5. Liberal Democracy as Secular Comedy

Laughter is something social and relational, something involving a context of trust, in a way that suffering is not. It requires exchange and conversation; it requires a real live other person—whereas Marcel’s [in Proust’s novel] agonies go on in a lonely room and distract him from all outward attentions. To imagine love as a form of mourning is already to court solipsism; to imagine it as a form of laughter (of smiling conversation) is to insist that it presupposes... the achievement of community.

—Martha Nussbaum, Love’s Knowledge

To be schematic about it, comedy presents a world in which human desires are satisfied, while tragedy tells us, in Nietzsche’s words, that there is a “contradiction” between human needs and what the world will afford us.¹ For Northrop Frye, “tragedy seems to lead up to an epiphany of law, of that which is and must be... [T]he overwhelming majority of tragedies do leave us with a sense of the supremacy of impersonal power and of the limitations of human effort.”²

Not surprisingly, then, the connection of tragedy with Necessity or Fate has led various writers to associate comedy with possibility. John Bruns tells us that “[o]ne of the most neglected of comedy’s premises is that there are no limits, only unlimited, unforeseen possibilities.”³ Kiernan Ryan, in discussing Shakespeare’s comedies and romances, looks to the ways that they “project a world where ‘the art of the possible triumphs over the intransigence of the actual.’... These plays are indeed not concerned with ‘preserving a good already reached’ under existing social conditions. They are powered by their commitment to unfolding forms of life liberated from whatever forbids the free play and shared satisfaction of justified desires.... The utopian romance dislocates and reshapes the present moment of history, and so ‘serves to stimulate in its readers a desire for a better life and to motivate that desire toward action by conveying a sense that the world is not fixed once and for all.’ Romances invite us to recognize and play experimentally with imaginable alternatives, which strengthen our conviction that a different kind of world could actually be realized.”⁴
An emphasis on the utopian often accompanies an attempt to distinguish comedy from romance. For Frye, “the romance is the nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream,” and Stanley Cavell adopts this point of view when he calls the “remarriage” films he studies in *Pursuits of Happiness* romances in his text after designating them comedies in the subtitle of his book: “Our films may be understood as parables of a phase of the development of consciousness at which the struggle is for the reciprocity or equality of consciousness between a woman and a man, a study of the conditions under which this fight for recognition (as Hegel put it) or demand for acknowledgement (as I have put it) is a struggle for mutual freedom, especially of the view each holds of the other. This gives the films of our genre a Utopian cast. They harbor a vision which they know cannot be fully domesticated, inhabited, in the world we know. They are romances. Showing us our fantasies, they express the inner agenda of a nation that conceives Utopian longings and commitments for itself.” Not surprisingly, this dismissal of the utopian is linked in Frye (as in the tradition more generally) with the claim that tragedy is more profound, and tells us a truer tale about the actual conditions of human existence: “Without tragedy, all literary fictions might be plausibly explained as expressions of emotional attachments, whether of wish-fulfillment or of repugnance: the tragic fiction guarantees, so to speak, a disinterested quality in literary experience. It is largely through the tragedies of Greek culture that the sense of the authentic natural basis of human character comes into literature.” In Nietzsche and in Frye, despite the vast differences in their general outlooks, tragedy reveals to us the way things really are—and there is a deep consolation, even a kind of perverse pleasure, in knowing that the order of things is fixed (it cannot be disturbed by human action) and in submitting to that order. Tragedy’s sadism, its staging of the spectacle of suffering, is perfectly matched by its masochism, the desire to be punished. Finally, there is the pride of knowing the worst without hiding in illusion, in standing up and taking one’s medicine like a man. As Frye emphasizes, the tragic hero acts and suffers in isolation; his battle is with the forces of the universe, with the gods or with nature, more than it is with other men. In that sense, tragedy is a metaphysical form, attuned to questions about the nonnegotiable terms of existence.
But, for all that, we would do well to remind ourselves that tragedy is no less a humanly contrived story about ourselves, who we are, and what we can be than any of the other literary forms. Why should we ascribe a special authority to the form that tells that we cannot have what we want, that the world cannot be “as you like it”? Note Ryan’s appeal to “justified desire,” a formula that raises the suspicion that tragedy might be based on an unjustified sense of guilt, on a conviction that I do not deserve what I want. One of the tasks of comedy, then, would be to persuade us that we should not repudiate our desires out of hand, to teach us how to lose our “passionate attachment to subjection” (to use Judith Butler’s phrase).

Or take Cavell’s easy, almost unconsidered, claim that equality between a man and a woman is impossible in “any world we know.” Where does this assurance come from? He shows that the films he studies have numerous “scenes of instruction,” that they are often built around educating the woman into an acceptance (even joyful embrace) of a sexual desire the world has presented as shameful and around educating the man into expressing his desires, into passing from the habit of “command” to the ability “to wish, and consequently to make a fool of himself.” Certain received images of femininity and masculinity have trapped men and women into roles that hamper their ability to relate to their own desires straightforwardly—and to one another equally. Are these roles immutable? These films say otherwise. Why should the possibility of effective education be confined to the films themselves—and deemed impracticable and nonreproducible in the “world we know”? Especially when it is understood that the desires the films strive both to justify and then to realize are part of “the agenda of a nation,” namely ours, that affirms “pursuits of happiness.” Cavell, I am suggesting, does not have the courage of his liberal desires. He confines the longing for equality to film, refusing that longing any capacity to motivate political action or find fulfillment through any social practice or political institution.

To put it this way does raise the vexed question of what “comedy” means. Is it a literary form, a way of describing real-life events, or a structure of feeling (a way of understanding and living humanness)? In what follows I present comedy as a world-view that is a cross between a sensibility (an ethos) and a set of arguments about how our world is and could be. I rely on comic literary works to identify and
exemplify various features of that world-view. Literature is not life, but it can provide equipment for living. And it serves, in a different way than philosophy, as a site of reflection on human situations.

If comedy is about the fulfillment of desire (after in some cases overcoming, as in the Jane Austen novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, a prior failure to even know one’s own desire), the fulfillment takes place in a social setting, in and through the self’s relationship to others, and through a process of reform. The prevailing relationships need to be rewritten before fulfillment is possible. Comedy, unlike tragedy, is not metaphysical, but social, and deals not with an isolated individual, but with selves in relation to one another. Comedy moves from a situation in which fulfillment is blocked (for whatever reason) to a renewed and revitalized society in which desire is satisfied. The usual way to tell this story is through a young couple whose desire to marry is thwarted by a father (or father-figure) who forbids the marriage or by a social order (usually it’s an issue of class) that deems the chosen partner inappropriate. The anarchistic energy of sexual desire threatens to disrupt the prevailing social order, but desire wins out to the extent that it has its way, although that desire is reined in by giving it the sanctioned legal form of marriage. Society is rejuvenated, quite literally. It is saved from becoming dry, sterile, and joyless, a mere following of established rules and roles. A creative chaos, which very often includes disguises of various sorts, especially of men pretending to be women and vice versa, loosens up the prevailing norms and allows them to be reformulated in ways that give greater satisfaction. Comedy is about change, about the movement to a social order that better accommodates our desires. The social world comedy imagines also accommodates “as many people as possible in its final ending: the blocking characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated. Comedy often includes a scapegoat ritual of expulsion which gets rid of some irreconcilable character, but exposure and disgrace make for pathos, or even tragedy.”

Comedy is the art of accommodation, of making things and people fit together. The tragic hero never compromises—and his intransigence marks both his nobility and his folly: “What tragic essentialism finds distasteful is randomness, contingency, the unraveling text of the empirical and everyday—in a word, comedy. Comedy is the domain of the non-intransigent, of those crafty, compliant, unkillable forms
of life which get their way by yielding. Its adaptive, accommodatory
[sic] spirit is thus the very opposite of tragic deadlock and clenched
resolution.  

The characters in a comedy do what it takes to make
things work (pragmatism), but it is worth noting that, instead of being
despised for their pains, a comity that is enjoyed by all results. Should
we wonder that the agent of this social harmony is so often a woman?
Against masculine pride and stubbornness, both of which lead to con-

flit, are poised the feminine virtues of listening to and making room
for the views of the other. Announcing at the outset of Attitudes toward
History his intention to take “comedy” as his desired attitude, Kenneth
Burke adds: “Basically this book would accept the Aristophanic assump-
tions, which equate tragedy with war and comedy with peace.” Humans
need, Burke writes, “to learn to cherish the mildly charitable ways of
the comic discount. For by nothing less than such humanistic allow-
ances can we hope to forestall (if it can be forestalled!) the most idi-

otic tragedy conceivable: the willful ultimate poisoning of this lovely
planet, in conformity with a mistaken heroics of war” (AH, v).

Comic accommodation does not require blindness to the fol-
lies and even evil of others, but it does require “discounting” them, of
making allowances: “[T]he comic frame will appear the most service-
able for the handling of human relationships. . . . The comic frame is
charitable, but at the same time it is not gullible. It keeps us alive to
the ways in which people ‘cash in on’ their moral assets, and even use
moralistic euphemisms to conceal purely materialistic purposes—but
it can recognize as much without feeling its disclosure is the last word
on human motivation” (AH, 105–6). Against a tragic view that focuses
on, even fetishizes, purity, comedy recognizes mixed motives, the ways
that our spiritual or idealistic aspirations are always already corrupted
by baser desires, but eschews the temptation to cynicism on the one
hand or to an unworldly transcendence of the body and/or of matter
on the other, “an acceptance of nature and body that does not ask to
be redeemed by any beyond.”  

Hamlet captures the mood of comic charity when he responds to Polonius’s promise to “use [the players]
according to their desert”: “God’s bodikin, man; much better. Use
them after your own honor and dignity. The less they deserve, the more
merit is in your bounty” (Hamlet, act. 2, scene 2, lines 527–32). Comedy
takes neither human virtues nor human sins too seriously, striving
to find a way of living with both. As C. L. Barber puts it, “The satirist presents life as it is and ridicules it because it is not ideal, as we would like it to be and as it should be. Shakespeare goes the other way about: he represents or evokes ideal life, and then makes fun of it because it does not square with life as it ordinarily is.”

F. H. Buckley, in his recent book *The Morality of Laughter*, misses this distinction between satire and comedy. Buckley argues that laughter is always directed against a “butt,” and, therefore, “superiority is a necessary but not sufficient condition of laughter.” Buckley pays homage to laughter’s ability to create fellow feeling, but he sees such sociability as always produced by identification of a common object of ridicule, a scapegoat. I hardly want to deny that laughter can be cruel, or that there are sacrificial comedies. But there is an alternative, an egalitarian laughter of the kind that Bakhtin celebrates. The key is “ambivalence,” the inclusion of the self in what is laughed at, and thus the mixture of affection and ridicule. This laughter “is also directed at those who laugh. The people do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world. They, too, are incomplete, they also die and are revived and renewed. This is one of the essential differences of the people’s festive laughter from the pure satire of modern times. The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world’s comic aspect is destroyed, and that which appears comic becomes a private reaction. The people’s ambivalent laughter, on the other hand, expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it.” Buckley’s refusal of ambivalence, his desire to use laughter as a purgative that lights the way to a pure world, is signaled by his statement of what the morality of laughter produces: “By highlighting comic vices, laughter teaches us a superior life-plan, of grace and suppleness, that is immune from ridicule.” But a very different lesson emerges from comedy if the lesson is that no life is immune from ridicule, that all humans play the fool at times and in various ways, that we are all united in our bumbling attempts to find our way in this difficult world. Comic ambivalence, the comic discount, not only accepts that “there, but for the grace of God, go I,” but also that solemnity, taking it all with utmost seriousness and a determination to be above ridicule, is one of the funniest of human foibles. If outrage at human folly and vice is not mixed with affection and with

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the knowledge that I am hardly immune to what I condemn in others, the result is differentiating satire instead of inclusive comedy.

By endorsing Barber’s and Bakhtin’s distinction between satire and comedy, I would seem to have abandoned the utopian altogether. But I am instead, as I hope to show you, making the case for the convergence of the “comic frame” and liberal democracy—and describing a “modest” utopianism that echoes the modest faith in progress outlined in chapter 2. Another of the persistent qualities the tradition associates with comedy is its immersion in, even celebration of, “the ordinary.”

An essay by Gerald L. Bruns on Martha Nussbaum can help us here. Identifying Nussbaum as “essentially a comic thinker” and “the task of comedy” as eschewing “greatness” and accepting “the ordinary,” Bruns contrasts the comic attitude with the tragic urge for sovereignty and tragedy’s subsequent rejection of this world as a place where dreams of sovereignty can never be fulfilled: “Blindness and rigidity, and a will to control, to dominate or rule, are notorious features of the tragic hero, but above all there is his refusal of the world, that is, refusal of its otherness, its resistance, its limits.” In Nussbaum, Bruns finds the desire to reconnect with the ordinary. Nussbaum’s “ethics of reengagement” takes as its “point of departure” the “intellect’s ability to acknowledge its body, its sexuality, its temporality, its contingency, its complexity, its entanglement with other bodies, its refusal of reason.”

I would only add that comedy wages its battle against abstraction, against the desire to escape into transcendence, through laughter and through love. To the gentle shaming of ridicule, comedy adds a reminder of love for one’s own life and love for cherished others as the means for affirmation of this world. In Richard Wilbur’s words, “love calls us to the things of this world.”

Stanley Cavell, of course, has been the great philosophical champion of the ordinary in our time, alerting us to the various ways that humans can refuse to acknowledge the everyday demands of the body, the claims of intimate others upon us, and (in general) the messy, nonideal terms with which one lives with one’s self and with others. For Cavell there is something “theatrical” about our literary and philosophical presentations of characters “look[ing] for something for which to live or die. There are only the old things, and they are at hand, or nowhere. Then how . . . shall we make ourselves present to them.”

As William James and Kenneth Burke each in their own way puts it,
the question is how to “accept” this world and our situated immersion in it. The comic attitude strives to return us to the things of this world, to overcome the ever-present temptations to avoid the difficulties of the here and now in favor of imagined perfect realms. Back to the rough ground, as Wittgenstein puts it. But that comic attitude is utopian in that it aims to produce a “love of the world” of the sort Hannah Arendt championed. The ordinary is not just the realm of necessity, the scene humans must inhabit, but now transfigured, through the comic process, into the scene, the only possible scene, for a satisfactory human existence. The freedom to make this world the place of satisfaction is activated by the insight that, in Robert Frost’s words, “the earth’s the place for love: / I don’t know where it is likely to go better.” Love of the world entails, in this secular vision, assuming responsibility for it. Humans live in the world they make—and their loving or their hateful relation to other humans plays a huge role in that making. The excessive responsibility I noted in Oedipus and Lear (in chapter 3) is a generous responsibility, one that takes on the task of making a better world, not a discourse of responsibility fixated on assigning blame for the current world’s less than utopian condition.

Comedy’s utopia is to teach us to love the ordinary, to make it the site of human satisfaction, instead of whoring after strange gods. Minimally, in Nussbaum’s words, it assumes the “the task of making us not hate who and where we are.” Traditionally, this teaching is conducted by corrective laughter, by gentle mockery of two extremes that, wonderfully enough, Dewey identifies (surely without any explicit knowledge of the comic tradition): “On the one hand, we dream of attained perfection, an ultimate static goal, in which effort shall cease, and desire and execution be once and for all in complete equilibrium. . . . [On the other hand], [w]e reach out to the opposite extreme of our ideal of fixity, and under the guise of a return to nature dream of a romantic freedom, in which all life is plastic to impulse, a continual source of improvised spontaneities and novel inspirations” (HNC, 100). The mechanical man, tied to his idée fixe, identified in Bergson’s On Laughter, is by Dewey accused of scorning life for perfection, of substituting the idea (the ideal) for the messy actual. The enthusiast, like Marianne in Austen’s Sense and Sensibility, must learn that impulse should be tempered by law, since the eventual frustration
of unrealistic (infinite) desires can also lead to hatred of this world, most familiarly in the Byronic hero. Generally, comedy treats the enthusiast more gently because most of the danger is seen as coming from over-constraint; comedy aims for liberty, to loosen things up, so it looks indulgently on the character who errs too far in that direction, while treating more harshly the puritans like Malvolio in Twelfth Night who would not only deny themselves any fun but also deny fun to all.

The goal of comedy is a nonrigid law, a flexible stability that gives human society just enough predictability to prevent disempowering chaos, but not so much fixity to stifle creativity, imagination, and all impulse. Sounding like C. L. Barber, Dewey writes of the “renewing of habit rendered possible by impulse; the latter never wholly ceases to play its refreshing role in adult life. If it did, life would petrify, society stagnate” (HNC, 100). The modest utopia of the ordinary, then, is to learn how to love its imperfections while also accepting constraints designed to enable our peaceful intercourse with others even as we avoid turning those constraints into straitjackets. This utopia entails moving beyond mere toleration of our neighbors’ various desires and actions to a delight in what diversity yields. It is to achieve commonality with our fellows through loose affiliations and affectionate appreciation rather than through deep and permanent agreements. This is the stuff of Burke’s comic discount, of Bakhtin’s ambivalent laughter, of comedy’s ability to stage all our human foibles even as it promotes increased affection for our fellow humans. Acquiring this double vision, a clear-eyed view of human imperfection joined with a love of this world, is comedy’s utopia. It is an ending both completely ordinary (what could be more ordinary, more imperfect, and more dependent on double vision than marriage?) and awfully difficult to achieve. In Nussbaum, a realistic love relationship stands for this clear-eyed acceptance of our humanity— with its imperfections and mortality: “If the loved one is not turned into a goddess, there is no surprise and no disgust at her humanity. . . . [In] a condition beyond both obsession and disgust, . . . the lover could see the beloved clearly as a separate and fully human being, accurately take note of the good properties she actually does possess, and accept both her humanity and his own.” To alter Wilbur’s phrase a bit, comedy calls us to be human, when so much else in our tradition calls on us to repudiate
our humanity, to flee from it in disgust, or righteous indignation, or flights of transcendental fancy.

What makes this comic vision “secular” is that it does not look to any nonhuman agents to create the society it desires. It is up to us. Even further. The secular vision applauds William James’s constant insistence that humans occupy “an unfinished universe” (P, 113) but finds his obsession with “salvation” and “redemption” disquieting. The sentence from James that I have quoted several times as a key mantra for nontranscendental thought—“Nothing outside of the flux secures the issue of it”—is immediately followed by this sentence: “It can hope salvation only from its own intrinsic promises and potencies” (P, 114). Why talk of salvation? What are we to be saved from? The demons in ourselves that keep us from loving this world and our fellow human beings? Some fundamental flaw in the nature of things or in our own natures? Why elevate the “blocking forces” that stand between us and happiness with such solemnity? We have met the enemy—and it is us. Comedy lays its wage on laughing that enemy off the stage, teaching ourselves the errors of our ways in a fashion that doesn’t overestimate the obstacles to success. Unkindness, greediness, even evil, are as ordinary as love and altruism. None of these human attributes poses a metaphysical puzzle, or is visited upon us from elsewhere. Each is there day after day; the important thing is to summon what resources we have to hand to create the world we want.