A THEORY OF THE COMIC

A. Logic of the Comic

by paul weiss

TO distinguish the domain of logic from that of psychology and to thus avoid confusion as to the nature of the problems considered, is to go a long ways towards securing solutions in either field. A similar distinction between art and aesthetics has proved proficuous and will be found likewise efficacious in connection with problems concerning the nature of the laughable, i. e., the Comic, as contrasted with those dealing with laughter situations. The limitations of previous theories, I believe, are due primarily to the failure to make such a distinction—they are, in the main, interpretations of the Comic in terms of its psychological occasions. Now, just as we have an aesthetic reaction where we have no art or theory of art (in connection with tastes, smells, etc.) we have laughter where there is no element of the Comic visible (in that due to hysteria, tickling, or in the innocent gurglings of babes). On the other hand, just as various artistic creations give no appreciable aesthetic sensation, as with the philistine, the Comic will at times not be laughed-at as in the case of repetition, non-recognition, etc. The fact that the Comic is not always laughed at and that laughter arises, at times, in non-comic situations, is a sufficient indication of the necessity for making a platonic distinction between the occasions of laughter and the laughable (a distinction, by the way, which even Plato overlooked).

The value of any theory lies in its ability to explain all the facts, with a minimum of assumptions. To this test, I submit the theory that Comic situations are error situations and that all errors are Comic. If it be true, that error is identical with the Comic, logical fallacies should prove to be the only type of comic situations, for every instance of an error is an illustration of some formal or mate-

rial fallacy—and insofar as material fallacies can be considered as a type of the formal, there exists but one type of the Comic. In this sense, the Comic is strictly objective in its nature and exists independently of anyone's recognition of it; and just as true arrangements or judgments are equivalent as regards their truth value, comic situations are equivalent as regards their error value. A difference between errors can be made by noting the addition necessary to convert the error to truth, but from the standpoint of logic there can be no difference in falsity.

To thus consider all errors as equally laughable, is apparently to go contrary to all empirical observations. This paradox is due, however, only to our persistency in the use of the psychological standard; in our refusal to separate a fact from our appreciation of the fact. Until such separation is made, we will have solely an individual criterion for the given situation, and will be faced with the inability to treat any given subject matter except in terms of individual caprice. Even psychological explanations are ultimately nonpsychological and plead to be considered on logical grounds alone, a test which, unfortunately frequently ends in their destruction. Explanations on the basis of somatic response have their place in the science of human behavior, but to interpret the reference in terms of its occasions is to be guilty of what may be called the fallacy ad personem applied to objects. To the possible objection that strictly objective definitions are necessarily dogmatic and involve meaningless unknowables, I would reply that it is only by such procedure that we can adequately treat with the subjective problems; that dogmatic assumptions have their place when they bear fruitful meanings and that unrealized conditions do not involve an unknowable but merely an unactualized situation. Thus, all error situations are equally laughable, not as regards their actual reception but *sub specie eternitatis* or as regards their possible reception. In terms of human response, error would then be merely the sine qua non of all comic, laughable situations—the additional conditions being supplied by the nature of human entertainment about which, more in the sequel.

An error arises when: given A to be true we judge that it is false or that Non-A is true. A complex error situation would be one where it has been falsely judged that A has been judged to be false, a case which has been used to considerable advantage by Shakespeare, especially in the Comedy of Errors. Mistaken identity, optical illusions, anachromisms, and errors in arrange-

ment when interpreted as bodily pointings or judgments of the nature, "A has been falsely judged to be true" (that straw hats are worn in New York in December), are simple comic situations. Errors of representation such as imitation of gesture, voice, behavior, caricatures, etc., are of the same nature. In the latter cases we do not have a comic situation unless the representation is inaccurate, and we cannot have an appreciated laughable situation unless the inaccuracy nevertheless points to the object which has been imitated.

Parody, which is an imitation of manner with the original intent left out, is a form of caricature. Puns are instances of the use of amphibological expressions, while what is called wit is incongruity in subject matter, actual or assumed. Cases involving possible misconceptions in language, which is a characteristic of the latter two types of communicated humor, cannot be said to be true comic situations unless they are so accepted. A word cannot be said to *imply* any other meaning than that given it, and all possible interpretations of any word cannot be said to be involved in its use. We have, therefore, no error of amphibology, per se, but only when an expression is diversely understood. Accordingly, a pun belongs exclusively to one who sees it—and he deserves it.

B.   Psychology of the Comic

The recognition of the fact that a tragedy may be the result of an error has been one of the serious obstacles in the way of an understanding of the nature of the Comic. Tragedy, as Aristotle saw, is a matter of morality. Eliminate the moral viewpoint or dispel the sympathetic response which certain situations generate and it can be converted into comedy. To illustrate this it is sufficient to point out the nature of what is laughed at with peoples who are not subjected to the influence of our mores. Max Eastman mentions a cannibal tribe, for example, where it is a great joke to kill a son and serve him to his father for dinner ; or to judge from the picaresque novels, to seduce a man's mistress, wife or daughter results in a comic situation— the joke, of course, being on "him." Similarity it is not difficult to imagine the story of Oedipus Rex told as a rare tale in certain quarters insofar as it deals with the error in the King's judgment as to the exact relationship between

Jocasta and himself. In error-tragedies, it is not the error itself that is tragic but what it implies in terms of general morality and, or, sympathetic response. However, inasmuch as a tragedy does not need an error, actual or assumed, as its basis, whereas this is an indispensable condition for a comic situation, comedy and tragedy are, despite possible overlapping, different in nature.

The perception of the Comic, as Bergson realized, is not a matter of emotion, nor is it, as he erroneously supposed, a question of intelligence. To be able to recognize it as laughable it is merely necessary to have a simple awareness that something is wrong. The greater the error (the contrast or divergency from truth), of course, the easier its perception. However, sophistication frequently destroys the possibility of a simple awareness of an incongruity, for what is often done is either inconspicuous, "right," or a "natural" error. These so-called "natural" errors, though recognized as false are minimized because they are expected or considered to be justifiable. When it is a man's business to correct errors, on the other hand, they are frequently exaggerated instead of minimized, but their laughable element is discountenanced by politeness or the intrusion of such implications—"This man is a bad worker." It is for these reasons that teachers, especially of logic, are not in one continuous guffaw over the mistakes of their pupils. There are also certain sanctified errors, such as belief in the efficacy of prayer, magic, etc., which are not laughed at because they are in good repute. Also, as faith in one's judgment depends largely on social approval and the fact that others do not see a thing as comic, will frequently prove a sufficient restraint on laughter—even though the situation be seen to be a truly laughable one.

Repetition, as the comic artists, such as Moliere have discovered, will often make clearer the full contradiction between truth and error. Familiarity with the conditions, on the other hand, though making the error more apparent, kills that spontaneity in the simple perception of a logical incongruity, which is one of the conditions for laughter at the Comic. An important test for a master of the appreciated Comic is his ability to indulge in repetitions without engendering too much familiarity with the situation. By calculating closely the time when repetition causes an expectation of further similar mistakes, and then deceiving that expectation we have the familiar device of many comic artists.

Unfortunately most of the formal fallacies, and of course, the more recondite erroneous symbolic manipulations, are not readily

perceived and very few of them can form the basis for actual laugh-
able events. Thus, although the professional humorist must per-
force be somewhat of a logician, the professional logician need not
be, and unfortunately rarely is a humorist. Philip E. B. Jourdian,
however, in his delightful "The Philosophy of Mr. B*rtr*nd R*s-
s*ll," with the aid of quotations from Lewis Carroll's several works
showed the possibilities of many generally unfamiliar slips of logic.

Fallacies of reasoning, when contrasted with those of behavior
are usually hidden behind confusing verbiage and therefore not
easily recognized, although the verbiage itself, when considered as
an error of behavior, representation or arrangement, or when it in-
volves a confusion with subtlety, may give rise to a comic situation.
It is interesting to note that people often unconsciously show that
they have assimilated, as part of their viewpoint in life, a logical
fallacy, by their laughter at non-comic situations. For a man to be
caught smoking a cigar immediately after delivering a lecture on
the evils of tobacco is usually interpreted, by the use of the fallacy
ad personem, as a contradiction, and therefore as a comic situation.
There seems to be a natural opposition between any division of labor
in the fields of preaching and practicing, and the non-conformity
of an individual to his own theories is often mistakenly interpreted
as a contradiction in theoretical outlook. Wherever such ad per-
sonem arguments are used to secure true conclusions, as in all cases
where false reasoning gives correct solutions, we still have only a
simple error situation, just as if faulty results had been secured.

At this point we may note the limitations of the view which
considers laughter from a sociological-teleological aspect (Bergson
and Eastmann). If laughter is society's naturally purposeful cor-
rective for anti-social actions, repetition instead of dulling the edge
of a comic situation, should invariably make it all the more amusing.
Neither can we be said to laugh for any purpose or because of an
instinct unless it is gratuitously assumed that it is instinctive to
laugh at errors, and that we are all unconscious guardians of the
truth. The feeling of superiority, already made classic by Hobbes,
may be considered conducive to laughter at comic situations. Such
a feeling might be the result of a faint recognition that he who
judges correctly is more to be envied than he who errs. That the-
ory would find some justification in the annoyance people manifest
when accused of having no sense of humor ; for that implies they
cannot quickly perceive errors, are too hidebound with moral preju-
dice to enjoy them or too sophisticated to note them without killing

their laughable aspect by introducing extraneous implications. The theory of detumescence, or disappointed expectation which has found favor with Crile, Havelock Ellis, Kant and Spencer would here be applicable if it is assumed that truth is expected and the body prepared for it, which preparation results in unused energy that is transmuted into laughter when the expectation is disappointed.

The element of rigidity on which Bergson laid great stress, involves a comic situation only insofar as it either implies an incorrect imitation or is an instance of incorrect behavior. Rigidity is not necessarily comic in Bergson's sense, as can be seen from the examination of such a situation as soldiers on drill or on parade. It is only when we have awkward drilling or an apparent violation of proper or usual methods, that we have laughter situations. Incorrect behavior forms a large but ambiguous class of comic situations. It would be mere presumption, in the face of diverse customs to maintain that any particular behavior is "right" and it is only when we assume that here is a right and wrong behavior in connection with dress, manners, speech, etc., that we can call any divergence from them, errors. We nevertheless find that unfamiliar mannerisms are an unfailing source of laughter, for what we are generally accustomed to doing or seeing is what we feel is right. The clothes, actions and speech of a foreigner, the use of ancient or foreign locutions, fashions, strange bodily movements, etc., by giving the impression that an error has been committed create a comic situation of a peculiar nature; it is only the judgment on the judgment that is at fault. It is because of an unconscious acceptance of "right" behavior attitudes that we find children and many adults enjoying certain supposed behavior errors, while cosmopolitans see no error whatsoever. On the other hand, the cosmopolitans have their own standard of right behavior, from which any divergency is considered as amusing. The book of etiquette is society's comic-bible. Violate one of its commandments—drink out of a finger bowl, eat with a knife, keep your spoon in your coffee, etc.—and you are a laughing stock. Go to a different section of the country where such a code is contemptuously considered, and conformity to it is considered a justifiable cause for laughter. Behavior errors can not involve comic situations, except insofar as the laughter at them does; unless there is such a thing as "true" behavior.

To summarize briefly : Error situations are comic situations. To be a theme for public laughter the error must be conspicuous and not involve a moral prejudice, or be sanctified by custom or habit. If we call deformity, baseness, imperfections, incongruities, etc., errors, the theories of the past will be found to be so far true. On the other hand, if this theory be true, then, of course, any view contradicting it is a fit subject for laughter ; but if false, cannot itself be laughed at, except for some other reason.