughter as a social gesture, and ultimately decides that "convinced that laughter has a social meaning and import, that the comic expresses, above all, a special lack of adapt= ability to society, and that, in short, there is nothing comic apart from man, we have made man and character generally our main objective" (p. 133). (He is still, however, a firm believer in the "cor= rective" school of thought.)

Bergson maintains that "comedy can only begin at the point where our neighbour's personality ceases to affect us. It begins, in fact, with what may be called a growing callousness to social life" (p. 134). Because of this faithful approximation of social life, however, he denies comedy true artistic reali= ty, finding that it lies midway between life and art.[1)] Bergson's view that "by laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it" (p. 197) ties in with Meredith's view that comedy demands a stable society of civilized men and women (in Sypher, 1956, p. 3) and is also indicative of the tra= ditional view that the very stability of the relevant society is the norm against which comic deviations in behaviour are measured. This is a comfortable and secure view that has been challenged by later critics. In fact, some later critics have pointed out that

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1. This is very different from Cassirer's more acceptable view that comic art is a "concretion of reality" (1951, p. 143).

both Meredith and Bergson dealt exclusively with the comedy of manners, a form of comedy in which society is the one stable factor engendering and maintaining grace and order.

Freud unequivocally declares that "the comic arises in the first instance as an unintended discovery derived from human social relations" (in Corrigan, 1971, p. 751). Similarly, Kronenberger has stated that "comedy, indeed, must gain admittance into any part of the world where people are thrown together" (in Felheim, 1962, p. 196). Lauter (1964) also stresses in the Introduction to his Anthology on comedy that comic characters are consistently set in a social situation.

Marie Collins Swabey, analysing comic laughter (1961) maintains that "the comic as a specific term has reference to the general mind of society, to the aggregate of men in interaction" (p. 33). Rodway (1975) takes that a step further by saying that "the rituals from which comedy springs seem to have aimed at just such an integration with self and society" (p. 26). Rodway goes on to deal with the idea of different phases of social integration producing different types of comedy ("satisfactory social integration" leads to "conserving comedy", while "during hardening phases we are likely to find the best comedy *innovating*", p. 27).

This idea is worth exploring briefly, as it has been suggested often enough that certain periods in history are apt to engender certain types of drama. Thus, there is the idea that tragedy will only come to fruition during times of political and social stability because then men can turn inward and subject the soul to analysis. Comedy, on the other hand, flourishes in times of social flux, as it deals more comprehensively and effectively with evanescence. In this respect then, Feibleman (1939) claims a greater responsibility for the comic poet. "But in days of great social upset, of economic turmoil and political upheaval, ... the responsibility of the comedian is a heavy one" (p. 219). Hall (1963) makes the point that comedy depends on rapid change and evolution within the social and cultural structure for its essential tensions. Feibleman's views complete this argument, for he feels that "the pursuit of comedy always flourishes during periods of excessive unrest and change, troublous times of wars and revolutions. For at such a time more than any other is it possible to see and point out the contradictions and disvalues of actuality" (p. 30).[1)]

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1. Dobrée (in Felheim, 1962, p. 205) says that comedy "comes when the positive attitude has failed, when doubt is creeping in to undermine values, and men are turning for comfort to the very ruggedness of life".

To return now to the main argument: "Olson (1968) finds the comic to be "only a particular sort of re= lation among human beings" (p. 24), and McCollom (1971) says that "comedy directs itself towards those levels of mind and feeling concerned not with peri= lous moral choices made in isolation from others but with the steps or leaps taken, the adjustments made, the routines rehearsed, and the chances encountered in an endless variety of social settings from family ..." (p. vii). He further elucidates this by ob= serving that "the amusing, discontinuous action of comedy presents successes and failures in social re= lations" (p. 16) and that the "ultimately inevitable movement of comedy is toward a conclusion supporting and supported by the natural desires of man as a social being" (p. 22).

In another article on comedy (1963) McCollom decides that "comedy studies the species and its varieties" (p. 67) and "the relationships of the individual are more important than the individual himself" (p. 67). Nicoll (1962) also stresses the idea of comedy deal= ing with representatives of types rather than indivi= duals by saying that "comedy is ... concerned with human society, and effects its purpose by filling its stage with society's representatives" (p. 121).

L.J. Potts (1949), writing on Jane Austen, adds a valuable insight. He first claims that the business of comedy is to "satisfy a healthy human desire; the desire to understand the behaviour of men and women

towards one another in social life" (p. 56). He then comments on the fact that to depict men and women in society successfully, "Jane Austen saw what was wanted; her 'three or four families in a country village' provided the most successful, and famous, of all English comic microcosms" (p. 62). The idea of a comic microcosm is a particularly useful convention in dealing with comedy as it delimits the comic world without limiting it, and allows of a greater degree of penetration within the bounds of the particular microcosm.

Both Northrop Frye and Suzanne Langer attribute a special kind of social significance to comedy in the idea of ritual rhythms underlying the comic form. Frye (1971) maintains that the "theme of the comic is the integration of society, which usually takes the form of incorporating a central character into it" (p. 43), so that the "action of comedy ... moves towards the incorporation of the hero into the society that he naturally fits" (p. 44).[1)] He mentions the "commonplace of criticism" (p. 207) that comedy tends to deal with characters in a social group while tragedy is more concentrated on a single individual. He further elaborates on this distinction by arguing that "just as tragedy is a vision of the

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1. Frye (1971) links this idea, in Christian terms, with the theme of salvation (p. 43), which starts, in ironic comedy, with the theme of driving out the *pharmakos* (or scapegoat) from the point of view of society (p. 44), the pharmakos being represented by a Shylock or a Tartuffe.

supremacy of *mythos* or thing done, and just as irony is a vision of *ethos*, or character individualized against environment, so comedy is a vision of *dianoia*, a significance which is ultimately social significance, the establishment of a desirable so= ciety" (p. 286). Frye has also mentioned that the tendency of comedy is to include as many people as possible in its final society. This point is im= portant in traditional, redemptive comedy[1)] and this comprehensiveness is sometimes achieved with great artificiality (the movement towards marriage as a symbol of social integration and regeneration in tra= ditional comedy is often somewhat artless and seemingly arbitrary, but nevertheless essential).

This point of view is echoed by Suzanne Langer (1953) when she speaks of the celebratory nature of comedy. "Comedy is an art form that arises naturally wherever people are gathered to celebrate life, in spring festivals, triumphs, birthdays, weddings or initia= tions" (p. 331). She further makes the point that what justifies the comedy is that the *comus* (which imparted its name to the form) "was a fertility rite, and the god it celebrated a fertility god, a symbol of perpetual rebirth, eternal life" (p. 331). Thus the perpetuation of the basic social unit, the fami= ly, implied by the marriage contrived at the end of

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1. Witwoud: Hey-day! what, are you all got together, like players at the end of the last act?
(Congreve: *The Way of the World*, Act V, Sc. 13.)

traditional comedy, is seen to be the central social concern of that type of comedy.[1)]

Nelvin Vos (1966) takes this view of comedy to its logical conclusion in Christian terms by stating that the comic protagonist is "subordinate to the social ethos, the society is redeemed in the man, and the society is to be 'the redeemed form of man'" (p. 100). He also, however, bases his vision essentially on the traditional *redemptive* form of comedy to be able to assume that "society must be made to work, that men must somehow learn to live together ... the tendency of comedy is to include as many people as possible in its final society" (p. 100).

Robert Heilman (1978) has written the most comprehensive analysis so far of the realm of the comic. He starts off with the statement that "tragedy is imaginable in solitude, comedy is not ... comedy and solitude are incompatible: the essence of comedy is relations with others, whether a man is laughing at them, being laughed at by them, cooperating with them, coming to terms with them ... easily or uneasily coexisting with them. The comic mode is social; the comic stage is not the soul but the world" (p. 14). Furthermore, "we instinctively move and act in the world, the domain of comedy" (p. 15).

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1. Heilman puts this into another perspective, however, by saying that "the celebration of ongoing life is a mode of comedy rather than the soul of comedy" (1978, p. 34).

Heilman further distinguishes between comedy and tragedy on one level by deciding that comedy is episodic rather than total (as tragedy is), and while he does not find this to be a reliable criterion of generic identity, the idea that after the central comic encounter "life goes on" (p. 31) is useful. "What survives in comedy is the human quality by which man acknowledges the nature of life in the immediate world" (p. 31). The nature of life in the immediate world is experienced as being almost impossibly fractured. Comedy deals exhaustively with man's efforts to come to some sort of compromise with the disparate nature of reality and the world. Heilman feels that "comedy, in treating the disparateness as bearable, as ingestible, asserts that social order is imaginable and so possible" (p. 251). (Treating the disparateness as bearable comes into his theory dealing with acceptance, which will be dealt with in more detail in 3.5.8.)

From the foregoing, therefore, one could accept as a commonplace of comic theory, as one of the permanent ways of comedy, that comedy and society are indivisibly linked and in fact that comedy finds its *raison d'être* within the society of men.

Gradually but increasingly in the discussion of various aspects of comedy the stress will fall less on the permanent ways of comedy than on the "variable superstructure" peculiarly attributable to the needs and demands of the age, so that the final definition

will reveal a very definite contemporary bias, without, however, denying the validity of certain permanent truths such as the social basis of comedy.

3.5.2 Comedy and incongruity

The element of incongruity has long been regarded as a central constituent element of the comic. It is also the one element of the comic which can be linked most consistently to laughter theory, as the incongruous is most often productive of laughter (although Olson's cautionary words might be mentioned here to the effect that "the universe is full of incongruities, and if this theory were true, we should never stop laughing", 1968, p. 10).

Bergson's formulation of the concept of incongruity is one of the best-known in comic theory. He refers to the lack of response to social stimuli as a rigidity, a mechanical inelasticity, so that the comic consists in "something mechanical encrusted on the living" (1922, p. 37). This idea is further elucidated in the later statement that "any incident is comic that calls our attention to the physical in a person, when it is the moral side that is concerned"

(p. 51).[1)]

In various forms, this idea has been reiterated by many critics and philosophers since Bergson.

Wimsatt (1955) bases his view of comedy on the idea that there should always be some kind of contrast. He describes this type of theory as being more austere, as being a movement away from the laugher himself and towards the things he may be supposed to laugh at. Thus, "the Kantian incongruity between idea entertained and sensuously discovered object and the similar formula of Schopenhauer are among the most purified versions" of the idea of contrast and incongruity in the comic.

Still in the sphere of philosophy, Marie Collins Swabey discourses on the idea of the incongruous, but then "an incongruity that makes sense" (1961, p. 15), and also ultimately an incongruity that demands an "intellectual process" (p. 16) to come to fruition. She accords the whole comic process an intellectual foundation, as to her mind wit "turns upon the intellect's recognition of sense in the *apparent*

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1. Bergson elaborates on this in an idea worthy of consideration. "This is just why the tragic poet is so careful to avoid anything calculated to attract attention to the material side of his heroes. No sooner does anxiety about the body manifest itself than the intrusion of the comic element is to be feared. On this account, the hero in a tragedy does not eat or drink or warm himself. He does not even sit down any more than can be helped" (p. 52).

nonsense and rejection of an absurdity in the light of consistency as a standard" (p. 70). Her later claim that one may lay hold of the laughable in comedy "by grasping the noumenal order under the Idea of Truth" (p. 170) seems somewhat narrow and rigid.[1)]

Feibleman (1939) elaborates on what he regards as the basic, underlying nature of comedy, finding a crucial incongruity which implicitly contains the critical function of comedy.

"There is only one kind of comedy, namely, that which we have said consists in the indirect affirmation of the ideal logical order by means of the limited orders of actuality" (p. 203). He continues this argument by stating that "such are the perspectives upon existence, that we are enabled to compare them and thus to note that each to some extent reveals an actuality which is not what it ought to be but only what it is; and it is then that we laugh. As long as human existence is a limited and finite affair ... there will echo the sound of laughter, a sound reminiscent of an indefinitely repeated round of humour and improvement ... " (p. 273). Leaving out the aspect of correction for the

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1. Johnson made a particularly apt remark, declaring that definers "have embarrassed their definition with the means by which the comic writers attain their end, without considering that the various methods of exhilarating their audience, not being limited by nature, cannot be comprised in precept" (in Lauter, 1964, p. 254).

moment, this idea is reminiscent of Heilman's view of the *disparateness* underlying the comic realm, the *world*.

Feibleman's essential contrast between the ideal logical order and limited reality is also perceived by Potts (1949). He posits the idea that "almost always comedy hints at the fundamental human inconsistency between the ideal and reality; but it also depicts every variety of clash between contrasting ideas and temperaments" (p. 26).[1)]

Likewise, Cyrus Hoy (1964) intimates that "incongruity is the essence of the comedy" mainly because he finds that "the discrepancy between the noble intention and the ignoble deed points directly to the most glaring incongruity in the human condition" (p. 5). He also comments on the fact that man's dual nature makes him an incongruous figure and that in this clash or eccentricity resides its dramatic value, for "if there were nothing incongruous in the human condition, there would be nothing to dramatize" (pp. 21-22). Schilling (1965) even goes so

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1. Thus, although he states that "it is not the business of comedy to inculcate moral doctrine" (p. 56) it is still in this matter of essential incongruity and discrepancy, to have a norm in view in the creation of comedy. "To detect eccentricity you must have a centre: that is to say a consistent ... standard of character and conduct" (p. 47). This need not be explicit, however, as " ... for the most part he will leave his public to deduce his norm from the way he depicts the clash and contrast of varied abnormalities" (p. 45).

far as to link a realistic perception of one's essentially incongruous nature with a man's personal and individual degree of discernment, because comedy "invites a certain discernment, an ability to see man as incongruously different from what he should be" (p. 17).

J.L. Styan (1968) does admit the presence of incongruity in comic forms of literature but denies that it is of necessity conducive to laughter (p. 43).[1] This idea is taken further by Olson (1968) who declares that incongruity *per se* (or *inappropriateness, discrepancy, contradiction, paradox,* etc.) need not be confined to comedy as they are in fact multivalent (p. 9). He does not deny the role of incongruity (etc.) in laughter or the comic, but "it is not the relation merely, but what is related to what, that would seem to make all the difference" (p. 10). He is even disparaging about this, claiming that "one and the same incongruity may amuse you or horrify you, depending on the circumstances, and your view of the matter. Indeed, the universe is full of incongruities, and if this theory were true, we should never stop laughing" (p. 10). (Cf. Heilman's views later in this chapter.)

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1. Styan also quotes Hazlitt as having said that "the essence of the laughable was the 'incongruous', a distinction between 'what things are and what they ought to be'" (p. 40).

Walter Kerr (1967) includes a whole chapter on comedy and incongruity in his highly readable book. He initiates the discussion by a very apt description: "'A sparrow fluttering about a church is an antagonist which the most profound theologian in Europe is wholly unable to overcome', Sydney Smith once said" (p. 26). Even more succinctly he says further on that "man can free himself of God but not of the need for a haircut" (p. 144). Kerr finds this irony at the very heart of reality, for while one cannot deny man's intellectual and spiritual mobility, it does constitute "baggage" (p. 145), so that one finds a strong echo of Bergson in the following: "A bishop should not have to go to the bathroom ... an ambassador busy on an important mission for his country should not have to pause over his scheduled appointments and soberly reshuffle a few to leave time for sex. The situation in each case is more than inconvenient; it is preposterous" (p. 145). Therefore, because a "creature capable of transcending himself should at the same time be incapable of controlling himself is hilarious" (p. 145), and consequently "comedy will speak of nothing but limitation" (p. 146) because on earth "the infinite is taxed" (p. 147).

On a different level from the literary critics, Koestler (1964) has postulated a theory to account for the actual "mechanics" underlying the perception of incongruity in his theory of bisociation. He feels that unexpectedness alone is not enough to

produce a comic effect. The crucial point here is that behaviour should be seen as being both unexpected and incongruously but perfectly logical (p. 33). He therefore defines the process (which he calls bisociation) as "the clash of two mutually incompatible codes, or associative contexts, which explodes the tension" (p. 35). (This explosion, in his theory, underlies both humour and the creative act.) In elaborating on humour he perceives the pattern underlying all varieties of humour as being "bisociative", as the perception of a situation or event in which two "habitually incompatible associative contexts" cause an abrupt "transfer of the train of thought from one matrix to another, governed by a different logic or 'rule of the game'" (p. 96).

This view has an implication for the human behaviour underlying comedy, as "these silent codes can be regarded as condensations of learning into habit. Habits are the indispensable core of stability and ordered behaviour; they also have a tendency to become mechanized and to reduce man to the status of a conditioned automaton. The creative act, by correcting previously unrelated dimensions of experience, enables him to attain to a higher level of mental evolution. It is an act of liberation - the defeat of habit by originality" (p. 98). This latter part of his statement also places him, albeit somewhat more sophisticatedly, in the school of comedy-as-corrective.

Finally, Heilman (1978) strives to give some perspec= tive on the matter of incongruity in comedy. He refers to essential disharmonies and discrepancies (existing between "self-estimate and fact", between two characters, between character and situation and role, between one element of his make-up and another) and states that the incongruous (as an enveloping term for all these phenomena) "has been employed in a wide range of ways from the obvious to the subtle" (p. 36). He has reservations about the validity of using this term which centres on the idea that "the incongruous is so persistently present in all kinds of dramatic and rhetorical situations that it does not provide a primary way into comedy" (p. 38).

Because the incongruous is rooted in the ironic, and because the ironic can be used of either tragedy or comedy, he feels that "since we need the qualifying adjectives, the noun itself will not take us into serious generic distinctions. Not that we shall not find the concept of the ironic, or the incon= gruous helpful ..." (p. 38). He ultimately opts for the term *disparateness*, or waywardness, since it does not let us off the hook too easily, it sums up fittingly all the modes of disparateness that comedy accepts. In the broadest sense comedy observes the discrepancy between imaginable or stated ideals and human actuality: we laud truthfulness, but we are imperfectly truthful" (p. 236).

The argument would thus seem to boil down to the idea that in comedy one should acknowledge the iro= nic underlay of existence, and perceive the essential disparateness and diversity of human life, typified by the use of the term *incongruous* in a great deal of critical theory.

3.5.3 Reason (intellect) and objectivity in comedy

Comedy and tragedy have often been distinguished from each other on the basis of intellect and emotion, tragedy being regarded as having more emotional appeal while the appeal of comedy is said to be more intellectual.

The idea that comedy has a largely intellectual appeal has a limited validity. One had perhaps better narrow it down considerably and claim places for intellect and objectivity in the *process of perception* of what= ever is seen to be comic at any given instant. It is significant to note that the theorists who insist most strongly on this characteristic of comedy (Bergson, De Staël, Molière and Meredith) would seem to deal mostly with the comedy of manners, in which fastidious detachment does become a norm.

In this respect Allardyce Nicoll has said the follow= ing: "That the comedy of manners builds itself upon a prevailingly intellectual attitude to life is cer= tain ... the emotions may not be deeply aroused, but

the entire effect of the comedy depends upon the interplay of a prevailingly intellectual approach and an undercurrent of sensibility" (1962, p. 125).

Lauter (1964) discusses Molière's idea regarding the appeal of comedy: "Pour connaître le ridicule, il faut connaître la raison dont il signifie le défaut" ("To know the comic we must know the rational attitude of which it is the obverse") (p. 144). Thus, in pinpointing the ridiculous as the *déraissonable* (or the unreasoned), Molière defines the approach to comedy.[1] Both in theory and in practice Molière subscribed to this approach.

Bergson, also dealing with the comedy of manners as his model for a theory, states that "the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion" (p. 4). He underlines this very decisively when he states that "to produce the whole of its effect, then, the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple" (p. 5). The objective disinterestedness that he perceives in comedy is illustrated in his statement that "comedy

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1. Moliére further clarifies his position by maintaining that "people do not mind being called wicked, but they object to being made ridiculous" (in Lauter, 1964, p. 157).

can only begin at the point where our neighbour's personality ceases to affect us. It begins, in fact, with what may be called a growing callousness to social life" (p. 134).

In dealing with Meredith's views, we come across the same limitation as is operative in the case of Bergson. Just like Bergson, he limits his consideration (albeit unconsciously) to the comedy of manners. "The comic poet is in the narrow field, or enclosed square, of the society he depicts, and he addresses the still narrower enclosure of men's intellects, with reference to the operation of the social world upon their characters" (in Corrigan, 1971, p. 744). He qualifies this view with reference to laughter when he observes that "the laughter of comedy is impersonal and of unrivalled politeness, nearer a smile - often no more than a smile. It laughs through the mind, for the mind directs it; and it might be called the humor of the mind" (p. 744). Finally, there is the famous Meredithian dictum regarding the comic and the society from which it springs and which serves further to underline the fastidious quality of his mind. "One excellent test of the civilization of a country ... I take to be the flourishing of the comic idea and comedy; and the test of true comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter" (p. 744). Feibleman (1939) comments on the fact that Meredith has the distinction of singling out the effect of comedy upon the audience, and the right sort of audience, as the

true criterion of comic excellence" (p. 80).[1)]

Marie Collins Swabey (1961) has sought to find a philosophical basis to explain the rational element in comedy. She claims that the perception of the comic "requires logical and metaphysical comprehension, a normative intellectual insight" (p. 13), and that "awareness of the comic requires an intellectual process" (p. 16).[2)]

Prinsloo (1970) comments on Swabey's dictum that there is an "intelligible logic that makes comic nonsense distinct from nonsense pure and simple" (p. 28) by saying that this "is the postulation of a frame of reference inside which the comic incongruity can appear" (p. 73). He goes on to state that "Swabey is brought to her redefinition of the comic which is based on what she has earlier called *intellection* and *mentation* by which she seems to mean the same as Meredith with his 'thoughtful laughter' ... the ludicrous is recognized only as the result of logic and an objective attitude" (p. 73).

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1. This view is reminiscent of the views expressed by Madame de Staël (1800) who claimed that "only the genius of one man and the good taste of several others can inspire genuine comedy" (in Lauter, 1964, p. 183).

2. Freud, however, has maintained that "the comic process cannot stand examination by the attention, it must be able to proceed absolutely unnoticed in a manner similar to wit" (in Felheim, 1962, p. 234).

Feibleman's view seems to support this when he claims that "comedy is concerned to show the inevitability of logic" (p. 28), and his stand is quite uncompromising later when he demands of comedy "which is intellectual [that it] must be without relaxation, ever on the alert. For we can never be sure when contradictions will present themselves in actuality and when they will not" (p. 78).

3.5.4 Comedy: criticism, morality and reduction

The vision of comedy as a corrective has had the longest (and the most chequered) acknowledged existence. It has often been used as a sop to susceptible consciences and to justify the existence of a literary form: a totally extra-literary consideration had intruded on the terrain of literary criticism and has persisted to do so up to the present day, albeit in more subtle or in disguised form.

This approach to comedy encompasses the Platonic tradition in literary criticism and a brief look at Plato's ideas should act as philosophical underpinning to this section. (This section, like the one dealing with incongruity theory, tends to a large extent to rest on the premise of laughter-as-scourge.)

In the *Philebus* (Lauter, 1964, pp. 6-8), Plato's basic views on the ridiculous and the evil are set out in dialogue form. "Generally the ridiculous is a certain kind of badness; it gets its name from a certain state of mind. It is that part of badness in general which is opposite to the state of which the inscription at Delphi speaks" (p. 6).[1] Socra= tes (the speaker in this instance) goes on to define the condition of not knowing oneself. "For ignor= ance in the strong is hateful and ugly, because mischievous to all around - both in reality and in stage copies. But ignorance in the weak may be reckoned in truth ridiculous" (p. 7).[2] There is agreement that "ignorance is always an evil" (p. 7). Feibleman interprets that in the following manner: "Plato's theory amounts in effect to the exposure of contradictions in actuality, and thus indirectly to the demand for a better state of affairs" (1939, p. 77).

In *The Republic* (quoted and evaluated by Lane Cooper, 1922) one comes across his well-known views on poetry and poets. He contends that "poetry is therefore false to the nature of the divine, untrue also in so far as it is imitative and unreal, and dangerous to the safety of the state" (p. 106). He elaborates on this by commenting on the adverse effects of

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1. "Know thyself."
2. Ignorance centres on delusions about *money, physical qualities* and *'qualities of the soul'* (p. 6).

poetry (from which has been extrapolated a concern with comedy) on the emotions of men: "In all of them [the emotions] poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, al= though they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue" (p. 109)[1] Cooper then refers to the *Laws* and Plato's view that man must know the *uncomely* and the *laughable* in or= der to arrive at truth through viewing opposites. Plato stressed the idea that a comic poet should not be allowed to ridicule the citizens upon pain of punishment; also, "he should command slaves and hired strangers to imitate such things, but he should never take any serious interest in them him= self, nor should any freeman or freewoman be dis= covered taking pains to learn them" (in Cooper, 1922, p. 110).

These views have been variously echoed in the works of many early philosophers. From *A Fragment on Comedy and Tragedy* (ca. 350 AD) by Donatus (in Lau= ter, 1964, p. 27) comes the view that "in comedy one learns what is useful in life and what on the

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1. Lane Cooper comments on this passage by saying that "most scholars have held that Aristotle took his departure from this argument, to combat it; that, having justified the emotional relief of pity and fear through tragedy, he went on to deal with the emotional problem of comedy in a similar way; and that for him comedy would afford the pro= per catharsis of laughter, so that the audience by giving vent to the risible faculty at the theatre, would be less likely to play the comic poet at home" (p. 109).

contrary is to be avoided". The same is implied by John Tzetzes in his *First Poem to Aristophanes* (ca. 1180 AD) when he affirms that "comedy is imitation of an action ... purgative of emotions, constructive of life, moulded by laughter and pleasure" (in Lauter, 1964, p. 33), which Feibleman interprets as a laying bare of "the fictions of the affairs of everyday life, with a view to founding that life more firmly, and may be taken as an excellent brief account of what the comedian tries to accomplish and of what the purpose of comedy essentially is" (p. 92).

Lauter, introducing Italian Renaissance theories, isolates a few important trends, such as the fact that "it became incumbent upon the Platonic critics either to find a value for any art form or to reject it. Some, like later Christian[1)] critics, did the latter" while "others saw in comedy a teacher of ethics, economics, politics, even the arts of language (a Horatian element of 'utility'), and above

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1. Comedy and the church had a very uneasy relationship in earlier ages - to put it mildly indeed. This is exemplified in the work of Pierre Nicole (in Lauter, pp. 164-169). He maintains that the comic is "a sacrilegious employment, and unworthy of a Christian" (p. 164) because of the "danger of the passion of love, which holds sway in all comedies" (p. 164). He also feels that "what renders this danger greater is that comedy weakens our means of resisting its bad influence" (p. 165) and "the aim of poets is to disguise depraved passions so as to make them more pleasant" (p. 169). He concludes with great severity that "the need to amuse oneself cannot excuse comedy" (p. 169).

all morality" (p. 39). These critics are not going to be dealt with in any detail - what they have to say individually amounts very much to the same in practically all cases. Minturno is typical in com= menting that comedy "amended ... lives" and the efforts of comedy were "concentrated on bettering the mores of the city and in bringing the citizens to a better form of government" (p. 77).

Much later Schopenhauer would insist that "comedy ... joins hands with the realistically defined 'will to live' and reasonably looks forward to a bet= ter future, one in which the errors and disvalues at which we have laughed shall have been corrected" (quoted in Feibleman, 1939, p. 112).

Meredith neatly describes comedy as "the specific for the poison of delusion" (Corrigan, 1971, p. 744). He rejects the overtly satirical and the farcical, however, as being "too gross for comedy" (Corrigan, p. 744), and derisive laughter thwarts the comic idea, but "derision is foiled by the play of the in= tellect" (p. 744).

Bergson also feels that in laughter (and thus in comedy) "we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct our neighbour, if not in his will, at least in his deed" (p. 136), and this leads to the damaging conclusion that "this is the reason a comedy is far more like real life than a drama is" (p. 136). It is precisely in this

duality of vision regarding comedy as literature and comedy as moral instrument that many of the critical problems and deadlocks have had their origin, for comedy is tacitly denied its reality as art and is made to serve a moralistic and didactic purpose.

As comedy has steadily gained in critical respectability (and sophistication) over the years, the position has undergone a fundamental change, but this is apparent only in the works of the most recent critics. Elizabeth Drew (1937) comes up with a division of comic forms founded on categories of critical comedy (criticism being either implicit or explicit). Explicit criticism "exposes definite follies or abuses to contempt and ridicule" while implicit criticism "is the natural result of revealing human nature as it is" (p. 148).

Feibleman (1939) similarly opts for a theory of implicit criticism, for to his mind comedy points to the limitations of actuality, so that "the categories of actuality are always what they have to be and seldom what they ought to be. It is the *task* of comedy to make this plain ... The *business* of comedy is to dramatize and thus make more vivid and immediate the fact that contradictions in actuality must prove insupportable" (p. 178). Furthermore, comedy "is in sympathy with the revolutionary struggle for something better and again for something still better" (p. 214).

Kronenberger (in Felheim, 1962, p. 197) claims uncompromisingly that "comedy at its greatest is criticism indeed; is nothing less, in fact, than a form of moral enlightenment". Similarly, Julius Vexler (in Lauter, 1964, p. 444) feels that the "ruth[1)] of comedy is its catharsis, its riddance of excess and hardened whim". Marie Swabey (1961), even while regarding the satirist as inferior to the true comic artist, nevertheless opts for the functional distinction that "satire is probably the most socially effective form of the comic, with the greatest *utility* as a *practical instrument* for the destruction of evils" (p. 271).

Modern critics like Knights and Bentley reply convincingly and succinctly to these earlier critics. Knights feels that "it is obvious that the Social Corrective theory not only precludes discussion of a comedy in terms of the effects we have described but prevents those who accept it from even realizing that such discussion is possible" (in Lauter, 1964, p. 436).

Bentley (1964) acknowledges that tragedy and comedy have the same heuristic intent, viz. self-knowledge, but maintains that to "condemn evil would be derelict, single, unironic and therefore uncomic. The classic condemners of evil are the Pharisees. And the

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1. Compassion.

Pharisees,[1] then and now, cannot make use of comedy; they can only be made use of by it" (p. 309). Bentley still treads a precarious path by calling the art of comedy "an undeceiving, an emancipation, an unmasking, an art, if you will, of dénouement" (p. 309), but any overtly moralistic ideas have been eliminated from his view. Walter Kerr also subscribes to this more modern and sophisticated view of the revelatory rather than the corrective nature of comedy. "Comedy cannot help finding the flaw in free, proud, vaulting activity ... [it] devalues by instinct, and his inverted vision is 20-20 ... yet he detests his own accuracy" (pp. 334-335).

Finally, Heilman (1978) provides the most carefully balanced viewpoint when he maintains that "the term correctiveness, if we are to use the term, does not proceed by the satiric flagellation of the uncorrected, but operates only through the unpretentious enactment of a corrected way of life that, being perceived, might stir some sharper perception of what is possible. And yet even so circumspect a statement might suggest the formal exemplum, *which is entirely out of the domain of comedy*. Whatever might be thought corrective is only one element in the arsenal of comic materials; its presence

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1. Gurewitch (1975) says it most succinctly: "But therapeutic comedy can have only a fugitive psychic effect; it has never been heralded as a power that can reduce criminal statistics or make adultery superfluous ... by vicarious satisfaction" (p. 40).

might not even be felt, and at best it would be unin-sistent, not raising its voice above the choral amplitude of presented life" (p. 235).[1)]

It is, in conclusion, significant that those critics dealing most persistently with the corrective and moralistic aspect of comic criticism simultaneously deal with the smallest number of plays as concrete substance for their arguments - a fact which leads one to the malicious suspicion that hard evidence for this sort of criticism must reside more in the minds of philosophers, moralists and guardians of public morality than in the real literary artefacts they are purporting to criticize.

3.5.5 Comedy and satire

More and more often, modern criticism of comedy is becoming disdainful of the claims of satire, as satire is thought to narrow down the vision of the comic to an unacceptable degree. The essential distinction between comedy and satire is to be found in the quality of compassion intrinsic to the truly comic, as the following brief, evaluative discussion should reveal.

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1. This is sharply underlined by Schlegel's view that comedy "is intended to sharpen our powers of discrimination, both of persons and situations; to make us shrewder; and this is its true and only possible morality" (in Lauter, 1964, p. 349).

Hall (1963) has expressed the central distinction in a beautifully evocative image. "Comic novels find garlic and sapphires in the mud, satiric ones find mostly garlic and blame it for not being sapphire, or comic novels are more forgiving and cheerful than satiric ones" (p. vi). Potts (1949) has made much the same distinction, viz. that "comedy accepts life and human nature" while satire "rejects and aims at destruction" (p. 155). Potts also accords tragedy and comedy an altogether higher position in the "hierarchy of modes" (above satire and farce). In support of this idea of the essentially accepting rather than rejecting nature of comedy as opposed to satire he stresses Congreve's essential and evident good nature, which he regards as a prerequisite to the creation of true comedy.

Merchant (1972) similarly opposes "bitter glee" (satire) and "compassionate laughter" (comedy) (p. 42). The compassionate laughter of comedy to his mind is rooted in "an urbane certainty of redemption" (p. 42). His fundamental distinction is fairly radical, as he finds it to consist in the following: "Satire judges man against an ideal, while comedy sets him against a norm. This proposes a fundamental distinction, for an ideal is by its nature difficult of realization by fallible man, while a norm

is humanity's resting-point" (p. 42).[1)]

Amur (1963) also finds in satire a complete absence of the kindliness generally associated with comedy, and he calls the satirical "inimical to the spirit of comedy if it is allowed to dominate the entire mood" (p. 29). He makes a point of central signifi= cance in the consideration of the contemporary vision of comedy in his comment on the development of the form. "The dissociation of the Comic Spirit from satire has been one of the most important features of its evolution" (p. 30).

Allardyce Nicoll (1962) finds that satirical comedy tends to work in the "humours" tradition because no sympathy exists (and he makes a case for Jonson's lack of staying power on the stage on the grounds of his having written comedies of humours, which rapid= ly tend to lose their topicality)[2)] (p. 127). To his mind the desire to satirize springs from condem= nation, leading ultimately to "despairing malevol= ence" (p. 126). He thus concludes that while satire may "successfully form an incidental part of

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1. Cook (1949) echoes this to a large extent. "Whereas comedy laughs joyously over the norms of contemporary society, satire laughs sardonically at those norms; to satire the times are out of joint" (p. 48).

2. McCollom (1971) provocatively accounts for Shaw's escape from this self-same fate. "If his plays were as intellec= tually haughty and uncompromising as his prefaces, essays, and statements to the press, he would be remembered primar= ily as a satirist, not as a comic dramatist" (p. 198).

a comedy ... its lack of sympathetic warmth and ... its openly expressed sense of purpose make it a dan=gerous style ..." (p. 127).

Heilman creates a perspective. He states unequivoc=ally that "the more the idea-ridden man becomes in=tense, intransigent and power-seeking, the more he demands the *rejective* style of satire" (p. 237).

It would thus appear from the views of a number of responsible and respected (as well as discerning) modern critics that while satire may constitute a small segment of the total comic vision, its mood should not be allowed to prevail and significantly stain the prevailingly compassionate mood of the truly comic view. One could then go along with Amur in his view that in direct proportion to the decline of satire in comedy so comedy has become a subtler and more all-enveloping vision of man and the world.

3.5.6 Comedy: compassion and pain

Compassion was described as the distinguishing qual=ity between comedy and satire in the preceding sec=tion. This aspect of comedy will be considered in greater detail as it has an important bearing on the consideration of comedy and its view of the imper=fections and limitations of the human race which

will be looked at in the following section.

Dobrée (1926) feels that comedy gives us courage to face life and "to feel humanly, for comedy shows us life not at such a distance that we cannot but re= gard it coldly, but only in so far as we may bring to it a ready sympathy freed from terror or too over= whelming a measure of pity" (in Felheim, 1962, p. 205). The stress on *human* and *sympathy* and the ex= clusion of an excess of pity are important points. Comedy does not view man with either a jaundiced or a condescending eye.

Kronenberger (1952) too maintains that the comic spirit is "kindly and companionable ... it is not only criticism but understanding" (in Felheim, 1962, p. 196). The views of both Dobrée and Kronenberger are still comparatively bland when one compares them with the searing awareness of our shared but imper= fect humanity emerging increasingly from the views of more modern and contemporary writers on comedy.

Dudley Zuver (1933) expresses the idea that mercy is the flexible connective between the actual and the real, as it is a proper manifestation of the comic spirit. He extrapolates from this and claims that God has a sense of humour as well, for He has been revealed to us as full of compassion, longsuffering and merciful. Thus in Zuver's work there is the strong awareness still that comedy is inherently re= demptive, an idea which will be analysed much more

closely in the ensuing sections, as the idea of redemption seems to be in the process of being irre= vocably eroded.

Emerson also obliquely acknowledges the need for a compassionate vision when he says that "the percep= tion of the comic is a tie of sympathy with other men, a pledge of sanity" (in Lauter, 1964, p. 380). Thus the society of men is more closely bonded through a vision which if not making light of limit= ing barriers at least ruefully and yet cheerfully scales them. Potts (1949) also finds an essential basis for comedy in good nature, maintaining that the combination of fastidiousness and good nature constitutes the best possible omen for comedy (p. 99).

Amur (1963) implicitly attributes kindliness to co= medy (finding this quality absent in satire). Similarly, Schilling (1965) finds that the truly co= mic vision will lead to an ending "in a mood of tolerance - [the] laughter tempered by sympathy" (p. 11). Merchant's (1972) view ties in with this when he refers to the "compassionate" and "urbane certainty of redemption" in comedy (p. 42).[1)] Styan (1968) also obliquely comments on this in dealing with the task of the comic writer, "who must mix sufficient reality to hold our belief with sufficient unreality to have us *accept the pain* of others. At

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1. A view based largely, however, on analyses of traditional comedies (cf. the section on comedy and redemption, 3.5. 10).

the point of balance, we are in pain ourselves, and the play is meaningful" (p. 257). Therefore comedy would seem to function meaningfully at the point where a good "chemistry" is achieved with the audience.[1)]

Walter Kerr (1967c) has commented extensively and provocatively on the compassionate as encompassed in the comic vision. He first establishes the fact that suffering is not confined to tragedy: "the fact of the matter is that the central contest of any play - comic or tragic - engages its principals in a kind of agony" (p. 339). In fact, earlier on he states categorically that "to be funny is to have been where agony was" (p. 16). What is terrible about the agony of comedy is that it is utterly relentless, that the only way even slightly to ameliorate it is to keep "kicking out at itself", and to find in the actions of the truly comic hero (as exemplified by the clown in Kerr's discussion) "a temporary joy in the worst" (p. 340).

The compassionate attitude advocated by the critics quoted here is an essential requisite for dealing with man as we will see him emerge in the following

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1. This idea has important ramifications, for the artistic autonomy of the comedy in question is now once again involved. As in laughter theory, it would seem that the dividing line between artefact and audience is virtually obliterated or at any rate very vague and confused. It would seem inevitably as if comic effect will not be readily isolated from comic artefact - as spectator involvement is too immediate and real to allow any real measure of detachment.

section - a "poor, bare forked animal" placed pre=
cariously in this world and dealing as best, if in=
effectually, as he can with the truly bewildering
array of difficulties besetting his existence.

3.5.7 Comedy: limitation and imperfection

The view of man as limited and imperfect constitutes one of the most vital aspects of the comic vision. It should be stressed that there is no real thought here of *function* (which would imply corrective action as a logical requirement) but rather an ontological implication: *this is what happens in comedy*. The comic vision is particularly suited to the clear, unambiguous and dispassionate *revelation* of man in his being and in his relationships; and since man is flawed and imperfect, this is the image consist=
ently and clearly evoked.

In this section stress will be on the more modern critics. It is important to note, too, that in this area, as in the area dealing with the social under=
pinning of the comic, there is general critical con=
sensus, as no critic has doubted that comedy reveals man and his foibles.

John Dryden (1671), in the Preface to *An Evening's Love* (in Lauter, 1964, p. 195), states quite simply that "comedy presents us with the imperfections of

human nature".

Zuver (1933) contends that the actual life of an individual centres on the struggle to achieve what he regards as the ideal as opposed to the limited reality of which he is aware. Most importantly, however, he recognizes the need for compromise as an essential part of life.[1)]

Feibleman (1939) has made quite an issue of the limitation of the world as he perceives it. In the first place he implicitly acknowledges a state of limitation and imperfection when he contends that "comedy of the highest order is always crusading for a state of affairs so perfect that it can never be achieved" (p. 63).[2)] From this he moves on to a more explicit statement of the incongruously limited world man inhabits: "... the categories of actuality are always what they have to be and seldom what they ought to be ... comedy continually insists on the limitations of all experience ... comedy, then, consists in the indirect affirmation of the ideal logical order by means of the derogation of the limited orders of actuality" (p. 178). He concludes that "the unexpected indication of the absence of

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1. This compromise constitutes acceptance, which in turn is the one valid attitude to take towards the awareness of the fallibility of all men.

2. Ronald Peacock (1946) has also averred that tragedy and comedy both spring from the tension between an imperfect life and ideal aspirations.

perfection (the *ought*) constitutes the comic situation" (p. 180).

Kronenberger too has simply stated that "comedy is concerned with human imperfection", but he qualifies this statement to some extent by maintaining that "comedy need not be hostile to idealism; it need only show how far human beings fall short of the ideal" (in Felheim, 1962, p. 195). This situation induces in man what he describes as a "strain of melancholy" and he quotes Schiller's dictum that high comedy is the greatest of all literary forms, encompassing the fullest image of man and the world (p. 195).

Dobrée too, in dealing with what he regards as great comedy, feels that "the greatest comedy seems inevitably to deal with the disillusion of mankind, the bitterness of a Troilus or an Alceste, the failure of man to realize their most passionate desires" (in Felheim, 1962, p. 205).

Potts (1949) seems in large measure to echo this, maintaining that "almost always comedy hints at the fundamental human inconsistency between the ideal and reality; but it also depicts every variety of clash between contrasting ideas and temperaments" (p. 26). He adds the important idea that this dispassionate view of life has important consequences, for comedy "is our weapon against the forces of disintegration ... and against the germs of anarchy

and defeatism in our own minds" (p. 44).

Christopher Fry (1960) distinguishes between tragedy and comedy on the basis of experience (tragedy) and intuition (comedy), and finds that "in the intuition we trust the arduous eccentricities we're born to, and see the oddness of a creature who has never got acclimatized to being created ... though comedy ac= cepts our position in time, it barely accepts our posture in space" (p. 78).[1] Fry's vision of comic man is a remarkably tolerant and benign one, for comedy to him is an escape "not from truth but from despair: a narrow escape into faith" (p. 77). (This view will be considered in more detail in the section on the metaphysics of comedy) (3.5.10).

Marie Swabey (1961) finds man limited too, but still sees him as illimitable in hope, for the truest co= medy "gives us hope for our kind, a sense of the doggedly upstanding, unquenchable spirit of the ab= surd human animal with all his weaknesses" (p. 159).[2]

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1. McCollom (1971), in dealing with Shaw, obliquely takes the same position in describing Shaw's situation, as he was "continually seduced by the absurdity of the human spec= tacle" (p. 198).

2. Cf. in this regard the more desolate view expressed by Kramer (1970) who maintains that "any forward action, any hope of attaining a goal not already hopelessly compromised by the mental detritus of the past, is a comic illusion, and Beckett's speciality as a dramatist has been to make of this illusion a viable subject for the stage" (p. 28). This idea is valuable because it is directly derived from a study of *contemporary drama*. Most ideas quoted so far rest on analyses of traditional plays.

Ultimately, the "comic apprehension has in mind a way out ... the levity of deeper comedy sees man's life as the striving of a finite, evanescent creature against an infinite and eternal background" (p. 179).

Hall (1963) echoes this in his identification of hope implicit in comedy, for he claims that while "comedy does trim the cloth of aspiration of the human shape ... it also identifies the aspiration" (p. 151). Thus man is seen in a certain perspective and his striving is seen in perspective mercilessly but it is *not derogated*.

Lionel Abel (1963) proposes to regard *metatheatre* as a complementary form to tragedy (in the place of comedy) and states that "metatheatre glorifies the unwillingness of the imagination to regard any image of the world as ultimate" (p. 371). In this re= spect, at least, *metatheatre* would seem to approxi= mate the traditional nature of comedy.

Schilling (1965) also seems to found his concept of the vision of comedy on the imperfection of man, be= cause "it is not the grandeur of man and his possi= bilities that one sees in comedy, but the plain, the common, the human element levelling all into brother= hood" (p. 17).

Similarly, Vos (1966) feels that the comic protagon= ist has to accept "every condition of his finitude" (p. 13) - and this acceptance of finitude is "the

unique 'act' of comedy" (p. 14).

Rodway (1975) also talks of the fallible nature of man as a "concomitant of human nature" making up what he regards as "inescapably unideal common humanity" (p. 37). Heilman (1978) comments on this aspect graphically in drawing one particular distinction between tragedy and comedy: "In comedy man puts up with the imperfections of the world or recognizes the imperfections in himself that make him a nuisance in the world; in tragedy man recognizes the flaws that make him crave triumphs incompatible with the moral ordering of mankind" (p. 94).

Walter Kerr (1967c) has once more commented tellingly on this aspect of comedy. He deals first with what might constitute a good and valid ending for a comedy: "To be comic, the ending must forcefully call into question the issues of 'happiness' and 'forever after'. Comedy is not lyric, not rhapsodic, not reassuring; putting its last and best foot forward, it puts it squarely down in dung" (p. 79). He also distinguishes between tragedy and comedy in the following terms: "Tragedy speaks always of freedom. Comedy will speak of nothing but limitation" (p. 146). He feels that comedy must face up to the fact that "man is irretrievably limited all the way" (p. 249). The fact that comedy uncovers limitations renders it particularly potent in comparison to tragedy, for it achieves "its own greatest stature when it has

occasion to taunt stature".[1] In the disappear= ance of tragedy from the contemporary literary scene, there are important implications for comedy, for on the one hand comedy is "dependent upon tragedy for its inspiration and even for its carefully inverted incidental effects", on the other "the experience [of limitation] is intensified in the absence of tra= gedy: man is sharply aware that he is more limited than he formerly thought he was" (p. 314). Kerr finds in this a disquieting possibility that "limita= tion too much multiplied will in the end devour, or obscure, the thing to which it adheres" (p. 315). In an age when one is so keenly and forlornly aware of limitation and feebleness, Kerr foresees a real danger that "limitation will loom so large that we can no longer see its referent" (the referent being the tragic vision). Under such circumstances come= dy "cannot perform at its very best, because there is not enough light to make for a thoroughly satisfying shadow dance" (p. 315). He says elsewhere that "when surrender is total and the commitment to limit= ation exclusive, comedy's ending must be what Fal= staff's is: despair" (p. 257).

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1. This idea is clarified elsewhere in the book when Kerr ex= presses the idea that "because comedy derives its very being from the affirmations of tragedy, to which it plays devil's advocate, it is bound to make its boldest obscene gestures just when the heroic parade is proudest" (p. 308). This state of affairs obviously does not obtain now, lead= ing to the unmitigated bleakness of the limited order of reality as it is balefully evoked at present.

Kerr's vision is of the utmost importance in the final consideration of a description of comedy which will fit the needs and facts of the present age. While imperfect man has long been portrayed as the central concern of comedy, there has usually been the idea of mitigation, of a hope that cannot be snuffed out (see 3.5.10). Presently, however, the fashionably bleak and desolate mode has become a force threatening to swamp the traditionally more tolerant view so that the sad lack of mitigation and redemption will increasingly come to characterize the prevailing contemporary comic vision.

3.5.8 Comedy: insight, acceptance and maturity

The most valid response (within the world of the comedy itself) to the revelation and the awareness of the imperfection and the limitation of man is to be found in the attainment, ultimately, of insight, acceptance and maturity by the comic characters. This acceptance is usually accompanied by an emotional tone that might best be described as deprecatory: wry and rueful.

In this respect, then, Zuver (1933) has maintained that because the world is so utterly unlike the ideal we have of it, the individual is involved in the necessity of accepting things as they are. While

this acceptance is by no means easy, it is possible through the presence of some mediating factor. This mediating factor is to be found in a sense of humour, the application of which results in the state suggested by the title of his book, which is *Salvation through Laughter*.

Elizabeth Drew (1937) discourses at length on the fact that comedy challenges the workings of the relevant social order from which it springs. What is important, however, is the fact that the intrinsically comic does not go outside the limits of a specific social order, as "the conclusions of comedy imply the acceptance of the terms on which human life has got to be lived" (p. 170).

Potts (1949) also links a stable social order and acceptance, by the individual, of life and its vagaries. He says that "being by nature social, man is also conventional, he accepts a common view of life generally current in the society in which he lives, and with it a common pattern of behaviour" (p. 114).[1)] Potts finds in this uniformity great ethical significance, because "for everyone to have an entirely different pattern of conduct would be

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1. Swabey (1961) also subscribes to this view by asserting that comedy usually "involves acceptance of the generally received frame of values" (p. 186).

inconvenient, not to say barbarous" (p. 114).[1] This does not imply strict bonds, because within the social structure thus erected man is free to make his own choices and develop his own pattern of conduct.

Potts also establishes a more personal process of insight and acceptance. "Comedy *accepts* life and human nature: sometimes with a light heart, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, sometimes rather *sadly*, as in *Don Quixote*, but always with the good sense that comes from *clear vision* and *understanding*" (p. 155). The italicized words should serve in large measure as a comment on the statement.

Cook (1949) also finds a conserving characteristic in comedy (a view which is in line with the positive attitude towards comedy, which sees in comedy a reaffirmation of hope and redemption). Cook declares that "basically comedy is approval[2], not disapproval, of present society; it is conservative, not liberal, however much the socialist Feibleman would

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1. Kaul (1970) can thus also declare that much comedy "takes happily for granted the basic social and economic structure of the existing world", feeling that "no comedy, at least none with which I am primarily concerned in this study, deals with social conflict in any fundamental way" (p. 23).

2. This is exemplified in the current view regarding Mirabell and Millamant (*The Way of the World*, Congreve). They are not now seen to be interested in changing or escaping from the society in which they live, but are rather involved in a process of adaptation to this society *on their own terms*.

like it to be" (p. 49).[1)]

Amur (1963) adds the dimension of joy to the consi= deration of insight and acceptance. To his mind the discovery of the limitations of human life on earth should not be an overwhelming and discouraging act; instead, the voluntary "acceptance of these limitations" adds immeasurably to "the attainment of a fuller perspective of life, [and] makes human existence not only bearable but positively pleasant" (p. 15).[2)] Thus comedy does not have "the object of condemning life, but of expressing it and making it acceptable" (p. 21).

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1. Heilman (1978) refers to Feibleman's view and formulation by saying that he "rather remarkably accepts the idea of acceptance but translates it into non-acceptance" (p. 263). Feibleman acknowledges grudgingly that comedy is psycholo= gically compelled to deal with acceptance, but is quoted here as saying that "comedy is negative; it is a criticism of limitations and an unwillingness to accept them", so that comedy is ultimately "a refusal to accept the comprom= ises meted out by actuality" (Heilman, p. 264).

2. Cf. in this respect Swabey's contention that comic laughter, though a corrective, carries along with it "a fresh convic= tion of the camaraderie of truth, a renewal of hope, of springtime in life, which despite all reverses finds the world good, reason in its heaven, and man eager to fare forth on new adventures" (1961, p. 247).

Hoy (1964) states this idea of acceptance most clear= ly and concisely. "Comedy implies, then, an accept= ance of life, which implies as well an acceptance of man. And to accept man, one must be prepared to forgive the weakness, the treachery, the downright depravity which, in spite of man's best intentions, are inherent in his behaviour. To accept and to forgive, one must be, above everything else, clear= sighted about what man is" (pp. 17-18). Comedy then, while being very realistic, is ultimately "com= passionate in its forgiveness and its acceptance of human failings" (p. 18).

Schilling (1965) also stresses the discernment necessary for this insight by saying that "if the comic spirit is humane, calling forth a sense of the richness of life, willing participation in it, an acceptance of the full responsibility of being human, it also invites a certain discernment, an ability to see man as incongruously different from what he should be" (p. 17).

Heilman (1978) regards acceptance as one of the relevant modes of response towards the challenges of *the world* (the comic realm). He says that it should be "apparent that acceptance means something between an unrelenting criticalness and a genial universal abdication of judgment" (p. 85). He creates the following perspective: "Comedy rather treats illness and death, not as trivial or as unmentionable, nor as mournful or shocking, but as standard, inevitable,

and much like all discomforts and disadvantages" (p. 91). Ruefully, he acknowledges that "acceptance of the world may mean acceptance of second best, that is, making do with something less than a total good than one is capable of imagining" (pp. 91-92). There is a certain inevitability associated with this, as "we compromise only with what we accept, and we compromise only when we can see what has to be accepted" (p. 97).[1)]

Nathan Scott (1966), writing in a Christian vein, says that "the comic man is not as Aristotle says, worse than we are: on the contrary, it is his function simply to be an example of the contingent, imperfect, earth-bound creatures that in truth we all really are, and it is also his function to awaken in us a lively recognition of what in fact our true station is" (p. 91), and he injects a note of hope and compassion in talking of Charlie Chaplin representing "the little man, the homunculus, who, amid the dreary facelessness of men completely involved in the rituals of a money culture, insisted on behaving as though his fellow human beings were still human" (p. 89).

Up to this point, critics discussed in this context have expressed remarkably coherent views regarding acceptance in comedy. These views, however, are

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1. Heilman's view of *over-acceptance* will be discussed later in this section (p. 138).

still mostly based on works which can be regarded as conforming to the traditional vision of comedy, works moreover written before the 1950's. What follows now is a brief look at a bleaker situation and an interpretation and perspective of what is essentially the same concept but with the elements of joy and hope stripped from it.

Bentley (1964) starts his consideration with the statement that comedy "is an adult genre"[1] taking place "on the other side of despair" (p. 298). Bentley furthers his argument by referring to the fact that comedy has the heuristic intent of self-knowledge (p. 309) and refers to the art of comedy as "an undeceiving, an emancipation from error" (p. 309). In referring to older drama, he finds that "although there has been ... nothing approaching a just society ... on earth, the imagination of mankind has been able to figure forth, and the conscience of mankind has been able to accept, a yet loftier idea. This is forgiveness" (p. 322). However, this lofty idea is submerged in modern times by the appalling spiritual and physical conditions man has created

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1. This idea is of course as old as comedy itself. Aristotle (quoted in Cooper, 1922, p. 125) has pleaded that *youth* not be allowed at comedy until of a suitable age "to sit at the public tables and to drink strong wine; by that time education will have armed them against the evil influences of such representations". It is a provocative and very valid idea that comedy should be dished up only to those who are sufficiently mature to deal with it adequately.

for himself. In the last analysis, Bentley veers away from a consideration of acceptance and comedy as such ("... the truth is that comedy now, when serious, tends in general towards the tragicomic") and adopts a bleak view. He decides that "tragi= comedy is itself an adjustment to the world, a way of living *with* Hitler ... Humor in a concentration camp will not help you to get out. It contributes to making you accept staying in. But by so doing it may help you keep body and soul together against the day when getting out is possible" (p. 347). He con= cludes that "to hope or not to hope, that is the question. We have been swindled so many times that life itself is now characteristically pictured as the Great Swindle. Comedy ... sees life as such" (p. 352).

This sort of vision is the one characterized by Heil= man (1978) as over-acceptance. Heilman contends that black comedy may be defined as a mode of over- acceptance - it implies an unconditional surrender (as opposed to the reasoned surrender to the inevit= able of traditional comedy). This view is expanded in the following way: "... the noun *comedy* implies acceptance, but the adjective ... the key element, challenges the noun, implying that acceptance is a too easy and uncomplicated response, that for what= ever one gets, the price is too high (... for fully sentient human beings). Hence *over-acceptance*, a certain sprawling excess of the comic spirit; either a compliance with and a docility towards whatever

comes up, or a positive outreach towards any handles at all to marginal, or central insidership in a wholly unjudged world, local or larger" (pp. 82-83).

This distinction by Heilman points, to my mind, to the central difficulty in the whole issue of contemporary comedy, for modern man is now caught precisely in the cleft stick of a world view that does not allow of hope or redemption or balance, and so "over-acceptance" has become the accepted mode of acceptance, and black comedy has become the current manifestation of the comic form, with concrete reality dissolved, in a situation evoked by White (1978) in a particularly apt description: "Its efforts are those of an epee flailing in half-darkness against what may be monstrous ... possibly amorphous" (p. 13).

3.5.9 Comedy and myth

The linking of comedy to its ritual origins and so postulating for it a basic underlying primal rhythm has caught the imagination of a number of critics. A recent commentator on this aspect of comedy deals with it fairly comprehensively in discussing, significantly, Shakespeare. "The ritual pattern of comedy, like that of tragedy was still linked to the annual festival rhythms, whether these were the consciously Christian celebrations of birth, death and

resurrection, of Christmas, Good Friday and Easter=day, or the mythical archetypes of 'birth, copulation and death' in the rhythms of the natural year: the fecundity of summer, the ripe maturity of autumn, the death and burial of winter and the renewal and birth of spring. There is clearly a related rhythm between the annual pattern of pagan and Christian rite: equally clearly comedy echoes the mythic pattern, whether ... it is the comedy of the Aristo=phanic, 'scapegoat' kind, or, with Shakespeare, regularly celebrates the 'green world'" (Merchant, 1972, p. 53).

The most comprehensive account of the rituals and rites underlying comedy is to be found in the book by F.M. Cornford (first published in 1914 and re=printed in 1934). The link of comedy to various types of fertility ritual is established clearly, and the link between the seasons of the year and the dramatic forms is also illustrated.[1)] Cornford also comments in depth on the differentiation of comedy and tragedy, working on the "assumption that the

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1. Gurewitch (1975) sums up this theory in the following terms: "... comedy is born in ritual or folk drama that is pre=occupied with the theme of 'the death of the old year and the birth or accession of the new', with 'decay and the suspension of life in the frosts of winter and its release and rebirth in spring ... as for the bridge between ritual and drama, in tragedy the emphasis falls on death; in comedy, on resurrection, especially as exemplified in 'the phallic element and the fertility marriage' ... hence the erotic tone of comedy and its canonical ending in marriage" (pp. 34-35).

ritual drama behind each was essentially the same in content, though not necessarily performed at the same season of the year" (p. 195). The argument is summed up in the following way: "The old ritual drama provided Tragedy with the abstract conception or movement of the plot, and the philosophy of *hubris*. It provided Comedy with the stock masks which could serve as a basis for its ever subtler classification of all that is ridiculous in human character;[1] while the outlines of the ritual plot were retained in the Old Comedy, because they were sufficient for its purposes" (p. 211).

Kerr (1967c) also comments on part of Cornford's theory as regards the comic plot and its progression. He says that "there is very good reason why all comedies should end in marriages. Cornford long ago pointed out - persuasively, I think - that Aristophanic comedies generally end in arbitrary Sacred Marriages not because there is any logical or literary need for such marriages but because the form of comedy had derived from that portion of Greek ritual which sang the 'hymeneal hymn' to fertility ... comedy ... continued to pay tribute to its ritual source" (p. 64). Kerr attributes an ironic connotation to this type of ending, however, by asserting that "we understand that the ending of a comedy, like everything else in it, is a joke" (p. 64). One

1. Discussions centring on incongruity, rigidity, limitation and imperfection as relating to comedy will take cogniz= ance of this.

could thus maintain that the obligatory marriage at the end of most comedies often constitutes a purely symbolic re-enactment of ritual requirements.

Northrop Frye (1971) is the best-known of the modern archetypal critics. He creates an elaborate system, attributing to comedy the mythos of spring - the regeneration of life, as Frye sees comedy as effecting the integration of society and thus causing "a new society to crystallize around the hero" (p. 163). Frye deals with the ironic ending by asserting that it is generally manipulated by a twist in the plot, and finds that this facile and absurd aspect of comedy has not changed much in the course of many centuries. He finds that the total *mythos* of comedy "has regularly what in music is called a ternary form ... and this ternary action is, ritually, like a contest of summer and winter in which winter occupies the middle action" (p. 171), the final action then consisting of what can be regarded as the symbolic and redemptive pattern of regeneration. He also points out an important aspect of traditional comic plot structure - the fact that the comic hero is pushed as far as possible along the path of disaster before being "saved". "An extra-ordinary number of comic stories ... seem to approach a potentially tragic crisis near the end, a feature that I may call the 'point of ritual death ... sometimes the point of ritual death is vestigial, not an element of plot but a mere change of tone" (p. 179). From this point the hero is dramatically saved or

redeemed. He goes on to deal with Shakespeare's romantic comedies and finds that "the green world charges the comedies with the symbolism of the victo= ry of summer over winter ... in the rituals and myths the earth that produces the rebirth is general= ly a female figure, and the death and revival, or disappearance and withdrawal, of human figures in romantic comedy generally involves the heroine ... Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* show[s] the repetition of a device in which progressively less care is taken of plausibility and in which in consequence the mythical outline of a Proserpine figure becomes pro= gressively clearer" (p. 183).

He comes to the conclusion that at one point "we realize that the crudest of Plautine comedy-formulas has much the same structure as the central Christian myth itself, with its divine son appeasing the wrath of a father and redeeming what is at once a society and a bride" (p. 185).

Frye analyses plays by Shakespeare and Aristophanes more than ones by the later comic playwrights, so that ultimately his views might not have too much validity for a view of modern or contemporary comedy as the world views held by these playwrights cannot in any way be compared with the views held by contem= porary playwrights.[1)]

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1. In spite of modern reservations, critics like Kathleen Burk= man who made an analysis of the ritual foundations of Pin= ter's work still accept the validity of mythopoeic interpre= tations.

Merchant (1972) does seem to give a valid perspective in this regard. "For the twentieth-century reader and critic, this pattern, largely lost or defective, both in the natural and spiritual forms, has to be self-consciously recreated, a combined exercise of scholarship and imagination which poses its own problems of dramatic interpretation, both in the study and in the theatre" (p. 53). Merchant goes further and attempts a coherent vision. He finds a certain incongruity in juxtaposing the Shakespearian sense of the "green world" with the comic practice of Genêt and Albee, although he maintains that a "valid analogy may be found in the sense of ritual movement" (p. 58).

The pre-occupation with myth and ritual, however, remains a peripheral concern, not so much a "way into a play" as an explanation of certain structural and plot elements.

3.5.10 Comedy and redemption (the "metaphysics" of comedy)

The concern with myth in comedy is continued here, and nowhere as strikingly as in the work of Joseph Campbell (1956). His work is completely philosophical and his premises do not rest on analyses of actual works, but his ideas represent the logical conclusion of a certain school of thought and will

for that reason be briefly examined. He claims to see comedy "in the furthest reaches of the cosmos". He defines the magic of myth as "the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation" (p. 3). These energies then lodge in the depths of the human unconscious, and can be detected in the quintessentially comic career of the monomythic hero.[1] Campbell's further arguments fall in line with the later ideas of Northrop Frye, for he maintains that the mythological hero travels "the dark interior way from tragedy to comedy" (a journey from disintegration to resurrection), so that ultimately the past is remembered only as "... dreadful mutilations, ... seen as shadows, only, of an immanent, imperishable eternity" (p. 29). Campbell joins theorists like Schiller and Frye in asserting that tragedy comprises only one half of experience, whereas comedy constitutes the second and more meaningful half, being a transcendence of the universal tragedy of man" (p. 28).[2]

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1. Gurewitch (1975) interprets this as meaning that "his triumphs over the ordeals of life and the defacements of death are redeemingly and joyously constructive" (p. 14).

2. Gurewitch (1975) voices a very important reservation (one that has intrinsic applicability to this study) by saying that Campbell's view of "the happy ending of myth, fairy tale and redemptive religion seems to be an *inappropriate paradigm for modern literary reality*" (p. 14). Campbell accounts for this himself by maintaining that modern literature has become sick, owing to its drastic denial of myth - of the ultimate reality that a universal happy ending does genuinely underlie the terrors of existence. This idea will be looked at in greater detail later.

Gurewitch (1975) points out that "in reality, few notions are more contagious in contemporary comic theory than the idea that comedy involves rebirth or transcendent reconciliation or, on a less exalted plane, social harmony" (p. 17). (An important point to bear in mind in this context is that cri= tical works positing a transcendent redemption are mostly based on critiques of traditional, pre-twen= tieth century comedies - thus comedies written during a time of less generally fragmented views of life and of man.)

Merchant (1972) concludes his book with a chapter on *The Metaphysics of Comedy*. Cautious as ever (Heil= man has referred to him as "extraordinarily diffident" - 1978, p. 260), Merchant nevertheless maintains that the "diverse comic modes, the grotesque, the ridiculous, the ironic, the absurd, the witty jest and the laughter of urbane compassion are all part of a single art, are facets of the nature of comedy, and they are diverse enough to comprehend metaphysics as well" (p. 81). He quotes T.S. Eliot who said (in his essay *Poetry and Drama*) that all art has the ability "to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness and reconciliation and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where that guide can avail us no further" (p. 82).

What exactly, then, are the metaphysical claims cri= tics have made for comedy?

Northrop Frye (1971) regards the comic resolution ul=timately as the achievement of a redeemed and inte=grated society, and elaborates by explaining that the "five phases of comedy may be seen as a sequence of stages in the life of a redeemed society ... in the fifth it is part of a settled order which has been there from the beginning, an order which takes on an increasingly religious cast and seems to be drawing away from human experience altogether. At this point the undisplaced *commedia*, the vision of Dante's *Paradiso*, moves out of our circle of *mythoi* into the apocalyptic or abstract mythical world above it"(p.158).

Frye exploits this view further in a later work (also on Shakespeare, his chief exemplar). In *A Natural Perspective* he speaks of Shakespeare's comic rhythm as being based on the second half of the great cycle, moving from death to rebirth, decadence to renewal, winter to spring, darkness to a new dawn" (p. 121). (The late romances in particular are considered here.)

In this respect, one could also repeat Fry's comment on this aspect of comedy by terming it "an escape, not from truth but from despair: a narrow escape into faith" (1960, p. 77). He goes on to say that "comedy says, in effect, that, groaning as we may be, we move in the figure of a dance, and, so moving, we trace the outline of the [cosmic] mystery" (p. 77).

Apart from mythopoeic critics, this issue has also been taken up in great detail by specifically Chris= tian critics (although they adopt sometimes start= lingly different perspectives). Vos (1966) talks of the essentially redemptive pattern of comedy by asserting that "the structure of dramatic comedy and the structure of Christ's passionate action bear an analogical relation to each other" (p. 7). The vision of comedy will ultimately close the gap "be= tween the finite and infinite" - Vos feels that "the comedy lies in the protagonist's final realization of the disappearance of the chasm between the two" (p. 13).

Nathan Scott (1966) finds a redemptive quality to be implicitly inherent in a joyful acceptance of himself by man, together with his creatureliness and his finitude. He regards the "basic function of the comic man ... simply to be a kind of icon of the human actuality ... to be an example of the contin= gent, imperfect, earth-bound creatures that in truth we really are ... to awaken in us a lively recogni= tion of what in fact our true status is" (p. 91). In fact, Scott posits the basic premise that God created our world, our reality, and thus it behoves man, the truly comic man, to accept and not to recoil from human actuality. He refers to existentialist literature as a "recoil into sensibility ... [as] ... a detour away from the human actuality" (p. 99), so that the "deep shudder of Sartre's hero before the phenomenal world presents us with an excellent

example of the response that is made to existence by him who is the antithesis of the comic man" (p. 101). For, contrary to the non-comic man, comic man is liberated because he "characteristically grapples with the thickness and density of the concrete world of human experience[1] ... the comedian is not gener= ally an aviator: he does not journey away from this familiar world of earth" (p. 161) - in remaining true to his bondage to created reality he is in fact freed.

To elaborate somewhat: the art of comedy is seen by Scott to be a reminder to us that, "however far we may venture into the strange corridors of the world or however high we may climb the treacherous moun= tains of the mind, ... we are creatures whose fini= tude is ineluctable" (p. 104) - but the essence of comedy consists in our not flinching and not finding the finitude irksome, as "the comic katharsis does ... esentially involve such a restoration of our confidence in the realm of finitude as enables us to see the daily occasions of our earth-bound career as being not irrelevant inconveniences but as possible roads into what is ultimately significant in life" (p. 108). Therefore, "forsaking all the *meretric= ious* forms of eschatology, comedy moves towards the actual: it asks us to be content with our human limitations and possibilities, and to accept our life in this world without the sentimentality either of

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1. As opposed to Roquentin, the hero of Sartre's *La Nausée* who recoils in horror from the amorphous, viscous mass he perceives reality to be.

smugness or of cynicism" (p. 116). The final demand to be made on comic man then is to be "deeply affir= mative", an attitude which sets him apart from the "tigers of wrath" - "the Kafkas and the Sartres and Becketts" (p. 116)[1] and then redeems him.

Scott quotes William Lynch (1960) to conclude his own argument. "... a thing need not step out of the human to be all things ... the mud in man, ... is nothing to be ashamed of. It can produce ... the face of God ... To recall this, to recall this in= credible relation between mud and God, is, in its own distant, adumbrating way, the function of comedy" (p. 109). This approach seems to have more validity than those positing ritual parallels between Christ and comic hero - and has more use for literary criticism because Scott does base his theory on a study of actual plays.

Hamilton (1972) is a theologian. He resolutely re= pudiates the idea of comedy being redemptive because he does not find it serious enough: "and this is because it does not face - and cannot face from its intrinsic limits - the ultimate of death" (p. 230).

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1. These "great heroes in our cultural life ... are cherished as examples of charismatic power, which we covet for our= selves, of being able to endure the stigmata of Alienation with ... fierceness and valor" (p. 116). One is reminded irresistibly of Kerr's idea that the new attitude to be ridiculed in comedy might well be man's pretension to be the most wretched creature ever.

He then rejects claims for redemption along the line of ritualistic and mythic vision by such critics as Frye and concludes uncompromisingly that "comedy is powerless to deal with death. By itself it leads to despair or at the best to a frozen resignation ... the Christ of the divine comedy alone (so Christian faith must claim) can preserve the human comedy from losing life by making it not afraid to lay it down in order to take it again at the hands of God" (p. 232). Thus tragedy has the last word in human exis= tence, and God alone "brings life out of death in the comedy of redemption" (p. 232). Hamilton impli= citly rejects the current theories of comedy as both "celebration" (p. 222) and redemption. He does not deal in any detail with any specific plays, however.

Schilling (1965) seems to echo Scott (even if he does not express his views in explicitly Christian terms). He claims that "in comedy man is weak and small and inconsistent, but is redeemed by reminders of his greatness; his weakness is tolerated because he is man after all, and has what strength there is, within himself. If man is not great, then nothing is, comedy seems to be saying, although it deals in things which show man as less than he should be" (p. 15).

Walter Kerr (1967c) espouses the idea of comedy being inextricably bound to earth and valiantly endeavour= ing to live with the "dark underside" of existence. He feels that "the best comedy makes no waivers. It

is *so*. And it is harsh" (p. 16). Therefore he decides that to be comic "the ending must forcefully call into question the issues of 'happiness' and 'forever after'"(p. 79).

Kerr quotes Prospero to the effect that "my ending is despair" (p. 79), and feels that within "comedy there is always despair, a despair of ever finding a right ending except by artifice and magic ... there is something about comedy that has no future" (p. 79).

This idea is implicitly continued in his discussion of Beckett, as he refers to him as a "sort of un= frocked parson who no longer believes in a Christian salvation, but only feels much worse in consequence" (p. 322). He finds the reason for this unredeemed state in the absence of tragedy: comedy needs a sounding-board to fulfil its essential function as echo, but presently yells only into the void and hears no returning voice.

Similarly, White (1978) feels that savage comedies are unredeeming, that they fight in another sphere, being "clubs to reverse the invasions of emptiness, the queasiness of cosmic disequilibrium" (p. 10).

G. Dasgupta (in White, 1978) argues that "in comedy, the value-system honoured by the majority wins; in savage comedy all value-systems have become morally inactive" (p. 61). Contrary to the case of tradi= tional comedy, in "most savage comedies, the world

never undergoes a change" (p. 62). He therefore comes to the conclusion that "the correlation between the savage and the comic rests on an aesthetic equation. And this equation can only be formulated by a faith, however amoral, in a universe without reprieve" (p. 63). This view, extreme as it may seem, does point the way to some extent in helping one to deal with the peculiarly non-redemptive quality of contemporary comedy.

The question of redemption will be a central concern in the formulation of a definition of comedy to describe contemporary dramatic works. Most redemptive theory is based on works displaying the central theme of acceptance, however grudgingly, of human finitude and most of these works conclude in the way they do because of the implicit assumption of love as a redeeming factor by the playwright. The loss of love and mankind's consequent bitter and vulnerable sense of being bereft will be revealed in the discussion - the paradigm of love and redemption is not ultimately valid in modern literature.

3.5.11 Cosmic homelessness:[1] comedy and despair: the abyss

The idea that comedy has become an increasingly valid means to translate the despair experienced by modern man appears in the work of quite a number of more recent critics. In the absence of fixed metaphysical and transcendental roots,[2] despair and the ways in which it can be exorcised or made bearable (however temporarily) have become concomitants of the comic vision. No theory so far, however, has sought to incorporate this idea into a coherent and comprehensive vision of comedy peculiar to the present age.

In the following discussion a number of often random reflections on comedy as a means of interpreting the despair of the contemporary human condition will be considered. It will be indicated that while the idea of the void, the broken centre, the nothingness at the core of existence, is essentially rejective in Scott's terms, it constitutes a crucially important aspect of contemporary comic drama as deduced from the works of a number of critically acclaimed contemporary playwrights.

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1. A term created by Scott (1966, p. 79).
2. Ionesco has said that modern man is lost and in despair, because, "cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions have become senseless, absurd, useless" (Esslin, 1961, p. 23).

Ionesco's vision of the absurd aptly describes the situation of modern man. He explains this in more detail by claiming that "as the 'comic' is an intuitive perception of the absurd, it seems to me more hopeless than the 'tragic'. The 'comic' offers no escape" (in Rosenberg, 1964, p. 286).[1)]

Eric Bentley (1964) has commented extensively on this facet of comedy. He maintains first of all, in dealing with earlier dramatic comedy, that "comedy takes place on the other side of despair" (p. 298). He goes on to say that "I am proposing to regard misery as the basis of comedy and gaiety as an ever-recurring transcendence. Seen in this way, comedy, like tragedy, is a way of trying to cope with despair, mental suffering, guilt and anxiety" (p. 301).[2)]

Bentley, however, finds this transcendence to constitute an escape from the "misery" underlying the playwright's vision - clearly this idea is more applicable to earlier than later comedy. The vision of despair becomes more prevalent and redemption less

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1. As against Fry's idea that "comedy is an escape, not from truth but from despair: a narrow escape into faith" (1960, p. 77).

2. Ellen Leyburn has also suggested that the "terrifying plays of Pinter and Dürrenmatt make use of grotesque comedy to reveal the precariousness of life and the condition of man confronted with pervasive evil" (in Calderwood and Toliver, 1968, p. 178).

and less apparent[1] as he deals with what he calls "comedy with a tragic sequel" (p. 338). He finds that the "vision of modernism ... knows no half-measures. It is nothing if not black, stark, implacable" (p. 339). This world cannot be redeemed or transcended by beauty as in the past, but in spite of the pervasive bleakness, "transcendence by truth argues a courage ... unflinching in the face of a world even more comfortless" (p. 339). Bentley feels that only tragicomedy (comedy with a tragic sequel) can aptly translate the spirit of a world which cannot be transcended and of which man can only accept that it is human nature, life and the world. He applies this vision to Beckett and finds that Beckett's despair is "the 'modern' despair - despair unrelieved by any last-act deus-ex-machina, a harrowing despair beyond the familiar despairs, further gone into moral paralysis, a despair that needs neither a catastrophe to point it up, nor a climactic speech to sum it up, because it is *there*, insistently, obsessively, monomaniacally" (p. 348).

Bentley finds, however, that this despair may ultimately be transcended because "artistic activity is itself a transcendence of despair" (p. 350) and therefore, "though it well may be imbued with despair,

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1. In talking about traditional comedy he asserts that "forgiveness and reconciliation are not here the static, inert goodness that Shelley feared. They are worked through to, fought through to, suffered through to" (p. 332).

and may easily be *about* despair, a work of art is it= self a sign that despair is not at the wheel but that a man is" (p. 350).[1)]

Thus, "all art is a challenge to despair, and the type of tragicomedy I am describing has addressed it= self to the peculiarly harrowing, withering despairs of our epoch" (p. 353). The challenge of art is in= fused with a sense of hope, and therefore, "if this is not the hope of a Heaven in which we would live forever, it is not the less precious, perhaps, being the hope without which we cannot live from day to day" (p. 353).

J.L. Styan (1968) quotes Giorgio Melchiori's descrip= tion[2)] of a characteristic of the present time, a description which serves to evoke an awareness of the precariousness discernible in modern works of art. He finds that "the achievement of the true artist in our age, who, like the successful acrobat, succeeds in keeping step by step, moment by moment, his balance, while being aware of the void of turmoil around him" (p. 297) is peculiarly descriptive of contemporary art. Therefore one can say that "in

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1. This idea bears a very strong resemblance to Sartre's idea that the only valid way to counter the monstrously amor= phous nature of the reality in which man lives is by the imposition of the clean and symmetrical outlines of works of art on the viscid paste ("pâté") of reality (*La Nausée*).

2. Melchiori, G. 1956. *The Tightrope Walkers*. London.

the 'sixties the comic dramatist leaves us alone and giddy in a spinning world: it is very funny, but quite terrifying" (p. 250). (Cf. in this regard White (1978) quoted later in this chapter.)

Sypher (1956) deals in some detail with the interpretations of Kafka and Kierkegaard of the century we live in. At the centre of existence, Sypher finds the Absurd, which is responsible for the fact that "*our* comedy of manners is a sign of desperation" (p. 194), an idea he illustrates by referring to the work of Kafka in which the hero, K., is "inexorably an 'outsider' struggling vainly somehow to 'belong' to an order that is impregnably closed by some inscrutable authority" (p. 194). Therefore he can maintain that "our new appreciation of the comic grows from the confusion in modern consciousness" (p. 195). Sypher feels that "we are now more sensitive to these absurd calamities[1)] than to tragic recognitions" (p. 198).

Walter Kerr (1967c) comments discerningly on the relationship between comedy and despair. He starts out by maintaining that "laughter always erupts precisely as the situation becomes hopeless ... we are serious as long as there is a way out. Comedy occurs when there is no way out" (p. 145.

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1. Lauter, too, says that "most recent philosophers emphasize the revolutionary, dissolving elements in comedy" (1964, p. 376).

Kerr touches on an important concept when he uses the image of the void (or the abyss). He says that comedy has to make something of a situation in which it has to assume a double burden, seeing that tragedy has fled: "Into a channel designed to accommodate the corrective afterthought of limitation must be poured the whole of contemporary existence ... it must do all the work, for everything is absurd" (p. 325). Under the strain of this double burden comedy has "cracked in two and fallen into the abyss" (p. 324). Comedy cannot, however, turn its back on the pervasive bleakness of an age, but must "go down in= to the pit, clawing furiously and, with luck, enter= tainingly the whole way down, even if the pit at last proves so deep that it can never emerge to flaunt daylight again" (p. 320).

However, there may be a change (and this idea calls to mind both Bentley and Sartre) for "comedy may have sensed that we are slightly past *angst* now ... and that from our earlier quailing before the void we have turned toward active investigation of the void" (p. 332). He can therefore conclude that perhaps "despair itself is the new heroic posture, the new pretense to greatness" (p. 328), so that (and this repeats the earlier reference to Kerr's description) contemporary man's aspiration to be known as the "most wretched of beings" is now open to ridicule (p. 328).

The ideas expressed by both Bentley and Kerr tend to

support Camus' vision of modern, existentialist man as being in heroic opposition to the exigencies of reality. Man may be in moral and material tatters, he may be rather pathetic, but he retains a dignity that cannot in the last analysis be denied.

White (1978) is even more explicit. He feels that "savage comedies are clubs to reverse the invasions of emptiness, the queasiness of cosmic disequilibrium" (p. 10). He also touches on an important point (to be elaborated in 3.6.2) by maintaining that "once tragedy is eclipsed, comedy remains to translate desperation" (p. 11). This world becomes night= marish and quite terrifying, for life is now "glimpsed as miasma ... or it is a reversing whirlpool" (p. 12).

Dissolution sets in, for "textures tend to shred. Comic harmonics go dissonant. Cacophany may arise" (p. 13). While these expressions are perhaps ex= treme, they do indicate a general trend discernible in the contemporary vision, a trend which will be explored in some depth in 3.9.

3.6 Comedy: farce and tragedy

3.6.1 Farce[1)]

Davis (1978) says that "farce came late to the canon of dramatic terminology. Unlike the terms of comedy, tragedy and even satire, its usage was not sanctioned by classical authority" (p. 1).

Generally speaking, farce did not exist as an inde= pendent genre for a long time and is still most often described in conjunction with comedy, often regarded pejoratively as a low cousin. In this regard Davis feels that "as long as it is viewed as existing in symbiosis with 'richer' forms of comedy, farce can only be characterized by negatives - the more exag= gerated characterizations, the cruder coincidences and the grosser pieces of joking belong to the farce, while the more sophisticated elements of plot, cha= racter and theme are those of comedy proper" (1978, p. 6).

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1. "Being short and often episodic in structure, farce is by nature suited to the role of 'filling'. Indeed, its name is actually derived from the Latin *farcire*, 'to stuff', ... Its first connection with the drama seems to have come by absorption of the verb-form into ecclesiastical usage" (Davis, 1978, p. 7).

The farcical as a style has been prevalent in drama since the days of the Greeks and the Romans. Charney (1978) points out that the plays of the Roman Plautus, all adaptations of Greek originals, fit the requirements of farce in every respect in the sense that the plots are farfetched but simple to follow, the main characters are clownishly different from the others in physical terms,[1] and they all act in a stupid manner calculated to generate laughter.

The history of farce can be traced through the Middle Ages and the Tudor period in England. Davis (1978) points out that "although farce was not known by that name in sixteenth-century England, it was thoroughly familiar to audiences and actors alike. Broad comedy and clowning had formed an integral part of medieval and Tudor drama ... The Elizabethan stage developed, in fact, its own form of 'comic stuffing' - the stage-jig, ... which took audiences by storm" (p. 16). At this stage too the similarity between the English jig and the French farce was noted (p. 16). Davis also points out that such illegal performances "as could take place during the Commonwealth period were chiefly of brief farces

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1. "The characters are all wound up or set to act in a certain way, and they are remarkably resistant to reality, insensitive to the obvious truth that surrounds them, inflexible and unadaptable - perfect models, in other words, for Bergson's theory of comedy as a mechanical intrusion into the free-flowing, vital forces of life" (Charney, 1978, p. 98). In addition, Heilman (1978) has maintained that the farcical is to be identified in the "intransigent, irreconcilable, all-or-nothing immovability" (p. 3).

or 'drolls', as they were called" (p. 16). After the Restoration French and Italian influence (especially under the impact of the *commedia dell'arte*) reached the English stage and while many "welcomed the new genre for its flexibility and popular appeal", the "arbiters of taste", who were conservative, condemned farce outright.[1)]

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, the popular appeal of farce grew steadily in France and in England to reach an acknowledged summit in the work of the Frenchman Georges Feydeau in the nineteenth century. In spite of continual critical disdain[2)] farce continued to prove itself "with its audiences and its perennial appeal has largely ignored critical disdain" (Davis, 1978, p. 18).

Farce has also, however, been regarded as "the purest, quintessential comedy" (Charney, 1978, p. 97). Charney also maintains that "the prevailing mood is one of a world gone mad ... in farce anything is possible" (1978, p. 97). This idea is also explored by Gurewitch (1975) who feels that "farcical nonsense

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1. So, while Nahum Tate lamented "aristocratic disdain" in the Preface to *A Duke and No Duke* in 1693: "I know not by what fate it happens to be the most contemptible sort of drama" (Davis, 1978, p. 1), Dryden deplored the fact that "as the Artist is often unsuccessful, while the Mountebank succeeds; so Farces more commonly take the people than comedies" (Preface to *An Evening's Love*, 1671, in Davis, p. 17).
2. Meredith referred to farce as "a fumbling comic vulgarity".

... glorifies irrationality" (p. 108). Farce is thus a powerful escape mechanism. It may be seen as "'a temporary truancy' from a whole host of pro= prieties and an entire army of pieties. Farce bold= ly invites us to smash all decency and discipline, all legitimacy and logic, all authority and artifi= ciality. Farce is the comedy (at least potentially) of all the delectable sins and outrages that the cultural superego plainly denounces" (Gurewitch, 1975, p. 134). This Freudian bias has support from other critics. Davis identifies two distinct pola= rities in farce: the impulse to pleasure and the impulse to aggression (p. 26). She also points out that the festive and the aggressive elements have been identified by both Cornford and Murray, writing as they did about the ritual origins of drama. There is the essential requirement in farce that these elements should be in balance. "If the farcical conflict[1)] is released from its traditional patterns of balance, farce becomes dangerous and liable to provoke the response of censorship" (Davis, 1978, p. 24). The most important structural element of farce is the element of play. Heilman (1978) has said that "a comic play is most like play, which has its own rules, when it is farcical. The essence of farce is immunity to real-life rules: certain events do physical damage, cause emotional anguish, and

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1. At the heart of farce Davis finds "the eternal comic con= flict between the forces of conventional authority and the forces of rebellion" (p. 24).

offend good sense" (p. 29).

Davis (1978) then says that "verbal and literary artifice is simply overwhelmed by physical action in farce" (p. 17). Furthermore, "farce is indeed mechanical and its mechanical manipulations of plot and character distinguish it clearly from other, more flexible comic forms" (p. 23).[1)]

Because of this linearity and simplicity farce bears an important relation to melodrama. Nicoll (1964, p. 87) has said that farce "bears the same relation= ship to comedy as melodrama does to tragedy ... we expect, and are given, a rapid series of scenes in which improbability rules and exaggeration triumphs[2)] ... Just as in melodrama the public is provided with a constant series of thrills, so in farce they are provided with a constant series of laughs"[3)] (p. 88). Heilman (1978) supports this idea by saying that farce often becomes a "*reductio ad absurdum* of the style of melodrama" (p. 4).

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1. Shadwell, in his Preface to *A True Widow* (1679), says that farce has to do with "the Putting out of Candles, kicking down of Tables, falling over Joynt-stools, impossible accidents and unnatural mistakes" (in Davis, 1978, p. 20).

2. McCollom (1971) has said that "in farce the movement is radically discontinuous" (p. 11).

3. He amplifies this later by stating that "comedy, in contra= distinction to farce, neither needs nor commonly depends upon continual laughter for its enjoyment" (p. 119).

The "unserious" aspect of farce is usually regarded as important. The highly exaggerated physical misfortunes are not meant to be regarded as realistic: the farcical hero continually pops up for more punishment. Whereas "high" comedy laments man's flaws and weaknesses and constantly points out the failure of man's attempts to "master our own bodies and our physical environment" (Davis, 1978, p. 22), "farce does not deny that human aspirations exist; it merely regards them as a joke" (p. 22).

In the same sense, then, Gurewitch can say that "farce ... sabotages limitations, but not in the service of a logical ideal. The victories of farce ... register vital revolts against reason's heavily regulative hand and against all those other onerous requirements of civilization" (p. 234).[1)]

For this reason, however, it is imperative that farce should retain its framework of play, because "if the conflict is allowed to escape its stylized and carefree 'play-frame', farce becomes cynical, a piece of black, absurdist comedy" (Davis, 1978, p. 24). On the other hand, "admissions of humanity on the part of the actors in farce tend ultimately to discredit the aggressiveness of their joking" (p. 89), and "as

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1. Davis (1978) also comments on this aspect. "Essentially, the comic spirit of farce is one which delights in taboo-violation, but which avoid implied moral comment or social criticism, and which tends to debar empathy for its victims" (p. 86).

long as the clown is imperturbable in defeat and dis=aster, laughter remains broad and uncomplicated; but when his terror begins to show, it renders our laughter more and more alarming" (p. 94).

These considerations lead one inevitably to an impor=tant contemporary issue. The form of farce has shown itself to be particularly amenable to many modern and contemporary playwrights. A number of new terms have been created, such as *metaphysical farce* (Ruby Cohn), *tragifarce* (Ionesco), *cosmological comedy* (Gurewitch). Gurewitch says of Beckett and Ionesco that they "have created nihilistic plays of ideas in which the language of futility, mated to primitive physical comedy, becomes the last illusory *game* in which man can indulge on earth" (p. 171). Therefore, the message of metaphysical farce is that "no one listens. God is dead, or paralyzed and blind. Love is a forgotten word among men tied to each other through need. The world outside is a wasteland" (p. 171).

Ionesco has also implicitly raised farce to a higher level of esteem. He wants no "drawing-room come=dies, but farce, the extreme exaggeration of parody ... comic effects that are firm, broad and outra=geous ... Everything raised to paroxysm, where the source of tragedy lies. A theatre of violence; violently comic, violently dramatic" (in Esslin, 1968, p. 139).

So, whereas Bentley could earlier say of farce that it is "practical joking turned theatrical" (1964, p. 234), Esslin says that "change in tempo is a techni= que which is powerfully exploited by the Theatre of the Absurd in the plays of Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Genêt and others. Here, the *practical joke* is sim= ply existence, which a malignant universe has appar= ently wished upon a variety of helpless and squirm= ing victims ... their sufferings provide both the laughter and the horror of these plays".

Hinchliffe echoes this by saying that this is one "of the ways of facing up to a universe that has lost its meaning and purpose" (1969, p. 11). Heilman ultimately rejects this type of comedy (such as *Four= some* by Ionesco) as being farce "which portrays a world of noncomedy - a world in which a defensive-aggressive-competitive rigidity casts off all ration= ality and civility" (p. 3). (Cf. in this regard Heilman's views on acceptance and over-acceptance in 3.5.8.)

The approach in this study will be that as *comedy* is a matrix term, it will not be categorically disting= uished from farce. Rather, and especially in con= temporary comedy, farce is regarded as a theatrical device of increasing usefulness and viability to give voice to certain pre-occupations of the contemp= orary comic dramatists.

3.6.2 Tragedy

The following is a very brief perspective on the relationship between tragedy and comedy. It is a subject which cannot be covered adequately within the present study. A brief look at the more contemporary idea of the relationship between the two genres will have to suffice.

The relationship between comedy and tragedy has been endlessly debated. Ellen Leyburn quotes from Plato's *Symposium* to the effect that "the chief thing which he remembered was Socrates compelling the other two to acknowledge that the genius of comedy was the same with that of tragedy, and that the true artist in tragedy was an artist in comedy also" (in Calderwood and Toliver, 1967, p. 185).

Heilman (1978) says that many students of comedy "approach their subject by using tragedy as a direction-finder" (p. 274). This indicates one common approach. The close link between the two has never really been doubted. Ronald Peacock (1946) says that he wants to "reaffirm the closeness of tragedy and comedy" (p. 152), because they both spring from "the tension between our imperfect life and our ideal aspirations" (p. 153), and as long "as there is imperfection these forms will flourish side by side as they have always done" (p. 158).

There has been a marked inclination in the work of contemporary critics to regard the two modes as overlapping more and more. Ellen Leyburn has even suggested that the two modes have become transposed, so that more and more comedy is taking over some of the traditional roles of the tragic. Thus she quotes Ionesco to the effect that "since the comic is the intuition of the absurd, it seems to me more hopeless than the tragic ... the comic offers no escape" (in Calderwood and Toliver, 1967, p. 178).

She also maintains then that "the shifts in the nature of both comedy and tragedy reflect the convulsion of society and man's sense of himself which characterizes the world which the dramatists invade" (p. 179) and so "the contradictions of pain and amusement in the best comedies of the absurd are evoked with clear intention and the most deliberate finesse" (p. 182).

Willy Sypher also espouses this idea. He declares that "our new appreciation of the comic grows from the confusion in modern consciousness, which has been sadly wounded by the politics of power, bringing with it the ravage of explosion, the atrocious pain of inquisitions, the squalor of labour camps, and the efficiency of big lies" (1956, p. 195). Thus he is led to declare that we have been forced to admit that "the absurd is more than ever inherent in human existence: that is, the irrational, the inexplicable, the surprising, the nonsensical - in

other words, the comic" (1956, p. 196).

Walter Kerr has commented most penetratingly on the shifting relationships between comedy and tragedy. He stresses from the outset that "comedy is at its most vigorous when tragedy is at its most vigorous" because comedy derives its being from the affirmations of tragedy. For this reason he believes that "black comedy is a phenomenon of the moment that derives from the complete absence of any tragic aspiration ... [it] acknowledges the disappearance of affirmation altogether and ... tries to work with the proposition that no motive is ever good and that no man would care to deceive himself into thinking that one might be" (1967c, p. 317).

In a world conditioned by bleakness comedy has no choice but to try to make something of the situation. "It cannot turn its back on the pervasive bleakness of an age. Having so long been the gleeful urchin calling out that the emperor had no clothes, it cannot really retire from a society which sees neither clothes nor emperor. It must go down into the pit, clawing furiously and, with luck, entertainingly, the whole way down" (p. 320).

The implications of this virtual take-over of the field of tragedy by the comic mode are enormous. What "the present situation means for comedy is that it must assume a double burden" (p. 324), and it "must do all the work", even though "it was ordained

to coexist with tragedy ... Small wonder that its voice sounds small, and its tricks seem half-hearted, some nights" (p. 325).

This leads him to the conclusion that while "pain is common to both forms and is so far from being a dis= tinguishing mark between them that it actually attests to their close relationship" it is also functionally different, for "the pain of comedy is more protracted and frustrating, ... because it does not know how to expel itself ... [comedy] must for= ever contain its pain ... hugging the fox to its breast ..." (p. 339).

This idea is taken ever further by White (1978) in very strong terms, for "once tragedy is eclipsed, comedy remains to translate desperation" (p. 11), and as "tragic purgation fades, comedies of corrosion offer new kinds of solace; those procured by sardon= ic derision" (p. 12).

One comes to the irresistible conclusion that for the moment comedy holds centre-stage, being the only voice that can adequately translate the spirit of the times. In the absence of his gods, man has come to the point where conflicts exist on a horizontal rather than a vertical plane, and the conflicts are translated into the idiom of despair and disintegra= tion, which is the idiom of contemporary comedy.

3.7 Recapitulation: a 'notion' of comedy

A brief recapitulation of the foregoing survey of critical literature on comedy is necessary at this stage as a perspective before one can go on to a formulation of a contemporary definition of comedy (based on analyses of representative contemporary plays).

Potts (1949) has stated that "the chief difficulty in any attempt to discover the character of comedy by inductive methods is the selection of specimens from which to generalize; for we cannot make the selection without first forming a notion of comedy to guide us in making it" (p. 141).

The resumé of the arguments contained in the survey will serve to establish a *notion of comedy* on which basis the choice of plays for analysis will be made.

3.7.1 Recapitulation

The extraordinary difficulty facing the aspiring definer of comedy has been pointed out, together with the fact that one definition of comedy will really fully serve only one tradition of comedy.

The theories of laughter and catharsis have been explored in some detail and shown to have limited validity in any critical approach dealing with the artefact, the comedy, itself. Laughter is an inessential adjunct to comedy, but because the world of the comic is so diverse and the kinds of response to this world are endlessly varied, it remains a perennial problem to distinguish laughter from literary considerations of comedy. Likewise, comic catharsis is a problem as there is no critical unanimity as to the existence of comic catharsis or the various guises it is thought to assume. A cautious and non-pedantic approach is thus the most useful in dealing with this area of the comic.

It has been established that the comic flourishes only in society, that the world constitutes the comic realm and that comedy consists in the implicit or explicit examination and revelation of relationships between men and between men and society. Comedy is intrinsically a social form as opposed to the lone individuality of most tragedy.

Within this comic realm, the world, there is always a keen awareness of the disparateness of reality. Essential incongruities abound and create the ironic underpinning that determines the character of many great comedies. The ironic principle is implicit in man's perceptive response to the world he inhabits. The disparate is to be found both in man and in the world that constitutes the realm of comedy.

Many critics hold that emotion is a foe to comedy, that pure reason best apprehends what is seen as a dispassionate approach to life and to man. It was indicated that this intellectualized vision holds true of many comedies of manners but that it is not a prerequisite for the comic. It is true, however, that an attitude of ironic detachment is an aid to greater perceptiveness in all relationships, but this detachment need not be complete or misanthropic.

A constant in earlier criticism of comedy has been the idea of reduction, morality and correction. More recent criticism has tended to discount this view, to the extent that it has practically disappeared from serious comic theory.

What has remained is the faintly utilitarian view that comedy, in revealing man's foibles and weaknesses, is an aid to understanding and insight. This intention is now seen, however, as heuristic rather than moralistic as it need not lead to improvement or reformation. By the same token, then, satire is seen to be a very narrow segment of the truly comic vision, looking with a baleful rather than a compassionate eye.

The idea of compassion is an important one in true comedy, even the modern variety. It implies the acknowledgement and the sharing of pain, of the agony of being alive and being in constant, even abrasive contact with one's fellowmen.

Comedy's searingly accurate vision of the limited and imperfect aspects of reality is another important consideration. The vision of great comedy is clear and unblinkered, a merciless revelation of every cherished foible and weakness that man is heir to. It is essential to note that even though this revelation may induce laughter in the audience, the laughter is not in any way to be regarded as a real, or a potential scourge - it is simply a probable effect of man's (shocked) realization of his kinship with imperfection.

What is significant is that the awareness of limitation within the confines of the play should be accompanied implicitly by acceptance and insight. In this sense, Heilman has spoken of both acceptance and over-acceptance - the over-accepting attitude being a concomitant of the contemporary comic vision. The over-accepting attitude will also be seen later to be intrinsically linked to the non-redemptive mode of contemporary comedy.

It has been argued too that comedy has a ritual or mythic substructure. While this approach may be a useful way of establishing provocative parallels, it does not add essentially to the better understanding of the nature of comedy, and more specifically of contemporary comedy.

Traditional comedy, created within the spiritual framework of the Christian world view, reveals a pat= tern of symbolic redemption within the total struc= ture of the play. This redemptive pattern has been a fairly consistent feature of comedy, even if arti= ficially expressed. Increasingly, however, in come= dies written in the course of the present century in Britain, the aspect of redemption has been eroded to the extent that it has now virtually disappeared. The prevailing world view in Western Europe has to be seen as the prime reason for this bleakness that has become a pervasive quality. Therefore, comedy is increasingly being used as a means to translate the despair afflicting significant numbers of people and to voice eloquently man's disillusionment with his cultural heritage. The image of the abyss, the void, has suddenly become an apt one to evoke a situation in which modern man sees himself as having become entrapped.

Therefore, farce as a dramatic device to translate the irrationality central to man's existence has be= come peculiarly suitable to modern dramatists. From its much-maligned position as the disreputable low-class cousin of comedy it has gained new artis= tic validity, particularly because the violence and aggression of the farcical mode constitute a very apt idiom in the twentieth century.

By the same token, tragedy has declined - in direct proportion to the loss of gods man has become incapable of attaining passionate grandeur and has settled instead for a tattered dignity, agonisingly evoked in the language and images of disintegration.

3.8 The foregoing *notion* of comedy has been used to make a choice of playwrights and plays to serve as a foundation for the development of a viable contemporary definition of comedy. The playwrights, chosen on the basis of critical acclaim and popular success as well as the foregoing criteria, are Tom Stoppard, Joe Orton, Simon Gray, Peter Nichols and Trevor Griffiths.

The order of discussion is not meant to represent a chronological sequence, as the playwrights are all roughly contemporary, working in the sixties and the seventies.

3.8.1 Tom Stoppard

Tom Stoppard's work has been the subject both of wild acclaim and of a somewhat fastidious disdain of his exuberance in some quarters. Yet the power of his work is immediately apparent in the theatre and in the study perhaps because he makes a sustained

assault on many crucial issues of the past twenty years. Bigsby (1977) has called him a serious man asking questions "in what he clearly feels to be the only form available to the putative philosopher in the second half of the twentieth century - the ironic joke designed to penetrate to the marrow, a farce in which discussions about art and life are subordinated to questions about the nature of reality itself" (p. 763). Stoppard himself has said in an interview that "I want to demonstrate that I can make serious points by flinging a custard pie around the stage for a couple of hours" (Bradshaw, 1977, p. 71), and this is an important underscoring of the idea of the use= fulness of farce as a device in contemporary comedy.

The themes of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* are crucial ones in terms of the preoccupations of contemporary dramatists. These themes include anguish about the loss of identity (the Hamlettian confusion about the identities of the two fringe courtiers, the most peripheral of characters, is com= pounded in this play); the contingent nature of truth; the loss of mysteriousness, intuition and wonder (Guildenstern: (wistfully): I'm sorry it wasn't a unicorn. It would have been nice to have unicorns, p. 15) and the total and terrifying disloca= tion of the familiar and comforting dimensions of time and space. The way in which these themes are por= trayed through character and language will be looked into.

The main characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are ruefully appealing. They are both quite clearly out of their depth in the gilded corruption that is the royal court at Elsinore. Rosencrantz is per= petually embarrassed, while Guildenstern's character note is worry and panic.

Although splendidly dressed as Elizabethan courtiers, they remind one irresistibly of Beckett's tramps and in startling contrast between outward splendour and inner trembling they stand keenly revealed as the ho= munculi of their world and ours. Their relationships with other members of the court are always critical, and they never quite succeed in establishing viable relationships: they are in turn condescending, fawn= ing, aggressive, petulant - and they become increas= ingly desperate because the note struck is always just a little sour. They never assume the right guise for the right moment. Both, however, engage the sympathy and compassion of the auditor, for in their terrified grappling with a reality that is con= tinually shifting, they are desperately human and ap= pealing.

After their encounter with a Hamlet who emerges, in this play, as a ruthless puppeteer, the following conversation takes place, vividly evocative of the abrasive discomfiture that is a common feature of encounters with others in an essentially bleak and forlorn world in which they are aliens:

Ros : I think we can say he made us look ridic= ulous.

Guil: We played it close to the chest of course.

Ros (derisively): He was scoring off us all down the line.

Guil: ... I thought we gained some ground.

Ros : He murdered us.

Guil: He might have had the edge.

. . . . . .

What about our evasions?

Ros : Oh, our evasions were lovely. "Were you sent for?" he says. "My lord, we were sent for ..." I didn't know where to put myself

(p. 40).

Under the surface discomfiture of a social gaffe, Rosencrantz is also revealing his deep awareness of a threatening force that will emerge, a force in the hands of "them" - the court, everybody.

The playwright proceeds by masterly manipulation of plot, language and character. The plot is, on one level, a concurrent of the Hamlet story - one might well imagine a production of *Hamlet* going on on an adjacent stage. Superimposed on this plot is the plot of the players who present the play-within-a-play in *Hamlet* and who, offstage, embody realistic= ally and terrifyingly the contingent nature of truth

as interpreted by Stoppard.[1] Linked to this plot are the actions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who are manipulated with grotesque and insulting facility by those surrounding them, while they reflect on past and future agonisingly and continually plan escape while being immobilized in the nightmare world of the present.[2]

Teasing reminders of the past haunt them and make them wonder whether "there must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said - no. But somehow we missed it" (p. 91). The playwright succeeds in creating a sense of *déjà vu* that has a sickening and lurching visceral effect when he regu=larly repeats the image of the messenger. "That's it - pale sky before dawn, a man standing on his sad=dle to bang on the shutters - shouts - what's all the row about?! Clear off! - *But then he called our names.* You remember that - this man woke us up" (p. 13). Rosencrantz picks up the description in popul=ar commentators' style by intoning: "It was urgent -

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1. Player: Everything has to be taken on trust; truth is only that which is taken to be true. It's the currency of living. There may be nothing behind it, but it doesn't make any difference so long as it is honoured. One acts on assumption.

2. Guil: All your life you live close to truth, it becomes a permanent blur in the corner of your eye, and when some=thing nudges it into outline it is like being ambushed by a grotesque. A man standing in his saddle in the half-lit dawn, half-alive dawn banged on the shutters and called two names.

a matter of extreme urgency, a royal summons ... lights in the stable yard, saddle up and off headlong and hotfoot across the land, our guides outstripped in breakneck pursuit of our duty! Fearful lest we come too late!!" (p. 13).[1] This unironic use of a very platitudinous attitude by Rosencrantz reveals his deeply disturbed awareness of the ambiguity underlying the summons, together with the helpless fury at not being able to refuse the summons.

The locales are revealing. The play opens "in a place without any visible character" (p. 7), and in Act III the locale is moved to "pitch darkness. Soft sea-sounds. After several seconds of nothing, a voice from the dark ..." (p. 70). The characters give fuller voice to their awareness of the vacuum, of the almost cosmic queasiness that has been described by White (1978):

> Guil: Are you there?
> Ros : Where?(p. 70).[2]

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1. In more than one instance Stoppard makes effective use of clichés in thought and in expression. He inverts the tired old music-hall joke to emphasize man's precarious foothold on the planet: "Don't clap too loudly - it's a very old world" (p. 16).

2. Their perennial condition is one of uncertainty, cf.:

> Guil: Unless we're off course.
> Ros (Small pause): Of course.

The terrifying truth of the human condition is nowhere so well exemplified as in the games of chance they play. At first the tossed coin comes down heads ninety-two consecutive times (pp. 7-12), a fact that fills Guildenstern with jabbering terror at the thought that the laws of probability have become suspended but that, at the same time, renders Rosencrantz complacent and pleased. (He is winning all the time.) When, later, the situation is reversed, Guildenstern is almost insane with fear and worry at the apparent arbitrariness of the laws of chance and probability. Rosencrantz's confession that he has been rigging the game to accommodate Guildenstern, far from pleasing and reassuring him, merely adds to his incoherent fear.

When they encounter the troupe of players, they are made more than ever aware of the contingent nature of truth, and see the abyss yawning ever more menacingly. Guildenstern typifies their situation as being "kept intrigued without ever quite being enlightened" (p. 30), but before they can wallow too luxuriatingly in the misery of mankind, the Player scornfully deflates their pretensions to misery by saying that "uncertainty is the normal state. You're nobody special" (p. 47). When Guildenstern panics that "I'm rapidly losing my grip" (p. 49), one is reminded of the earlier lament that everything has changed with the arrival of the messenger from Elsinore. Before, "the fortuitous and the ordained [were related] into a reassuring union which we recognized as nature"

(p. 12), a fact which made for harmony and a kind of confidence. At the end, however, they feel that space has been violently dislocated, and while at one stage "we came from roughly south according to a rough map" (p. 41), later on they are "slipping off the map" (p. 78) in what they regard as a "conspiracy of cartographers" (p. 77), seeing that even England seems to be a nebulous reality. Their "decision" to go on to England even while knowing of the horrifying fate[1)] awaiting them at the hands of the headsman is a last despairing, heroic and rebellious gesture to establish for themselves some kind of fixed identity, even if only in a message from one sovereign to another. Rosencrantz defiantly decides that "I don't care, I've had enough. To tell you the truth, I'm relieved" (p. 91).

The most consistent dramatic device Stoppard uses to impose a semblance of order on the terrifying unintelligibility and seeming irrationality of this world is language. Stoppard himself has characterized his

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1. The scene that prophetically indicates their fate is a masterpiece of theatrical inventiveness. In a "rehearsal" of the anticipated scene with the English king, they actually (if inadvertently) read the letter (switched by Hamlet) and discover their fate. They make no effort to escape this fate, as, paradoxically, in being sentenced in this way, they assume a clearer and more definite identity - at least they are now victims. Also, their defiance in the face of death carries with it something of the austere rebellion advocated by Camus, a rebellion imparting dignity.

dramatic use of language as a means of "withdrawing with style from chaos", a claim made good in his stage plays. With a great deal of adroitness he uses syllogisms, paradoxes, conundrums, allusions, innuendo, the most banal but dramatically effective platitudes and a particular form of allusive incantation that underlines the sense of dread and foreboding that is a pervasive element in the play. A few examples will be looked at in more detail, to indicate the extent to which language aids the farcical element which is an important dramatic device in this play.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play elaborate word-games to impose some degree of intelligibility and order on the world that they inhabit so precariously. Playing at *Questions*, they are disqualified for using statements and *non sequiturs*, and the game is won when Guildenstern confronts Rosencrantz with the question, "who do you think you are?" (p. 32) and Rosencrantz calmly counters by saying, "Rhetoric. Game and match" (p. 32), only to disintegrate as he asks fearfully, "Where's it going to end?" (p. 32).

Guildenstern tries to exorcise the awareness of malignity by chanting at times in the play the desperate allusive litany (which has great dramatic effect):

Give us this day our daily mask (p. 28).
Give us this day our daily week (p. 33).
Give us this day our daily round (p. 68).
Give us this day our daily cue (p. 74).
Call us this day our daily tune (p. 82).

The use of *cue* and *tune* in the last two instances is particularly effective as a means of underlining the increasingly unreal world they inhabit, a world resembling a nightmarish play, and as this aspect is associated with the players it gains an added impact.

The same method is used in a cumulative sense with the expressions *home* and *high* and *dry*, so that Guil= denstern's anguished cry of "Can't you see, the pi= rates left us home and high - dry and home - drome - (furiously). The pirates left us high and dry" (p. 87) is a hilariously funny but paradoxical statement which is at the same time a symptom of the disinte= gration of their linguistic world. Earlier they pride themselves on their fastidious linguistic ele= gance, but an edge of desperation is visible when Guildenstern maintains that what counts is "words, words. They're all we have to go on" (p. 30), but when the words desert them they are finally left on the edge of the void, in a state evocatively describ= ed by the Player at one stage as being "stripped naked in the middle of nowhere and pouring ourselves down a bottomless well" (p. 45).

The audience is frequently forced to do a double-take in the main characters' bland but penetrating anti-climactic observations which are frequently funny to the point of hysteria and which succeed in wrenching one's mind to a receptiveness to a new perspective. Thus, in "rehearsing" the scene where they have to accost Hamlet, Rosencrantz observes sagely:

> To sum up: your father, whom you love, dies, you are his heir, you come back to find that hardly was the corpse cold before his young brother popped onto his throne and into his sheets, thereby offending both legal and natural practice. Now why exactly are you behaving in this extraordinary manner?
> (p. 36).

As mentioned before, Stoppard uses farce with deadly effect. After Hamlet's murder of Polonius, they have to apprehend the murderer and they make ridiculously detailed but patently absurd and woefully inadequate preparations. "Guildenstern positions himself next to Rosencrantz, a few feet away, so that they are covering one side of the stage, facing the opposite side. Guil. unfastens his belt. Ros. does the same. They join the two belts, and hold them taut between them. Ros's trousers slide slowly down.[1)] Hamlet enters *opposite*, slowly, dragging

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1. The obvious parallel to the scene in *Waiting for Godot* where a suicide attempt is foiled because one belt cannot be used for hanging oneself and for holding up one's trousers is functional because of its allusive value.

Polonius' body" (p. 65). Nowhere is their pathetic submission to the hostile forces surrounding them more tellingly and searingly revealed.

The dominant impression at the end of this disturbingly funny and intellectually provocative play is one of aching compassion. The two hapless little men have to accept what is ultimately meted out to them ("There's only one direction, and time is its only measure", P. 51) because they are "little men, we don't know the ins and outs of the matter, there are wheels within wheels" (p. 80) and so "we move idly towards eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation" (p. 88).

So, poised on the edge of the abyss they fade from sight, disintegrating at the last, agonisingly wondering, "couldn't we just stay put? I mean no one is going to come on and drag us off ... they'll just have to wait. We're still young - fit - we've got years ..." (p. 91). Ultimately then, after all the vicissitudes they have gone through, poised on the edge of disaster, there is acceptance of a kind, a curiously touching dignity and a fastidious avoidance of any redemptive possibilities. The vision of the playwright in this instance is one of clarity and yet compassion.

Stoppard explores these same issues in greater depth in *Jumpers* (1972), regarded by many critics as his best play. The play is a tour de force, consisting

of scintillating verbal wit, intellectual allusion and masterly manipulation of structural elements, all culminating and exploding at times in the most exuber= ant farce which is used to convey the most agonising emotions and ideas and literally to bash the audience into awareness. Stoppard's own words, regarding custard pies and serious thoughts, are doubly relev= ant and applicable in this instance.

The whole concept of the play is daringly and outra= geously funny (as will also be seen later in Gray's work, academics have become the target for a great deal of very funny castigation). At George Moore's university, "the close association between gymnastics and philosophy is, I believe, unique" (p. 51), and the Professor of Logic is murdered while participat= ing in a (rather amateurish) display of gymnastics, along with the other jumpers - "logical positivists, mainly, with a linguistic analyst or two, a couple of Benthamite Utilitarians ... lapsed Kantians and empiricists generally ... and of course the usual Behaviourists ..." (pp. 50-51). The free inter= mingling throughout of logical, moral and physical gymnastics produces the devastatingly ironic sense of incongruity pervading the play.

Allusion on various levels remains the most tantaliz= ingly effective dramatic device Stoppard employs. This allusion functions even in the names of the characters. George Moore, the Professor of Ethics, bewails his sad fate in not being the first, as he

is historically subservient to the other philosopher. His wife Dorothy, the retired musical comedy star, is called Dotty, and, under the influence of various lunar oddities, is slowly disintegrating. Archie, the nattily dressed psychiatrist, with his suave urbanity and smooth patter, is irresistibly linked in one's mind to Osborne's Archie Rice of *The Entertainer*.

The play concerns two quests. On one level, Moore is agonizingly debating the existence of a moral absolute: he wants to establish the existence of a metaphysical reality that one can call God. In an insane world in which the church ("not the faith, the fabric", p. 37) has been "rationalized", Moore cries piteously that "the irrational, the emotional, the whimsical ... these are the stamp of humanity which makes reason a civilizing force" (p. 40).

On another level, Inspector Bones of the CID is pursuing an inquiry into the murder of the professor.[1] The superimposition of the police investigation on the philosophical investigation into the existence of God and the nature of good and evil produces the familiar effect of dislocation that Stoppard has mastered so well. Other plots are threaded organically into this fabric. The first Britons to have

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1. The dramatic use of a police investigation as a paradigm for a more fundamental search into values is quite widespread: Stoppard himself uses it in *The Real Inspector Hound*, Orton uses it in *Loot*, and also in *What the Butler Saw*.

landed on the moon, Scott and Oates, run into trou=
ble, and in a horrifying inversion of the actions of the members of the Antarctic team of explorers for whom they are named, Scott forces Oates to remain behind when the returning rocket malfunctions.

The other subsidiary plot is Archie's suspected mis=
conduct with Dottie (in his alleged professional mis=
conduct a long literary tradition based on the dub=
ious practices of medical men is perpetuated, and it will be seen that other contemporary playwrights, such as Nichols, have also found this a fertile source for satiric attacks).

In dramatizing his main pre-occupations, Stoppard once again shows us his main characters teetering on the edge of the abyss. George is a forlorn believer "pointed out to visitors in much the same spirit as we point out the magnificent stained glass in what is now the gymnasium" (p. 63), while Dotty, who used to base her musical comedy routines on songs about the moon and the various romantic and illusory aspects of the moon, is going to pieces quietly and desperately. Man's landing on the moon is a symbolic enactment of the intrusion of technology into every sphere of life. She recalls the raptures of Keats, Milton, Shelley and popular songwriters about the moon and breaks down: "Oh, yes, things were in place then!" (p. 41). She wistfully talks about the moon-landing before she collapses: "When they first landed it was as though I'd seen a unicorn on the television news ... It was

very interesting of course. But it certainly spoiled unicorns" (p. 39). Later she says illumin= atingly that the psychiatrist, who represents the gross technological world, is a party to this destruc= tion, for "I should never have mentioned unicorns to a Freudian" (p. 39). Dotty's attempts to establish a viable relationship are pathetically doomed to fail= ure. When she cries at first: "Is anybody there?" (p. 26), nobody answers, and her final physical cry for help is blandly explained by Archie as pure exhi= bitionism. George and Dotty, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, play verbal and visual games to main= tain their sanity and to try to give substance to their frail and disintegrating vision of a moral, ro= mantic and intuitive world. George, reminiscing about their first meeting, reaches out tentatively to establish some measure of genuineness: "... I thought, 'The Hyacinth girl' ... and 'How my hair is growing thin'" (p. 33). The rueful awareness of physical imperfection in himself leaves him, a vul= nerable Prufrock, more than ever open to the on= slaughts from without.

Once again, in a world taken over by the Radical Liberals (with a fascist undercurrent), a world in which good and evil have ceased to be metaphysical absolutes and have become, rather, points of view or conventions, the characters wander in an arid land= scape in which redemption is elusive. (Moore com= plains of "an incredible, undesirable and definitely shifty God" who defies logical explanation and can

thus not be discussed with other men.) They are forced, in the end, in an absurd whirl of events, to the view expressed by Archie (p. 87):

> Do not despair - many are happy much of the time; more eat than starve, more are healthy than sick; more curable than dying; not so many dying as dear; and one of the thieves was saved. Hell's bells and all's well - half the world is at peace with itself, and so is the other half; vast areas are unpolluted; millions grow up without suffering deprivation, and millions, while deprived, grow up without suffering cruelties, and millions, while deprived and cruelly treated, none the less grow up. No laughter is sad and many tears are joyful. At the graveside the undertaker doffs his hat and impregnates the prettiest mourner. Wham, bam, thank you Sam.

The mode of overacceptance lamented by Heilman is very much in evidence here - accompanied by a lack of redemption given shape in Dotty's closing words:

> Dotty (sings without music): Goodbye spoony Juney Moon.

Stoppard creates his most striking dramatic effects through the employment of farce. Because mere logic will not suffice in an attempt to persuade others of the existence of God, Moore resorts to some visual aids. He trains a hare, Thumper, and a tortoise, Pat, to illustrate Zeno's proposition about the relative speed each will attain in a race. At the same time, he acquires a bow and arrows to disprove another proposition by Zeno that "since an arrow shot towards a target first has to cover half the

distance, and then half the remainder after that, and so on *ad infinitum*, the result was, as I will now demonstrate, that though an arrow is always ap= proaching its target, it never quite gets there, and Saint Sebastian died of fright" (pp. 27-28). At this point he is startled by Dotty and fires the arrow inadvertently. The arrow lands on top of a cupboard, impaling the fugitive Thumper (although Moore is unaware of this at the time). Later, while Dotty and Archie are consuming a dish that has "not been casseroled, *jugged*", Moore is convinced that Dotty has turned "cannibal". A good deal of ambiguity (as well as hilarity) ensues, as talk about Thumper and the dead Prof. McFee gets totally tangled and confused. This device is a powerful one to enable the playwright to hint at the deceptive nature of reality, however. At the point where Moore becomes totally convinced and clear in his own embittered mind about the hapless Thumper's fate, and nurtures his sense of grievance and rage at Dot= ty, he finds the dead hare on top of the cupboard. Stepping down from a chair with the corpse in his hand and contemplating his own unwitting perfidy in a state of stunned and appalled disbelief, he steps onto Pat the tortoise "fatally" (p. 81). At this point of most devasting visual farce, Moore disinte= grates. His last means of proving what cannot logic= ally, linguistically be explained has been destroyed - by himself. His sobs fill the auditorium, shock= ing, harsh and inconsolable.

In this world in which they are living so precariously, language once again proves to be insufficiently useful as a means of establishing and maintaining relationships and significance. George despairs of making a good showing, for "though my convictions are intact and my ideas coherent, I can't seem to find the words" (p. 46), and later he decides that "language is a finite instrument crudely applied to an infinity of ideas" (p. 63). The failure of language in its communicative function is at one level a powerful symbol of man's functioning within a world in which all absolutes have disappeared, to leave only a void, a nothingness. This is evocatively described by George when he says that "to attempt to sustain the attention of rival schools of academics by argument alone is tantamount to constructing a Gothic arch out of junket" (p. 27). The loss of mystery and intuition is lamented, for with it went the possibility of redemption: largely as the result of the "mounting implausibility of a technological age as having divine origins - for while a man might believe that the providence of sheep's wool was made in heaven, he finds it harder to believe the same of Terylene mixture. Well, the tide is running his [the atheist's] way ..." (p. 25).

The harshness of the final implications is mitigated only by the essentially compassionate vision Stoppard has of a mankind lost in a desert of its own contriving.

3.8.2 Joe Orton

Orton's work may be loosely characterized as falling at the almost totally farcical end of the spectrum covered by recent writers of serious comedy. He uses the farcical vision as a paradigm for the con= temporary world in which rationality has disappeared. Rance, the inspecting psychiatrist, states at one point that "you can't be a rationalist in an irra= tional world. It isn't rational" (p. 72) - a state= ment which gives a clue to the tone of the play to be discussed: *What the Butler Saw*.

The play is in reality a parody of a farce. It gallops along at a frantic pace. At times, in fact, the farce gets out of hand and one has the distinct impression that Orton is trying for laughs. Over= all, the farcical touch works surprisingly well in conveying his notion of a world gone awry.

Two plays by Orton will be considered: *What the Butler Saw*, his last play, will be discussed in some detail, while *Entertaining Mr Sloane* will be refer= red to in passing.

In *What the Butler Saw* the action is set in the pri= vate psychiatric clinic of Dr Prentice. The private asylum (specializing in "the breakdown and its by= products") is the comic microcosm which provides a farcical context and which also serves as a symbol for the disintegrating world outside. Rance gives

expression to this view:

> Rance: You're in a madhouse. Unusual behaviour is the order of the day.
> Match: Only for patients.
> Rance: We've no privileged class here. It's democratic lunacy we practise (p. 56).

As mentioned before, the play is in a sense a parody of a conventional farce. It opens on a conventionally farcical note with Dr Prentice (unsuccessfully) trying to seduce an applicant for a secretarial post. The dénouement, however, is wildly improbable, with Orton making fun of the contrived endings of popular melodrama. It transpires ultimately that Dr Prentice and his estranged wife, after the most absurdly implausible (and yet perfectly logical)[1] series of events are in fact the natural parents of both the applying secretary and the errant hotel page. In a scene spilling over with recognitions and revelations all the trappings of popular melodrama (such as concealed identity, different halves of a distinctive brooch mysteriously being matched, babes abandoned on doorsteps and brought up by strangers, etc.) are used

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1. A distinctive feature of Orton's work is the way in which he uses the almost surrealistic dislocation between the most extraordinary and improper happenings - balanced by an unruffled propriety of conversation. In *Entertaining Mr Sloane* a murderer who will murder yet again is caught in a trap that is totally outrageous and which almost chills the marrow of the audience with its implications. Yet the facade of respectable suburban life and affected gentility of speech is never allowed to crack.

with devastating farcical effect. Orton further parodies the Oedipus and the Electra myths in having Prentice *almost* succeed in seducing his daughter and Mrs Prentice *almost* raped by the page who is really her son. The fact that they only discover their parenthood at the end renders these situations doubly preposterous and hilarious in retrospect.

The farcical and parodistic nature of the play does allow the plot to get out of hand at times, and of course the use of parody tends to alienate potential sympathy for the characters. One is therefore not going to be able to offer compassion easily except possibly in the case of Geraldine Barclay who tries to use reason in a world gone mad and finds to her horror that she cannot begin to penetrate the verbal smoke-screen (made up of a welter of popular psychological theory and Freudian misinterpretation) thrown up by Rance. In this respect Orton's work dovetails neatly with that of other contemporary comic writers, for a solitary sane voice is easily drowned in a world resembling a madhouse. Geraldine still tries to find a rational explanation:

> Geraldine: Am I mad, Doctor?
> Prentice : No.
> Geraldine: Are you mad?
> Prentice : No.
> Geraldine: Is it the candid camera?
> Prentice : There's a perfectly rational explanation for what is taking place. Keep calm (p. 27).

But when Prentice tries out the rational explanation later, that too collapses woefully.

The play deals to a large extent with the theme of madness, and this theme will be seen increasingly in contemporary comedy as a defence against the incom= prehensible onslaughts of life. When Geraldine is put into a straitjacket because she keeps insisting on the "truth" and on "reality", Rance says to her:

> Your mind has given way. You'll find the ex= perience invaluable in your efforts to come to terms with twentieth century living
>
> (p. 82).

Therefore, using rationality in an irrational world is clearly an act of lunacy. Somewhat later, Nick, the hotel page, also insists on "reality":

> Nick: I can't be an hallucination. Look at this wound. That's real.
> Rance: It appears to be.
> Nick : If the pain is real I must be real.
> Rance: I'd rather not get involved in meta= physical speculation (p. 87).

In common with his contemporaries Orton manipulates language to create some of his most dramatically striking effects. In *Entertaining Mr Sloane* ambiguity centres on the word *entertaining* in the title, which holds the key to the structure of the entire play. There is an inexorable shift from the first part of the play where entertainment has to be

provided for Mr Sloane, to the last part where Mr Sloane becomes an occasion for the ghastly enter= tainment of the other characters. Ultimately Mr Sloane finds himself outmanoeuvred and becomes a "pet" to Kath and Ed, required to divide his "favours" (heterosexual and homosexual) equally between them. The events may be (and frequently are) as outrageous as one may imagine them in terms of convention and of morality, but the prim propriety of the language is never abandoned.

Similarly, in *What the Butler Saw*, this stylistic paranoia is carefully maintained, and produces a sort of farcical double-take on more than one occa= sion. A veneer of perfect logicality is continually imposed on wildly absurd premises. Prentice ques= tions Geraldine about her deceased stepmother:

Geraldine: An explosion, due to a faulty gas-main, killed her outright and took the roof off the house.
Prentice : Have you applied for compensation?
Geraldine: Just for the roof.
Prentice : Were there no other victims of the disaster?
Geraldine: Yes. A recently erected statue of Sir Winston Churchill was so badly injured that the George medal has been talked of. Parts of the great man were actually found embedded in my stepmother.
Prentice : Which parts?
Geraldine: I'm afraid I can't help you there. I was too upset to supervise the funeral arrangements. Or, indeed, to identify the body.
Prentice : Surely the Churchill family did that?

Geraldine: Yes. They were most kind.
Prentice : You've had a unique experience. It's not everyone has their stepmother assassinated by the North Thames Gas Board (p. 9).

Later, Rance tries to elicit information from Mrs Prentice about the unsuccessful attempt upon her virtue in the hotel:

Mrs P : He had no sympathy for me when I complained of being assaulted by a pageboy at the Station Hotel.
Rance : What was the object of the assault?
Mrs P : The youth wanted to rape me.
Rance : He didn't succeed?
Mrs P : No.
Rance (shaking his head): The service in these hotels is dreadful (p. 34).

Orton also comments obliquely on the state of communication between people when Geraldine is unable to communicate with the rest of the characters and in the various styles of language he employs under various circumstances. Nick, who is the wronged youngster of popular tradition, uses and invites the sentimental gush of cheap melodrama:

I had a hard boyhood (p. 14). (This is the reason he advances for Prentice having to employ him.)
My parents were divorced, sir. I missed the warmth of a happy family atmosphere (p. 16).

Mrs Prentice links herself to him because she says of him that "I saw in his youth the remnants of a natural goodness that had all but been destroyed by

the pressures of society" (p. 18).

In the same style Orton uses glib and facile intel=lectual jargon in revealing the spurious Dr Rance, who is the satirical butt in this play much as Archie is in *Jumpers*.

> Rance: Lunatics *are* melodramatic. The subtle=ties of drama are wasted on them. The ugly sha=dow of anti-Christ stalks this house. Having discovered her Father/Lover in Dr Prentice the patient replaces him in a psychological reshuffle by that archetypal Father-figure - the Devil him=self. Everything is now clear. The final chapters of my book are knitting together: in=cest, buggery, outrageous women and strange love-cults catering for depraved appetites. All the fashionable bric-à-brac. A beautiful but neuro=tic girl has influenced the doctor to sacrifice a white virgin to propitiate the dark gods of un=reason. 'When they broke into the evil-smelling den they found her poor body broken and bleeding beneath the obscene and half-erect phallus.' (To Mrs Prentice.) My 'unbiased account' of the case of the infamous sex-killer Prentice will undoubtedly add a great deal to our understanding of such creatures. Society must be made aware of the growing menace of pornography. The whole treacherous avant-garde movement will be exposed for what it is - an instrument for inciting de=cent citizens to commit bizarre crimes against humanity and the state! (He pauses, a little overcome, and wipes his brow.) You have, under your roof, my dear, one of the most remarkable lunatics of all time. We must institute a search for the corpse. As a transvestite, fetishist, bi-sexual murderer Dr Prentice dis=plays considerable deviation overlap. We may get necrophilia too. As a sort of bonus (p. 72).

There is an almost nightmarishly unreal quality to this scene, for what started out as a very casual attempt at infidelity has now assumed enormous pro=portions involving and threatening to engulf every=body. There is also, however, an air of utter un=reality about the entire set-up, which is the life=blood of farce: one is induced to suspend one's dis=belief even more strenuously than usually and yet there is also the air of irrefutable logic which in=duces a sense of anxiety even though everybody knows that what is happening is only a joke ... isn't it?

Emotions have no real place in Orton's work. In a sense his work is the logical culmination of the re=newed interest among contemporary dramatists in the farcical as a vehicle for the modern comic vision, but whereas most of his contemporaries use farce as a device Orton uses it as an exclusive mode. His work ties in with that of many of his contemporaries, however, in the sense that he portrays the same chaotic world in which madness seems to be the most apposite manner of existence, the most useful re=sponse to the challenge of the modern world. In this manner of existence, language is once again shown to be inadequate as a means of communication, being used in a spurious manner and for spurious pur=poses. The end of the play is equally unredemptive, for even while all the characters are rescued in classical deus-ex-machina fashion by the sergeant, the parodistic intention of the playwright nullifies the pretended reconciliation at the end of the play.

> They pick up their clothes and weary, bleeding, drugged and drunk, climb the rope ladder into the blazing light (p. 92).

3.8.3 Simon Gray

In his fastidious rejection of farcical action and the elegance of even his most vituperative and de= structive utterances, Gray seems to be almost the opposite of Orton, and yet the same essential bleak= ness pervades his world. His plays are equally fun= ny and disturbing, although in a totally different key.

Harold Clurman (1972) has called *Butley* a comedy of dissolving will and moral impotence. "The state of mind it reflects is that of a community no longer secure in its action because it has lost faith in its goals. All that remains for it to do, in a 'civilized' mode, is to grimace and grin" (p. 538).

Butley is different from many comedies in the sense that it has a dominant main character. The other characters come alive only in their relationships with him. This is unusual in a comedy, but in this instance it is important to note too that relation= ships are still the crucial factor and not the cha= racter caught up seemingly inextricably in his own moral and material conflicts.

The main movement in the play is concerned with Butley's gradual process of alienation - a process also traditionally in the domain of the tragic. What is important in this play, however, is that Ben Butley is not unaware of the fact that he is destroying himself and those with whom he comes into abrasive contact. He is painfully conscious all the time of what he is doing, but he cannot stop himself once he is set on the collision course. The wanton destructiveness that he indulges in serves most strongly to reveal his pettiness and nastiness - and also, conversely, his claim to pity and compassion.

The play has a very compact structure.[1)] All the actions take place in Ben's university tutorial room in the course of a single day (just after a short midterm break). Ben is picking up the pieces after a disastrous and short-lived marriage and wants to convince his ex-student and colleague Joey to resume living with him. Joey, however, is in the process of establishing an overtly homosexual relationship with Reg, a much older man (a publisher). In the course of this one day Ben also finds out that his ex-wife is having a serious affair (planning marriage, in fact) with the man he describes as "the most boring man in London", and he emerges at the end of

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1. In a moment of cynical detachment, Ben is able to tell Joey that "we're preserving the unities. The use of messengers has been quite skilful" (p. 73), even while recoiling hurt from the fact that each of the messengers has been devastatingly effective in destroying his world.

the play shaken to the core by what he experiences as "cluttered contact" (p. 73).

Butley is shown to have a brilliant and devious mind, and he is in turn vituperative, sardonic, needling, cynical - and utterly vulnerable. He uses language as an offensive weapon and as a mask and inadvertently reveals himself most mercilessly when he says that even boring old friends are necessary because they "do their bit towards holding you together. Like ivy around crumbling walls" (p. 40), which is an apt description at the same time of the use to which he puts language.

Butley is at this stage an almost incredibly sloppy person, the outward squalor and chaos serving as a symbolic manifestation of his state of mind, of his idealism gone awry. Joey says at the end that Butley used to teach, but "now you spread futility, Ben. It creeps in, like your dirty socks do, into my drawers. Or my clean ones, onto your feet" (p. 73).

Along with the portrayal of Butley's wit and laziness, the playwright effects a hilarious send-up of academic life. Ben says petulantly at one stage that "you know how it exhausts me to teach books I haven't read" (p. 16) and later, when he is accused of having accepted an unsuitable student, he declares callously that "I suppose I must have decided that he wasn't fit for anything else" (p. 27). Ben is also extra-

ordinarily devious and elusive when students try to pin him down to have tutorials. While all this is of course highly entertaining, it has a very destructive potential, for Ben alienates even his students in a most hurtful manner:

> She goes out. Ben stands at the open door, gestures obscenely after her. Then, aware that he is holding her essay, pinches his nostrils, holds the essay at a distance, makes gagging sounds, pantomimes gas poisoning as he goes back to his desk.
>
> Miss Heasman has come back to the door, stands watching him.
>
> Ben drops the essay onto his desk, stiffens, turns slowly.
>
> He and Miss Heasman stare at each other.
>
> Miss Heasmen turns and goes quickly from the room.
>
> Ben (makes as if to hurry after her, stops). Oh Christ! Bloody girl (p. 46).

Then, while he is still in a sweat over this gaffe, he hurries willy-nilly into another attack, almost as if to exorcise the memory of Miss Heasman. Phoning his wife's fiancé's headmaster, he is insufferably and gratuitously insulting and boring. Yet always, immediately following his greatest destructive successes, he succumbs to his private agony. Following his wife's surprise visit, during which he accuses her of being "tough, versatile and brutal", he collapses when alone again:

(He breaks off, trembling. He sits down at his desk, puts his hand to his face, takes it away, looks as it,[1] touches his chin, inspects his fingers.) Bloody woman! Bloody woman! (He feels in his pocket and takes out more cotton wool) (p. 42).

Sensing Joey's defection, Butley shakily tries to maintain his style. Affecting an American accent and trying desperately to keep to the tone and idiom of their casually bantering but affectionate style of communication, he says that "this is a *human bean* you're talking about here, kid, not a cheque, or an order of groceries, but a human bean!" (p. 51), but he soon regains his equilibrium so that he nastily tells Joey:

Don't flounce, Dappley. It doesn't suit your mousey hindquarters (p. 56).

Gray carefully manipulates the audience's response, ranging as it does from disgust to compassion, so that the audience is in harmony with Butley at the end of the play, going along with his own view of life as expressed to Joey:

---

1. From the opening scene onwards Butley fights a losing battle to staunch the flow of blood after a particularly nasty shaving cut. His pathetic dependence on the roll of cotton wool he carries along with him is instrumental in fixing him firmly within his entrapped position as a man, a finite and limited creature, trapped by his flesh.

> Our beginnings never know our ends. They're always so sad, so sad (p. 56).

As indicated earlier, the other characters come to life only in their relationships with Ben. Joey emerges as weak, petulant at times, but indispensable to Ben. Anne remains aloof, provoking Ben into an almost incoherent fury, while Reg, the ageing queer, is provoked into hitting him before contemptuously rejecting him as "pitiful, pitiful. This man that you've given me all the talk about. That you made me jealous of" (p. 71).

Along with the themes of alienation and "sadness of endings" Gray explores the ambiguity and confusion of sexual roles so prevalent in the Western society of the present time. Gray himself has explicitly denied[1)] that the relationship between Butley and Joey is or was a homosexual one, and there are some (barely discernible) disclaimers in the text of the play. The Joey-Reg relationship, however, is overtly homosexual ("You might say that when he comes to me our Joey will be moving out of figures of speech into matters of fact. Ours will be too much like a marriage to be a metaphor" is Reg's taunting reply to Butley [p. 66]).

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1. "Gray is surprised that people see Butley as homosexual: 'he might have been happier if he *had* had a homosexual relationship with Joey, and then he might have preserved it ...'" (Kerensky, 1977, p. 143).

Whatever the exact nature of Ben and Joey's relationship, however (and in the intimacy of shared razors and socks there is at least a hint of ambiguity), Ben's rejection of Anne and their child is significant. He opts for an essentially sterile relationship which, if viewed in the traditional framework of comic relationships is rejective in the extreme. It is also in line with the contemporary trend in comedy.

In the exploration of this theme, language is used mercilessly as an offensive weapon. In talking to Reg, Butley excuses his own exemption from military service by blandly claiming that he "got took queer" (p. 61), and only pretending to discover, much later in the conversation, to have used the expression in an entirely innocuous sense:

> One of our chars used to say it. Whenever I came down with anything it would be, 'Our Ben's took queer again, poor little mite'[1] (p. 63).

He drops all pretence in his all-in bout with Reg, however, affecting both Reg's North country accent and his sexual predilections in taunting him:

> Owd sod, feery, punsy ... (p. 70).

---

1. Butley is really exempted from military service because of a light case of TB.

This makes Reg hit him, even though Reg himself earlier jeers at him with great smugness:

> No, our Joey's just been waiting for the right queen, fairy, fruit, poof or homosexual to come along. He's come
>
> (p. 66).

Having the wind taken out of his sails metaphorically, Butley is more vulnerable than ever, because he himself is usually the manipulator of language in the battles of wits that he is so fond of indulging in as an alternative to real emotional commitment. He cultivates a deliberate misunderstanding by confusion of related clauses to disconcert his listener as far as possible, to evade an issue as long as possible and thus to gain a tactical advantage:

> Joey: It was Gardner you told me about then? The boy who complained about Edna's seminars in a pub?
> Ben : Edna holds her seminars in a pub? I shall have to report this (p. 31).

With Edna, who is an irritating personality, he is even more elaborate:

> Edna: Now would you kindly tell me what transpired between yourself and this Gardner?
> Joey: I don't know anything about it, Edna.
> Edna: My teaching, it appears, isn't up to his standard.
> Ben : Indeed. Well, I can assure you, Edna, that it is more than up to mine. I know our society has become insolently egalitarian, but I refuse to believe that the gardener's verdict on your

teaching will be given too much weight. I didn't know we had a garden - let alone ...[1]
(p. 52).

Butley also employs loudly recited nursery rhymes and fractured and dislocated literary allusions as evasive tactics and implicit abuse. When he hears of the publication of Edna's long-awaited book on Byron, he facetiously comments that "now the centre cannot hold. Mere Edna is loosed upon the world" (p. 30). When he bitterly reflects on his broken marriage, he muses that

It must have been our last, we were already fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf, a flash of thigh in the yellow leaf,
What seas, what shores, what granite islands toward my timbers
And woodthrush calling through the fog
My daughter
(p. 34).

---

1. This manner of response is also the one most likely to give away any of Gray's characters. In *Otherwise Engaged*, when a visitor asks whether he had had "it off" with a girl, the main character explodes in a burst of seemingly righteous indignation:

Wood : Did you have it off with her?
Simon: *What!*
Wood : Did you have it off with her?
Simon: Look, Wood, whatever your anxiety about your daughter, I really don't think, old chap, that you should insinuate yourself into people's homes and put a question like that to them I mean, good God, you can't possibly expect me to dignify it with an answer, can you?
Wood : I other words, you did.
Simon (after a long pause): In other words, I'm afraid I did. Yes. Sorry, old chap.

His use of these "fragments to shore up his ruins" prompts Joey to say, far too discerningly, that "you do miss her then?" (p. 34), an observation inviting a fresh avalanche of abuse.

Butley emerges as disillusioned, disgusted with life and mankind, and, having had a good look at himself, does not retain any illusions about himself either. Being forced to accept the situation, he does so with no grace at all but a great deal of pathos. He sees himself very clearly as standing on the edge of the abyss, but lacking volition to do anything about it. He tiredly sends away Gardner, the eccentric student, who for a wild but brief moment seems to embody some kind of hope:

> You're not what I mean at all, not what I mean at all. I'm too old to play with the likes of you
>
> (p. 77).

The play ends with Butley in the almost catatonic stance of the contemporary comic hero:

> Ben ... sits at the desk, turns off the desk lamp and tries feebly three times to turn it on again
>
> (p. 78).

Gray continues his penetrating study of the bleak unhappiness of contemporary man in later plays. Two of these will be looked at briefly: *Otherwise Engaged* and *Plaintiffs and Defendants*.

Simon Hench (the main character in *Otherwise Engaged*) has constructed a shell around himself to protect himself from the bruising contact with other people. The play deals with his strenuous attempts in the course of one disastrous afternoon to avoid being possessed and invaded.

The plot is fragmentary and consists almost entirely of a series of duologues. There is a subtly cumulative effect, however, and the ending leaves Simon stunned and disbelieving, retreating again into his cowering stance on the edge of the void which he studiously but not altogether successfully ignores.

The actual situation revolves around a free afternoon that Simon has been promising himself for a long time. He wants to play the complete recording of Wagner's *Parsifal* but he never gets beyond the opening chords because he is interrupted almost at once by the student lodger who has taken the private flat on the top floor of the house (at a nominal rent). The student, Dave, is an inveterate scrounger and seems vague and

uncommitted about everything,[1] coming to life only when he piles virulent abuse on Simon's head for an imagined slight. Simon's motive in renting the flat to Dave is an important pointer to his character, as he says in great irritation to Dave that "unmarried mothers mean babies, and babies mean nappies and crying. While old age pensioners mean senility and death" (p. 45), so that even while Dave's manners are irritating, his smell offensive and his cadging a nuisance, "you have your one great value, that you run a poor third to recent births and imminent deaths (p. 46).[2]

---

1. Stephen, Simon's brother who is a teacher, asks Dave:

   Stephen: What are you studying?
   Dave : Sociology.
   Stephen: That must be jolly interesting. What aspect?
   Dave : What?
   Stephen: Of Sociology.
   Dave : Oh, the usual stuff.
   Stephen: Psychology, statistics, politics, philosophy, I suppose.
   Dave : We're sitting in at the moment.
   Stephen: Really? Why?
   Dave : Oh, the usual sort of thing (p. 12).

2. Simon is unable to get rid of Dave, who has become a nightmare. Gray uses this situation repeatedly: a character does something of no seeming significance, casually (and selfishly motivated). The situation then gets out of hand and becomes something of a nightmarish albatross around the neck of the character. In *Plaintiffs and Defendants* the casual seduction of a pretty girl (who is dangerously unstable emotionally) becomes a nightmare involvement for Peter who is ultimately unable to extricate himself. In the above case, Simon's wish to remain uninvolved with the recipient of his casual charity leads him into bruising contact with the uncouth and thickskinned Dave, who offends his fastidious sense of propriety in an outrageous manner.

The second interruption comes from Simon's brother Stephen, who carries a chip on his shoulder. Stephen has come to Simon to talk dejectedly about his unsuccessful interview to become assistant headmaster of Amplesides, a minor public school. Stephen is keenly aware of his limited abilities and Simon's cool and uninvolved responses goad him into a fury. When he painfully recalls his acute embarrassment during the interview ("and this movement caused me to fart") (p. 14), Simon's face is "completely composed". Simon never lets slip the tight control he has imposed upon himself, even to respond normally to a brotherly confidence, and this alienates Stephen even further. Stephen is in the position where he has to eat the nut cutlets and drink the pansy wine ("sugary and tastes of onions") forced on him by the headmaster's fanatical wife. The fact that he has six children also seems to put him strangely on the defensive towards the childless Simon. When Stephen returns to the flat for a third time he is goaded into telling Simon that contrary to his fond belief, his wife is desperately unhappy and having an affair. (What finally prompts Stephen to disclose this is Simon's "callous" reasons for not having children.[1])

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1. Simon: Well Steve, in the first place there isn't enough room. In the second place they seem to start by mucking up their parents' lives, and then go on in the third place to muck up their own. In the fourth place it doesn't seem right to bring them into a world like this in the fifth place and in in sixth place I don't like them very much in the first place.
(p. 48).

Before this shattering revelation, however, there are other equally abrasive contacts. Simon's publisher friend Jeff turns up looking for a shoulder to cry on because he has fallen in love with his ex-wife again but cannot marry her as she has remarried. He carries on a sordid affair with her instead.

Jeff is an almost totally rejective character. His language, even though forceful and witty at times, is extremely vituperative. He is clearly desperately unhappy and his constant and unremitting swearing is a clear outward manifestation of his violent rejection of the world around him.

To a large extent he represents the awareness of the loss of idealism and the forlorn awareness of the irretrievability of the loss:

> Jeff: I'm English, yes, English to my marrow's marrow ... D'know when I'm really at bloody peace with myself? When I'm caught in a traffic jam on an English road, under an English heaven ... rain sliding down the window, engine humming, dreaming - dreaming of what's past or to come ... Oh Christ - it's my actual bloody opinion that this sad little, bloody little country of ours is finished at last. Bloody finished at last[1)]
>
> (p. 25).

---

1. Together with the larger and more enveloping awareness of "cosmic homelessness" the sadness over an England shorn of glory is a pervasive one in contemporary comedy, strengthening the sense of loss and aimlessness.

Jeff's current casual bedmate, Davina, intrudes on this scene. She sends Jeff (who is drunk by now) off on a wild-goose chase by pretending to have had a phone call to the effect that his ex-wife has attempted suicide. (She follows this up with vicious inventiveness by alerting the police, so that Jeff is intercepted, breathalysed and booked - convinced for some reason that Simon tipped off the police.)

Davina attempts to seduce Simon and he rebuffs her. "Because of Beth?" she sneers, and he answers righteously that "this is her house, as much as mine. It's our house, don't you see?" (p. 32). This admirable sentiment, however, is curiously inverted by Simon himself, for to the next visitor, Bernard Wood,[1] he admits that he did seduce his fiancée casually when she came to his office for an interview.

From this ambiguous morality emerges an important facet of his character. He is extraordinarily anxious to manipulate pretence so that reality need not intrude on his carefully shielded consciousness. (When Beth confesses her infidelity somewhat later, he tries to stop the flood of words, asking, "In other

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1. Wood: It means something to you, then?
   Simon: No, just an echo. Of Birnam Wood, it must be, coming to Dunsinane (p. 33).

   In using this familiar technique of evasion, Simon creates a distance between himself and others.

words, can't we confine ourselves to the other words?" [p. 53].) He wants to remain in the indifferent, cushioned and insulated world he has created for him=self, even to the extent of saying to Beth:

> We could go on and on, with Ned, until you've gone off him, why, why, did you have to muck it up between you with your infantile agoniz=ings
> (p. 58).

This attitude is of course the perfect exemplifica=tion of what Heilman regards as the overaccepting attitude - but it is also the prevalent attitude.

The scene with Wood becomes a sort of surrealist horror for Simon. Wood questions him minutely and absorbedly as to the technicalities and minutiae of seduction and instead of becoming enraged or em=barrassed Simon courteously and with seemingly in=violable control answers all the questions. That he is appalled by the consequences of a seemingly casual and irrelevant act is revealed only marginally. Wood asks whether he doesn't suffer "from any guilt afterwards? No post-coital distress, no angst or even embarrassment?", and Simon fastidiously counters with "Not unless this counts as afterwards" (p. 38).

Wood is even more pathetic than Stephen and it appears that they all went to the same school, where Simon was "that lucky sod, the Wundale tart" (p. 38) who slept with all the popular boys, while Wood (whose real name is Strapley and who was then known

as Wanker Strapley) was a social outcast, together with Stephen:

> He was known as Armpits Hench. We were two of a kind, in that we were both considered drips
>
> (p. 39).

Gray looks at the ambiguity of sexual roles again in this play. Simon slept around with some boys to the envy of others (although he ironically warns Wood that the phase is over by some decades) and Wood falls in love with Joanna when she appears in *The Winslow Boy:*

> Wood: She came on the stage in grey flannel bags, a white shirt and starched collar. She walked with a modest boy's gait, her eyes were wide with innocent knowledge. So did you walk down the Wundale Clois= ters, that first year of yours. So I watched you then as I watched her
>
> (p. 39).

Stephen's reappearance shatters the mood and Stephen caustically but casually shatters Strapley/Wood. He recognizes him, but Strapley disclaims this, prompt= ing Stephen to reminisce with devastating effect:

> Oh actually [he was] a bit of what we used to call a plop, wasn't he Simon? So you're quite lucky not to be Strapley who almost cer= tainly had a pretty rotten future before him
>
> (p. 41).

When Wood rushes off inarticulate, Simon is grateful and lets him go, only to be shaken to the core when he listens to the playback of a telephone recorder later and hears a suicide message spoken by Wood and recorded while Simon has the phone off the hook in the course of the scene with Stephen and later with Beth. He cannot escape from the consequences of the destructive effects of his seemingly insignifi= cant act of betrayal, even though he switches off the recording before hearing the actual shot - in a futile and symbolic attempt to evade reality once again (pp. 58-59).

Stephen, infuriated by Simon's cool and detached re= ception of his news that he got the post after all, reveals that Beth is having an affair with Ned, ano= ther teacher at the school where she teaches. It would also appear that Beth is desperately unhappy, contrary to what Simon has brought himself to believe. Even when Beth also insists on telling him, Simon refuses to listen (see above). Earlier, he says to Stephen that he has "a distinct preference for later" (p. 16) when it comes to doing or finding out about something unpleasant. Now he rounds on Beth in a fury because "nothing's changed for the worst, though it might if we assume we have to talk about it" (p. 53). His almost panic-stricken desire to maintain and preserve the status quo, his unwillingness to commit himself is rudely shattered, however, when he finds that Beth is hurt beyond measure by his casual and indifferent acceptance of the news. She faces

him with a crucial question: "But do you want to live at all?" (p. 56), accusing him of having a deeply contemptuous view of human life. She has been agonizing over the situation with Ned, because "we want, you see, to be husband and wife to each other"[1] (p. 55) and Ned's duty to his family is constricting because his wife is psychotic and needs constant care. Beth is in a near-frenzy because Simon simply remarks on her guilt "as if on the difference made by an extra voice or something in your bloody Wagner - don't you see, don't you see that makes you a freak!" (p. 57). Simon acknowledges his being freaky in pleading for a continuation of a perfectly sensible arrangement. "We could go on and on, with Ned, until you've gone off him ..." (pp. 57-58). Beth wrenches him out of his carefully nurtured and protective complacency by telling him that she is having a baby - and does not know whose it is.

Simon's response at this climactic moment is crucial. Instead of committing himself to one particular course of action, however, and responding with a valid emotion, he withdraws, denying himself redemption. He has looked under the stone and seen the nameless horrors crawling there, but does not extend forgiveness or tolerance to either himself or others.

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1. Simon's flip response to Beth's impassioned statement is typically alienating:
   > Husband *and* wife to each other? Is Ned up to such double duty? (p. 55).

He has seen himself clearly and is appalled by the vision to the extent that real acceptance and the ameliorating grace of forgiveness and tolerance can= not find an entry. He also retreats into the catat= onic stupor of Butley at the end of the play: when a stunned and chastened Jeff appears to plead piti= fully:

> Don't throw me out, eh? I've nowhere to bloody go, and I don't want to go there yet
> (p. 59),

Simon invites him to listen to *Parsifal* - the music used consciously as a powerful anaesthetic agent to his lacerated awareness.

This play, in common with many contemporary plays, turns on a pivot of wit and grace of language: a language used dexterously to mask the agony lurking below, which is never resolved because the concepts of love, of real acceptance and forgiveness of self and of others have gone. Finally this attitude may be described once again by the idea of over-acceptance: an attitude of total submission to every damaging blow inflicted by a malicious universe. The comic hero under these circumstances still clings with a heartrendingly pathetic dignity to the shreds of his protective clothing, but his footing is seen to be precarious. The laughter evoked by Gray's drama is often edged with hysteria or violently truncated by the devastating awareness of a shared anxiety.

In *Plaintiffs and Defendants* Gray explores some of his central pre-occupations further. One of these is an increasingly questioning attitude towards the viability of the family unit, as hinted at in both *Butley* and *Otherwise Engaged*. In this play he contrasts two best friends ("You and Charlie had a grubby public school dorm affair when you were passing through adolescence together, and you did your national service at the same barracks. So now they're our best friends at 38", pp. 119-120.) Charles, a teacher, has five children, while Peter, an advocate, has one son with whom he is totally at odds ("I set just the right example for Jeremy. He models himself on everything I am not. My vices have moulded an ascetic" p. 116), and about whom he has curiously unproductive and yet intense arguments with his wife - whom he loves in a detached and uncommitted way.

Gray again explores the potentially disastrous effects of a seemingly insignificant action on the life of the perpetrator. Peter succumbs to a casual seduction by a young and attractive girl, only to find himself sucked into a vortex of embarrassment and absurd mendacity when the highly unstable and neurotic girl stakes an increasingly irksome and infuriating claim on his attention. When he tries to end the affair abruptly, she goes into a frenzy, breaking up the furniture. To calm her down he returns briefly, leaving on an ambiguous note, until a friend of hers pleads with him to talk to the girl who has withdrawn into "despair, you know, beyond her usual -

desperation" (p. 125), The strain this affair exerts on Peter has a corrosive effect on all his relationships, so that his usual aloof cynicism turns to self-loathing. His wife confronts him at one stage with the accusation that "you certainly don't love yourself, do you?" (p. 130), which is a keynote for all Gray's major characters. His own situation is not helped in the least by his wife's overt anxiety that he might stray into somebody else's arms because of her temporary but debilitating pre-occupation with a difficult new job.

The title of the play refers to a court case Peter is handling. The case deals with custody of children and promises to be messy and inconclusive. Peter observes at one stage, in speaking to Sallust, his pupil, that they do have a chance of winning the case:

> So has opposing counsel. I shouldn't think anybody else has, though
>
> (p. 124).

This statement neatly sums up his rather jaundiced view of the world and of human nature.

Like Simon in *Otherwise Engaged* Peter also faces some wrenching truths. The debacle over his mistress and a more than usually corrosive fight with his wife leave him vulnerable and open to shock. His pupil, the youthful and seemingly fit Sallust, dies of heart failure after a strenuous squash game. He

is brought face to face with his own mortality, and turns to Charles for comfort. Charles, whose fourth child (and first son) has just been born, is keenly aware of death:

> The death of friends, all the deaths in wait=
> ing, including our own. But it's the death
> of children that haunts me. Sometimes in the
> night ...
>
> (p. 134).

This searing awareness of man's essential limitation is a constantly recurring concern in modern comedy. Peter forlornly muses that "halfway upon this way of life I'm lost upon ..." (p. 134), and wistfully con= cedes to Charles that he "has something to celebrate" - the birth of a son. This concession makes him appear curiously vulnerable, for even the affair is being kept "in abeyance" for the moment. Like other modern comic heroes, he remains suspended precarious= ly over the vertiginous edge of the abyss - forlorn and battered and unredeemed in any essential way. He speaks wistfully to Sallust of a particular stroke in cricket that went just right:

> The one moment in my life I felt a touch
> of sublimity. I try and recall it occas=
> ionally, before I go to sleep
>
> (p. 132).

Gray's comic heroes are all witty and funny, sad, scarred by life and scared of further hurt, enmeshed in the daily struggle to make life yield up some

sense, hiding behind masks of urbanity or savage riposte, but revealed at last, bleakly and forlornly, as men inviting compassion.

3.8.4 Peter Nichols

Peter Nichols's work is notable for the way in which he uses conventionally taboo subjects such as mental retardation, illness and death as subjects for hilarity. He is a masterly manipulator of audience response for he is "most serious when he is most funny" and "he has a unique gift of finding the laughter in pain without diminishing its painfulness" (Taylor, 1971, p. 34).

Two of Nichols's plays will be looked at. His best-known play is *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*, a play dealing with a hopeless spastic, Josephine, and with her parents' response to her retardation. (His other great success, *The National Health* will also be discussed briefly.)

Joe Egg functions on many levels. Ostensibly the action is centred on one more evening in the house-hold when Joe is brought back from the day-centre she attends. Her parents receive her and deal with her in the way they have evolved over ten years of heartbreak: they joke in the broadest fashion, creating a fantasy world in which the unspeakable

becomes funny. Their stylized patter about Joe's supposed responses to their solicitous inquiries about her day is a paradigm for their deeper and unutterable feelings - feelings which cannot now be couched in other than stock comic patterns. The following excerpts from their conversation should prove the point:

Bri : You been a good girl?
Joe : A-aaah!
(This is her closest approach to speech.)
. . . . . .
Bri : Saw the Christmas Trees?
. . . . . .
And the shops lit up?
. . . . . .
What d'you say? Saw Jesus? Where was he, where was Jesus, you poor softy?
. . . . . .
Saw, the Christmas trees, Mum, And Jesus.
Sheila : She got a screw loose, Dad?
. . . . . .
Bri : [Saw Jesus] on top of the Electricity Building.
Sheila : Oh, yes. Thought she was off her chump for a minute, Dad.
Bri : Seeing Jesus in a dump like this? No wonder, Mum. But no, she's doing well they say.
Sheila : Daddy's pleased you're trying love. What with your eleven-plus on the way.
(Bri gives a short burst of laughter then resumes.)
Bri : You want to get to a decent school.
Sheila : I don't want to be shunted into some secondary modern slum, she says ...

Bri : Like the one where Daddy works.[1)]
Sheila : Share a room with forty of fifty coun=
cil-house types and blackies (p. 16).[2)]

The elaborate game-playing, in which they recall the details of Joe's early life in inventive parlour-games reminiscent of music-hall turns is extended in=to a particularly effective "alienation" device when the audience is drawn into the conversations as a silent third partner, being addressed directly by any of the characters.

The play opens with Bri speaking directly to the audience in the style he uses with 4D, a class of rowdy and backward boys (in a "secondary modern slum"). His smothering frustration with his job is evoked with great clarity so that much of his subsequent be=haviour is more sympathetically viewed. In his des=pair at the end of the day he uses ludicrously in=appropriate nursery-school techniques ("Hands on heads, eyes front, one minute of silence!"), coupled with wounding sarcasm: a mixture certain to miss with 4D. His ineffectuality is underlined at one stage when he tells Sheila of his day:

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1. One critic finds that there is something "too quiescent at the back of the parents' games", and feels that a good heartfelt cry of pain might have been more cathartic. This is, however, precisely the point in modern comedy - the forlorn acceptance of too much suffering is a constant in this drama.

2. A casual but nevertheless consistent reference to racial and national prejudice occurs in almost all the plays studied.

Bri : I said to my class, "Right - Christmas decorations - paper chains". Deep voice from the back said, "Kids' stuff." I frowned at him and realized I'd never seen him before. Turned out he was the elder brother of one of the more backward boys. On the dole, he had come in out of the cold, been sitting in classes all day, nobody'd noticed.

Sheila : Did you throw him out?

Bri : What for? When he brought me up his paper-chain, he said, "You're not much good at teaching, are you, mate?"

Sheila : Oh, I should have hit him.

Bri : He meant it nicely. I must find some= thing else

(pp. 16-17).

Bri, like other modern comic heroes, has no lack of insight into his weaknesses - he has the same un= remittingly bleak and intolerant view of himself as for example Gray's characters.

Sheila repeatedly tries to convince Bri to find some= thing else to do but he seems paralyzed and frozen in his present state.

The play deals with many aspects of love and family life. Love is seen in the context of this play as a means of manipulating relationships, so that on that level the play is not so much about love as about warped interpretations of love by the various individuals concerned.

In Bri and Sheila'a relationship one is made acutely aware of powerful undercurrents. Joe is not so much a cohesive as a divisive influence. For all their surface devotion to a common cause, serious problems mar their relationship. Bri is to some extent a mother's boy, having always been excessively coddled. Sheila is deeply if unconsciously resent= ful of this and refuses to respond to Bri on terms other than her own. It is revealed gradually that Bri married Sheila knowing of her youthful promis= cuity, and one is made more and more insistently aware of the insidiously corrosive effect of her "confessions" on Bri.

Sheila : I wish I'd never told you anything. You said we should be *honest*. You told me about yours first.
Bri : All three. That took an hour. Then for the next few weeks you made a short-list.
Sheila : You *made* me.
Bri : You must have enjoyed those fellows at the time.
Sheila : No!
Bri : One or two.
. . . . . .
Sheila : Once you get to a certain stage with a man, it's hard to say no.
Bri : Most women manage it. With *me* at any rate. Three out of God knows how many tens of thousands I tried ...

(p. 23).

This exchange is especially wounding to Brian as he has been trying with a notable lack of success to get his wife to come to bed.

Sheila's constant rebuffs have made him shy away from attempting any more spontaneous interaction:

> Bri : No fear! I've done all I can without total loss of dignity (p. 25).

Sheila's "terrible sense of duty" (p. 25) is at least partially responsible for the breakdown in their relationship, and this sense of duty has grown out of a sense of guilt - she feels that Joe's condition is a terrible revenge on her for her earlier promiscuity. Bri says that "Sheila's got a theory about Joe's birth. She doesn't blame the doctors. She blames herself" (p. 28), and Sheila voices it even more pertinently by admitting that "I think it was partly because I'd been promiscuous, yes, and my subconscious was making me shrink or withdraw from motherhood, all right!" (p. 28). (While the truth of the matter is that there was clear evidence of negligence on the part of the doctor who attended the birth, as appears from later reminiscences.)

Bri reveals his bleak awareness of a malevolent God when he shamefacedly admits to Sheila that he prayed while Joe's birth dragged on agonisingly for fifty hours:

> Bri : I said, "God, I've only just found her. The baby doesn't matter. It it's a question of a swop ...
>
> . . . . . .

Bri : Yes, He heard all right. (To audience): I see Him as a sort of manic-depressive footballer. He looked down and thought to Himself, "I'll fix that bastard!" (Shakes his fist at the roof.) And He did!

(p. 31).

At this point too, they reminisce about the early days[1] and come to the visit of the clergyman who was appalled at their describing Joe as a kind of "living parsnip" (p. 39). Sheila reveals that she has faith in Joe's recovery still (unlike Bri, who "lives with despair", p. 39), and they make heart=breaking fun of the "laying on of hands bit" (p. 41).

It is clear ultimately, however, that Sheila's insis=tence on magic and faith is another form of opting out, for she can indulge in martyrdom and duty by refusing to let Joe go into an institution.[2] Her use of the cliché that "while there's life there's hope" (p. 45) is revealing, as is the way in which she dissipates her emotional energy by "embracing all living things" (p. 26), which in this case means the whole menagerie they keep, and to which she pays

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1. The paediatrician, either German or Viennese, told them that "Mattam, let me try and tell you vot your daughter iss like. Do you know vot I mean ven I say that your daughter vos a wegetable?" (p. 36).

2. Freddie talks to Bri and says that "you used, I remember, a striking metaphor describing Sheila's state of mind. You said a cataract had closed her eye - like your mother's net curtains, screening off the world outside" (p. 57).

meticulous attention, squeezing Bri in almost off-handedly for his share of her attention.

The defective relationship between Bri and Sheila is painfully highlighted in the scene with Pam and Freddie. Various divisive issues are aired. In the first place Bri has accused Sheila of having an affair with Freddie - a patently ridiculous accusation. Bri also annoys Freddie (who is a stolid unimaginative type) with his sick jokes:

> Bri : The Thalidomide Kid. Fastest gun in the West. On the slightest impulse from his rudimentary arm-stumps, the steel hands fly to the holsters, he spins on solid rubber tyres and - pschoo! (He blazes away.)
>
> Freddie : That's a bit too sick for me. Give me a good message any time
>
> (pp. 51-52).

Bri prompts Freddie at last to say that "the whole issue's a giggle. I throw you a lifeline and you giggle. The whole country's giggling its way to disaster" (p. 57). Freddie forces Bri out into the open[1] and the tone darkens perceptibly when the issue of euthanasia is openly aired. There is a visible reshuffle and clear if ironic sides are taken, ranging Bri and Pam (whom he detests) on the opposite

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1. Freddie: "These jokes. May I say my piece about these jokes? They've obviously helped you see it through. A useful anaesthetic. But. Isn't there a point where the jokes start using *you*?"

side from Sheila and Freddie. The measure of Bri's desperation is visible as he pretends to have killed Joe (to gauge their response), then tries to prevent Sheila from "having everything done" (p. 83) to pro= long Joe's life once again.[1)]

Bri despairs of a future for him and Sheila[2)] and finally takes the plunge to leave her just as the moment when Sheila, ironically, makes some gesture to accommodate him - but once more on her own terms, and by now far too late.

> Sheila : It was my fault. I've been asking too much. ... I'm going to look for a residential hospital where I'm sure she will be well looked after and won't pine. ... You and I will leave her there ... several

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1. Bri expresses his despair facetiously: "Mimes hand-mike, assumes awe-stricken voice: If there is anything hearten= ing about such a disaster, I think it's the wonderful way this great operation of mercy has moved into action. And of course the uniquely British optimism that suddenly in moments of crisis seems to suffuse the whole nauseating atmosphere ..." (p. 84). He goes on to create an ironic parallel between the process of saving Joe's life and the chaos resulting from a great disaster. His very style seems to suggest the absurdity of the effort expended on Joe.

2. "Our marriage might have worked as well as most if Joe hadn't happened. I was too young for it, that's true. I always will be. But Sheila might just have dragged me screaming into manhood." (p. 85)

   One can see that Bri does have insight into himself and into the destructive process initiated by the birth of Joe. Sheila's love is side-tracked into sterility and Bri also withers away as a result.

weeks, even a month, a year. Means we'll be able to go abroad. Haven't been abroad for eleven years. Second honeymoon, alright? And let's start now. (Her hands are all over him.)

Bri : I'll go and ring the school. (He gets free.)

This getting free is a symbolic act - for in going to phone the school he is going away for ever, leaving Sheila with her menagerie to expend her love on.

Bri : Sheila might just have dragged me screaming into manhood. 'Stead of which, I was one of the menagerie. She loved me as much as any goldfish or aphelandra

(p. 85).

Nichols has succeeded in creating a very funny and yet very disturbing (and compassionate) vision of the ways in which love can be manipulated within a family situation (admittedly an extreme one, but one which allows extreme emotions to emerge) and finally destroyed. The context in this family with the severely retarded child provides him with the oppor= tunity to touch on some contentious contemporary issues in an unselfconscious way which in turn fas= cinates, amuses and appals the audience. What emerges here as in other contemporary plays is the idea that violence and chaos lie just under the sur= face of the ordinary, to surface unexpectedly and shatteringly. Bri's description of his feelings

regarding his pupils is only half a joke[1] as is his flippant rejoiner to Sheila's consoling words:

> Sheila : Never mind, you break up in two days.
> Bri : I broke up years ago
>
> (p. 14).

As in so many of these plays, there is no lack of insight into self - Bri sees only too clearly. "I'm made up as I go along from old lengths of string, fag-ends ... magazine cuttings, film clips ... all stuck together with wodges of last week's school dinner" (p. 25). He desperately acknowledges his awareness of the imperfection of his world and his craving for "more": conditioned as he is by Sheila's disdain for his self-pity, he talks of "calling attention to myself to make sure I get more than my share. Otherwise I'd have to settle for eyes-front-hands-on-heads and a therapeutic bash once in a blue moon. And I'm too young to die, I tell you!" (p. 26). This vision, once again, is not ameliorated by real acceptance or tolerance - instead he looks at the rejective picture of himself and accepts it as the only true one, leaving himself precariously on the edge of the abyss, loathing himself and yet clinging to the remnants of life in a pathetic attempt to assert himself. His centre, however, is

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1. "I was on playground duty sipping my Nescaff, dreaming of a sudden painless road accident that would put an end to it all ..." (p. 13).

shattered and the centripetal movement of the frag=ments leaves him bereft and devastated, yet indus=triously attempting to plaster over everything with gallant if macabre attempts at wit and playfulness.

Nichols expands on some of these themes in *The National Health*, a play set in a hospital ward in which the author explores attitudes[1] towards life and death while at the same time making hysterical fun of people's morbid and covert fascination with the sor=did and undignified details of ill-health and death.[2]

Taylor has rightly commented that on one level the play functions as a *Carry on Nurse* type of entertain=ment, but this has the same effect on the audience as the farcical in Stoppard and Orton: it is a device for turning the laughter of the audience upon itself and violently truncating it. Nichols also takes the idea of "alienation" further in this play and has

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1. The play is satirical in its treatment of doctors and nurses who do not know the names of the patients but deal with them in the abstract terms of diseases and opera=tions and in terms of beds that can be emptied and then removed from a ward that has to be redecorated. In this sense the medical staff is seen as representing all figures of authority and the frighteningly anonymous way in which modern man is manipulated and turned into a sta=tistic is suggested.

2. Barnet, the orderly, is used to play these scenes. In direct address to the audience he describes with an archly salacious attitude, the actual mechanics of laying out a corpse and of preparing a male patient for abdomin=al surgery.

Barnet the orderly function as a compere, narrator and commentator who is at the same time in contact with the cast and the audience. Barnet also singles out one woman in the audience to discomfit, a device which serves to discomfit the entire audience and stimulate their awareness. While laying out the corpse, he says that the "lady knows what I mean" (p. 49), and goes on to reprove her for being coarse because she seemed to catch his broad innuendo. Later on, shaving Ash in preparation for the opera= tion, he says archly "not that it's going to get near many *throats* today. Quite the reverse. All right, madam, we know you're always the first to savvy smut. Nothing to be proud of" (p. 53). Into this intricate pattern, in which life and death are interwoven, he weaves another strand. In conven= tional soap-opera style, he develops, as if shown on a television screen, an affair between a young doc= tor, son of a racist doctor, and a coloured nurse. There is high good fun when the father's disapproval is dissolved in outrageous melodrama: the son is stricken by kidney failure, the nurse donates a kid= ney, the father performs the transplant and all is well, widowed father marrying the spinster nurse who has been pining for years, son marrying the "blackie" and the play dissolving into a carnival ending, with Barnet in black-face fusing the two worlds in a tel= ling comment on the truth and relativity theme: "It's a funny old world we live in and you're lucky to get out of it alive" (p. 109).

In true comic style, man is shown in this play strip=ped of all defences, pretence and dignity gone: in ill-health and facing death, there can be no sugar-coating. He creates some frightening perspectives such as the one on euthanasia provided by the termin=ally ill cancer patient who has had it written into his records that he wants no more resuscitation (after three successful and strenuous attempts to keep him "alive"). Another perspective with wrench=ing visceral effect is created by the callow Kenneth (recuperating from his second motorbike accident. A third leaves him an idiot[1)] who piously claims that he is "animal-minded", as his last pile-up was the result of his swerving to avoid hitting a dog:

Ash : Hitler liked animals.
Ken : Who?
Ash : Hitler. *He* was opposed to blood sports.
Ken : Who's he when he is at home?
Ash : Never heard of Hitler?
Foster : German dictator during the last war. He ...
Ken : Oh, yeah, Belsen and all that. I read about it. It must have been a giggle in there.
Ash : A what?
Ken : All them naked women. I read about it (p. 20).

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1. Barnet: "Young Kenneth swerved to avoid a dog, a coach driver swerved to avoid *him*, and went head-on into another coach, killing or maiming sixty passengers. But when I add that one was a party of Mongols and the other an old-age pensioners's outing, you'll surely agree that one sometimes discerns A Grand Design. The Great Reaper cer=tainly seems on occasion to have his head screwed on" (p. 101).

This must be what Walter Kerr (1968) had in mind when talking of lifting the stone of the heart and finding a creature crawling there that one cannot shake off.[1)]

Yet Nichols balances this unrelieved gloom with a character like Tyler who is always cheerful in spite of the greatest adversity, and with characters like Ash and Foster who are reassuringly human with their little failings and frustrations balanced by concern for others and compassion.

Heilman has strikingly accounted for Nichols' success by claiming that "to make jokes about the repellent, the frightening or the pitiable is to grant them acceptance; ... jokes are symptomatic of acceptability or acceptedness" (1978, p. 135). In this way, then, the situations of being ill, of dying, are seen not as pathetic disasters but as situations in ironic contrast with hopes and illusions (such as the soap-opera visions of hospitals the world of melodrama feeds on). Ultimately the play deals with various ways of accommodating reality, mostly wry and rueful but exquisitely comic.

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1. Cf. Griffiths' play, *Comedians*, which also deals with this theme.

3.8.5 Trevor Griffiths

To a large extent Griffiths' play *Comedians* incorporates many of the pre-occupations of contemporary comic authors. The play deals with a class of "comedians" who have, under the expert tutelage of an ex-vaudeville star, been preparing for an audition to enable some of them to turn professional. It is a searching look at what engenders laughter; what dark impulses, for example, trigger laughter as a response to remarks about sex, ethnic groups and physical disabilities. (The concern with laughter is a central *thematic* one in this play. In more general terms and in the light of the earlier discussion it is necessary to keep this distinction in mind and to determine more specifically to what extent the play succeeds in creating the predisposition to an awareness of the comic postulated by Elder Olson.) In this sense then it is an acute exploration of man's real nature and the true and false ways in which man can accommodate reality in his scheme of things.

There is a punctilious theatricality in this play which ties in with the insistent use in modern comedy of the device of play/life,[1)] which consistently functions as a metaphor for reality. The clock in

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1. Cf. Stoppard's use of the intermingling of the "play" and life in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

the classroom keeps the real time throughout the show, a fact which constitutes a powerful device in involving the audience.

The group of would-be "comics" are polishing the acts they have been working on. Waters, the ex-comic who has been coaching them, warns them that the examiner might be hostile, being an old professional rival. This potentially unnerving situation frag=ments their sensibilities, forcing two of them (the Jew and the Irishman) to change their acts in a dis=honest attempt to butter up to the examiner (who, significantly, then chooses only these two for pro=fessional contracts). Some of them go to pieces, trying to maintain their loyalty to Waters, while Gethin Price, the star pupil, goes to the opposite extreme, pulling out of the hat a searingly truthful but ultimately rejective act that leaves Waters stunned. ("You were *brilliant!*" ... but "It was ugly. It was drowning in hate. You can't change today into tomorrow on that basis. You forget a thing called ... the truth") (p. 65). Price is stung into retaliation, and asks, "What do you know about the *truth*, Mr Waters? You think the truth is *beautiful*? You've forgotten what it's *like*" (p. 65). Waters counters with his own private agony, telling Price of having seen a German concentration camp and being stunned by the implications of the actions of the Nazis for humanity as a whole and for him as a person. The horrifying tale includes an account of the tour he made with an Army entertain=

ment group. In one hour, the group visited Mozart's house ("These perfect rooms, all over the house, the sun on the windows") and then Buchenwald ("They'd cleaned it up, it was like a museum, each room with its separate, special collection"). What stunned him was the realization that in "this hell-place", there was a special "Punishment Block" (p. 66). The fact that to Waters it appeared to be "a world like any other. It was the logic of our world ... exten= ded ..." (p. 66) has robbed him of the ability to laugh. " ... I discovered ... there were no jokes left. Every joke was a little pellet, a ... final solution. We're the only animal that laughs. The only one. You know when you see the chimpanzees on the P.G. Tips things snickering, do you know what that is? Fear. They're signalling their terror" (p. 67).

Waters is now signalling his terror, feeling desper= ately that "we've gotta get deeper than hate. Hate's no help" (p. 67), so that in his continued classes one might regard him as constantly involved in an effort at exorcism. Price implicitly rejects this attitude by saying about Grock (a comedian upon whom he modelled his act): "Thing I liked was his ... hardness. Not like Chaplin, all coy and covered in kids. This book said he weren't even funny. He was just very truthful, everything he did" (p. 67). He quotes from the book and ends on a bleak note: "If I had to perish twice, I think I know enough of hate to say that for destruction ice is also great and

would suffice ... It was all ice out there tonight. I loved it. I felt ... expressed" (pp. 67-68).

Waters is criticized by his old rival earlier on. Challenor claims that he was brilliant, but "he didn't want enough. I don't know. He just stayed up here" (p. 32), not joining the professional rat race and not clawing his way to the top. Waters clearly feels some desire for redemption of whatever kind to exorcise the ghosts haunting him but he is deeply and despairingly conscious of the fact that it is not possible. The play ends with an aware= ness in both Waters and Price that the core is shat= tered, that man's darkly destructive nature cannot be repudiated or, worse, ameliorated. Price opts out of the "horror": "The Jews still stayed in line, even when they *knew*, Eddie! What's *that* about? ... I stand in no line, I refuse my consent" (p. 68), an attitude which cuts him off (his wife also deserts him), but leaves him his dignity and leaves him insulated against further abrasive human contact: "I wait. I'm ready" (p. 68).

The awareness of a world gone awry is underlined by a horrible joke told by the Indian who strays into the class by accident:

> Patel (laughing, excited): It's very funny, it's very very funny. A man has many children, wife, in the South. His crops fail, he have nothing, the skin shrivel on his children's ribs, his wife's milk dries. They lie outside the house

> starving. All around them, the sacred cows, ten, twenty, more, eating grass. One day he take sharp knife, mm? He creep up on a big white cow, just as he lift knife the cow see him and the cow say, Hey, aren't you knowing you not permitted to kill me? And the man say, What do you know, a talking horse. (Patel laughs a lot) (p. 69).

The implied barbs aimed at religion and culture in this joke are symptomatic of the thematic preoccupations of the play. Waters calls the joke Jewish - an indication of its blackly effective mode of acceptance of the world (although in a somewhat different idiom).

Price, however, has rejected all cosiness and all consolation, treading a lonely path of *hardness* where one need not fear any involvement: a shattering comment on modern man and his relationship with the world.

3.9 The contemporary comic vision

An absorbing and provocative picture of the contemporary comic vision emerges from the study of contemporary plays. A tentative formulation of this vision will be made and this formulation will then be applied to certain plays by Pinter: from this it should emerge that some of the difficulties facing the critic of Pinter could well be resolved by using

this definition of comedy as a way into the play.

The formulation will rest on the structure created for the discussion of the traditional vision of co= medy, with increasing stress on deviations and con= temporary developments.

Comedy has retained its social character. The comic characters are still very much involved in their social relationships and their (largely defective) efforts at interaction and adaptation. An almost imperceptible but nevertheless real change has be= come discernible, however. Pinter has observed that he deals with characters at the edge of their living, where they are very much alone, and there is a trend towards this aloneness. Butley, for exam= ple, is more of an "individual" hero than is usual in comedy, and a proud solitariness seems to be an attitude cultivated by characters from Simon Hench to Gethin Price.[1)] Thus, while the framework of comedy is still society, the integration of character and society is becoming a problem that can be tied largely to the disintegration of the contemporary world as it is perceived by the characters in comedy, and which contributes substantially to the ultimate bleakness of the comic vision.

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1. Simon Hench : *Otherwise Engaged* (Gray)
   Gethin Price: *Comedians* (Griffiths)

As in older comedy, the ironic principle is still very much operative. Incongruity is still the key=note, it is to be observed as existing between cha=racter and character, character and society, or be=tween ideal and reality. In actual fact, the prin=ciple of irony or incongruity seems to be gaining greater force, so that the degree and the quality of disparateness are greater and more confusing than ever before. This has an important bearing on the tone of contemporary comedy, for the very extent of the disparateness perceived seems most effectively to preclude the possibility of however partial a victory on the part of the comic hero. The tone of contemp=orary comedy is thus persistently bleak, ironic, wry and forlorn.

In contemporary times comedy seems to have a stronger intellectual appeal. Stoppard's work succeeds par=tially because of the elegance and intelligence re=vealed, while of the enormously successful *Butley* one critic has observed that "it is difficult to account for the great success of this play. It is both witty and psychologically interesting, but one might have expected that its appeal would be limited to middle-class intellectuals. Obviously many other people identify with Butley's ... pro=blems" (Kerensky, 1977, p. 138). The great success must therefore be ascribed to the universality, in quality if not in detail, of Ben Butley's problems.

The greater stress on intelligence (and the utmost elegance and effectiveness of the language) also has an important bearing on the contemporary vision. The objectivity and detachment engendered in this way create and encourage the greater effective distance between characters, negating to some extent the socially conciliatory function of the great comedies of the past.

The mannered style (and content) of much contemporary British comedy is highly reminiscent of the style and content of Restoration comedy. The character of Horner (in Wycherley's *The Country Wife*) would equally well fit into Gray's living-rooms. It is important to note, however, that in the greatest Restoration comedy, such as Congreve's *The Way of the World*, there is an essential difference. Mirabell and Millamant do not try to escape from their society: they still have sufficient faith in it to try and conform (albeit on their own terms). The contemporary hero, however, seems to have lost faith in his society and therefore remains, sadly solitary, on the fringes of a society that he considers has failed him.[1)]

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1. Jeff (in *Otherwise Engaged*) says bitterly that "it's my actual bloody opinion that this sad little, bloody little country of ours is finished at last. Bloody finished at last" (p. 25).

The element of reductiveness, morality and correction is still operative to a certain (limited) extent, albeit in a much more sophisticated and subtle form. Gray's explicit satire of university staff in *Butley*, however, is an integral part of his larger design in indicating the personal and professional disintegra= tion of a man. It does provide much of the fun, however, even if that is incidental. Orton and Nichols (as well as Stoppard) take wildly hilarious swipes at institutions like the medical and the psychiatric professions, but these criticisms are really symbolic of their bleary-eyed vision of man as a victim of a dehumanized technocracy.

The compassionate element in comedy has remained as strong as ever, for once one overcomes the initially deliberately alienating effect created in most of these comedies, the awareness of pity and compassion leaves one viscerally shaken because of the delayed (and then concentrated) impact.

Therefore, also, the awareness of limitation and imperfection has become steadily more corrosive and forlorn. Man could once still see and accept him= self as the crowning glory of creation, so that even while aware of his limiting imperfection man had the comforting awareness of the seeds or at least the residue of greatness within himself, which made for easier acceptance. So, whereas earlier on man could still appreciate and depend on the angelic as contained within the outward shape of the beast, now

he has to cope as well he may with being, in his own balefully and painfully precise estimation, a "poor, bare, forked animal", daily gathering around him, with pathetic dignity, his shreds of protective clothing.

One might reiterate, in referring to the bleakness of vision that the contemporary comic hero has of himself, Walter Kerr's statement about man's current pretension to being the most miserable wretch ever which has come to constitute a new target for defla= tion by comic attack. The Player can then at one stage say to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that "un= certainty is the natural state. You're nobody special", stressing the pervasive quality of forlorn lostness in this type of drama.

The awareness of limitation in traditional comedy has always demanded acceptance and consequently in= tegration and redemption: if these were not forth= coming, there was rejection, imparting at once a darker tone to the play. Thus Shylock is rejected and almost upsets the tone of the play, thus Christy (*The Playboy of the Western World)* is redeemed and liberated while Pegeen dithers and hesitates, then retreats fatally, and is left to lament heartbreak= ingly the loss of the only playboy of the Western World. This ambivalence has led to the description of Synge's play as an "unhappy comedy".

In contemporary terms, acceptance has become too complete: Pegeen now would not cry but would make a savagely derisive and sardonic joke about her loss. This over-accepting attitude seems to have become the norm in British comedy to the extent, I suspect, where a deviation into a redemptive attitude now would be largely regarded as ironic. The prevail= ing world view militates against acceptance leading to redemption and forgiveness: the sense of a dis= integrating culture induces a further awareness of anxiety that cannot be exorcised. The comic vision, then, which is an all-encompassing one, deals com= prehensively with man and society. One should stress that the impulse behind these plays from which the conclusions were drawn cannot be regarded as a pre= conceived moral system: the dramatists proceed, rather, by an intuitive and honest assessment of ex= perience, and for this reason the portrayal of their experiences is much more likely to be true and con= vincing than if they had proceeded by other methods and with any overt intention.

In the framework of contemporary literature one could then assert that the comic vision has become a means of coping with despair, of asserting man's residual dignity in the face of blankly hostile and often in= comprehensible assaults on his sensibility. The black jokes and the savage humour often serve as a weapon against the invasions of emptiness, the aware= ness of cosmic homelessness, even if, to repeat what White has said, the efforts may be likened to an

epee flailing in half-darkness against something monstrous, possibly amorphous. On one level the "sick humour" so often encountered represents an assimilation of *all* aspects of reality, so that comedy remains a means that can be used to translate the "whole of experience", the flux and evanescence constituting modern experience.

On another level, as Heilman has suggested, joking about the unspeakable does tend to take the sting out of it and to make it more amenable to close inspection. In fact, man seems not so much to quail before the horror now as to be investigating it.

As suggested earlier, more of the contemporary playwrights are using the farcical as a device to translate their awareness of a fractured existence into dramatic form. This use of the farcical has significance on more than one level.

On the one hand the farcical is one significant "creator of laughs". While this is not a consideration that has any real critical value, one should perhaps look at one aspect of this laughter. There can be no question now of a laugh "doing one good", leaving one refreshed and rejuvenated. More than ever the laugh is ambiguous in its form and effect. Whereas Shakespeare and Synge also evoked laughter tinged with uneasiness, the laughter of most contemporary drama is mostly lined with hysteria, often violently truncated and underlaid with anxiety. The

laughter passes, leaving in its wake some sort of emotional débris in the shape of unresolved anxiety, in the sense of the nearness to the surface of tears at the pathetic insufficiency of man to the heart-breaking task of living.

On another level, the present description of the nature of comedy, particularly as it embodies the farcical not as mode but as device would seem to encompass what has been called the Theatre of the Absurd. Indeed, in the comic lostness, in the violence and aggression thinly disguised and then revealed by wildly exuberant farce, and in the illimitable compassion and pain one feels with and for the over-accepting homunculi of much Absurd drama, one could make a strong case for saying that those plays constitute part of the contemporary comic vision. Those plays dramatically (and effectively) challenge the assumptions of the contemporary world in the spirit of comedy right down the ages.

Comedy seems to be assimilating and usurping other forms, displacing tragedy, as the spiritual environment at the moment is intrinsically hostile to tragedy - as tragedy deals with grandeur as rooted in the individual, and as this grandeur is explicitly and emphatically if regretfully denied in contemporary drama.

This vision of comedy manifests itself in forms retaining much of the traditional while at the same time accommodating the contemporary. The social framework is still there, although seemingly disintegrating, as evidenced by the creation of more solitary heroes such as Butley and even Gethin Price (*Comedians*).

Comic plots are still the somewhat sprawling and largely inorganic plots of tradition, although there is a tendency towards greater simplicity. Thus, a plot may consist loosely of a number of encounters involving two or more characters. It could also be a more organic plot, as in *Butley* or *Comedians*. A growing trend seems to be the superimposition of a popular plot form such as the "whodunnit" on a more fundamental quest pattern (as in *Jumpers*, *Loot*, *The Real Inspector Hound*): a device enabling the playwright to comment obliquely and ironically on the moral or intellectual quest pursued by the character in question. It also enables the playwright to create a paradigm of action for the play and has ironic allusive value.

Comic language has shown an important development. Language has become an instrument for manipulating the nuances of reality, for manipulating relationships between characters and for alternately obscuring and revealing character. One could refer again to Stoppard, who has called his dramatic language a means of withdrawing with style from chaos, and this

is an immensely valuable statement. One of the main functions of language in contemporary comedy seems to be its function to act as a semblance of order imposed on an essentially disordered universe. Through the wit and intelligence of Stoppard and Gray's language, and in the enigmatic and sparse elegance of Pinter's language one is made, paradoxically, more aware of the teeming and seething world threatening the weakly teetering little man on the edge of the void.

The themes of contemporary comedy are essentially the same as those of traditional comedy. Man is still concerned intrinsically with "sex, money and politics", but the stress has been shifted to the point where man's anxiety about his ability and desire to relate to the society in which he finds himself a terrified stranger has assumed ever greater, often nightmare proportions, and this anxiety and the terror it often degenerates into have significantly coloured the themes of comedy.