RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Irresponsible Self

James Wood

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About the Author

James Wood was born in 1965. From 1991 to 1995 he was the Chief Literary Critic of the *Guardian*, in London, and since then has been a Senior Editor at the *New Republic*, in Washington D. C. His reviews and essays appear regularly in that magazine, in the *New Yorker*, and in the *London Review of Books.* A collection of essays, *The Broken Estate*, appeared in 1999. His first novel, *The Book Against God*, was published by Cape in 2003.

For Glyn and Geraldine Maxwell

James Wood

THE IRRESPONSIBLE SELF

On Laughter and the Novel

Introduction:
Comedy and the irresponsible self

I

Comedy, like death and sex, is often awarded the prize of ineffability. It is regularly maintained that comedy cannot really be described or explained, that to talk about it is merely to do it noisy harm. Particular derision is reserved for the formal criticism of comedy, which seems to most sensible people like an unwitting bad joke, since nothing is funnier than solemnity about laughter. But the people who resist the intrusion of criticism into comedy are often the same people who claim that a poem or music or the idea of beauty can't really be talked about either.

Such people seem to fear too much self-consciousness, or to have too little faith in words, and in particular too little faith in the possibilities of exegesis. Actually, much comedy is explicable, exhaustively so; what can be a little absurd are theories of comedy – so plentiful in modern times – though that did not deter Schopenhauer, Baudelaire, Meredith, Bergson or Freud. Since I obviously believe in criticism's capacity to talk about many things, I will offer for critical discussion a joke – or, really, a witty reply. One London lunchtime, many years ago, the late poet and editor Ian Hamilton was sitting at his usual table in a Soho pub called the Pillars of Hercules. The pub was where much of the business of Hamilton's literary journal, *The New Review*, was conducted. It was sickeningly early – not to be at work, but to be at drink. A pale, haggard poet entered, and Hamilton offered him a chair and a glass of something. 'Oh no, I just can't keep drinking,' said the weakened poet. 'I

must give it up. It's doing terrible things to me. It's not even giving me any pleasure any longer.' But Hamilton, narrowing his eyes, responded to this feebleness in a tone of weary stoicism, and said in a quiet, hard voice, 'Well, none of us *likes* it.'

I think Hamilton's reply is very funny; and so did *The New York Times*, which reproduced it in its obituary of Hamilton, but mangled it by failing to italicise 'likes'. That such a mangling is instantly felt as damage suggests that the joke is indeed explicable—for we instinctively know that the comedy of the reply inheres in that wearily stressed verb *'likes'.* So why is it funny? There is comedy in the inversion of the usual idea that drinking is fun and voluntary. In Hamilton's reply, drinking has become unpleasant but unavoidable, one of life's burdens. The cynical stress on *likes* gives the reply a sense of weary déjà vu: it sounds as if Hamilton is so obviously citing a truism that it is barely worth saying it aloud. It is always funny when singular novelty is passed off as general wisdom, especially when it is almost the opposite of the truth.

The joke simultaneously plays on the inversion of drinking as good fun while playing off the grim truth of alcoholism, which of course is indeed a state in which drinkers may not much like alcohol but cannot release themselves from it. Against those two worlds – the world of ordinary, pleasant, voluntary drinking, and involuntary alcoholic enslavement – Hamilton's reply proposes a stoical tragi-comic world, populated by cheerful but stubborn drinkers doing their not very pleasant duty. The joke seems to me to open, in a moment, a picture at once funny and sad.

Hamilton's comic stoicism also creates, like much comedy, an alternative community. Instead of asserting his difference from the poet ('Well, so be it, but *I* still like drinking'), Hamilton effectively says, 'Well, so be it, but we're all in the same boat, and none of us is having a good time.' Hamilton's reply barely offers the poet the chance of

resigning from this community; we are all stuck in it: it is the price of adulthood (or literary adulthood). At the same time, the joke can only work if it rests on the idea of a normative community, the ordinary world in which people enjoy drinking and are free to drink or not to. Mildly rebellious, the joke is also oddly forgiving, because Hamilton offers himself as the weary, downtrodden example of what living in this alternative community will do to you, and offers the alternative community as the *real* normative one. The beauty of the quip is that it seems at first to assert a superiority, only, on closer inspection, to offer a helpless commonality.

I like Hamilton's joke, too, because it arises gently from its context, out of a natural exchange, and in so doing offers us access, albeit fleeting, to the character of the man who made it. It is unflashy; it is not an obviously great or crushing *mot*. It represents the opposite of those forced moments when someone says 'Do you want to hear a joke?', at which point most of us freeze, alarmed that we won't get the punchline, and nervously aware that we are now inhabiting a 'comic moment'. In literature, there are novels that have the feel of Hamilton's quip – novels in which a mild tragi-comedy arises naturally out of context and situation, novels which are softly witty but which may never elicit an actual laugh; and there are also 'comic novels', novels which correspond to the man who comes up to you and says 'Have you heard the one about . . . ?', novels obviously very busy at the business of being comic. *Tristram Shandy*, for instance, is in multifarious ways a marvellous book, but it is written in a tone of such constant high-pitched zaniness, of such deliberate 'liveliness', that one finds oneself screaming at it to calm down a bit. Dr Johnson, a greatly tragi-comic figure himself, found *Tristram Shandy* too eccentric to bear. The 'hysterical realism' of such contemporary writers as Pynchon and Rushdie is the

modern version of Sterne's perpetual excitements and digressions.

The subject of many of this book's essays – the implicit and not always explicit subject – is a kind of tragi-comic stoicism which might best be called the comedy of forgiveness. This comedy can be distinguished – if a little roughly – from the comedy of correction. The latter is a way of laughing at; the former a way of laughing with. Or put it like this: at one extreme of comedy there is Momus, the ancient personification of fault-finding, reprehension and correction, who appears in Hesiod and Lucian. And at the other extreme of comedy, in the area now called tragi-comedy, is 'the irresponsible self'.

Not necessarily funny himself, Momus roots out absurdity and foolishness. He sees through you; he truffles for folly. Poor Coleridge, the tormented opium-addict who had much to fear from being seen through, shudders, in the *Biographia Literaria*, at the horror of Momus's fabled desire to put a glass window in the breast of man, so that his heart could be seen.

Momus, you might say, is the patron saint of satirists. The comedy of correction, which would include the Aristophanes of *The Clouds* and *The Wasps*, Alberti's allegorical comic tale *Momus* (written in the 1440s), Erasmus, Rabelais, some elements of Cervantes (though *Don Quixote* amiably contains many comic modes), Swift, Molière, and Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, is satirical in impulse, frequently violent and farcical, keen to see through the weaknesses of mankind, and essentially pre-novelistic. *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, though written in the heyday of the novel, is the exception that proves the rule: it is actually much less like a novel than a treatise, written to prove how repetitively stupid we all are, by a writer whose comedy is often cruel, who was obsessed with the folly and vices of bourgeois idiocy, and who complained in a letter that he found the characters in *Madame Bovary* 'deeply repulsive'.

Flaubert was really a religious writer who had transferred his devotion to aesthetics. He had the old religious impulse to scourge and check his characters. Indeed, the comedy of correction might be called religious comedy, since the ambition of total transparency, the desire to put a window in the human heart, strikes one as essentially religious. Kierkegaard sounds like Momus when he exults, in *Fear and Trembling*, that 'a man sitting in a glass case is not so constrained as is each human in his transparency before God'. That transparency received its memorably terrifying formulation when Jesus – who weeps but who never laughs in the Gospels – admonished us that to look on a woman with an adulterous heart is to have committed the act; we are known, through and through. Or if we are not fully known, as in Flaubert, there is a feeling that we should be. The few references to Yahweh's laughter in the Old Testament are all examples of laughing at, not laughing with: in Psalm 2, we are told that God will 'laugh at' the heathen and 'have them in derision'; and again in Psalm 37, that the Lord will 'laugh' at the wicked man, 'for he seeth that his day is coming'.

Here, God is like Jupiter, who is described in both *Momus* and Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly* as looking down at heaven from a watchtower. Job's God is little different from Homer's gods: 'And unquenchable laughter arose among the blessed gods / As they saw Hephaestus limping through the hall.' Both Rabelais and Cervantes assume as funny such happenings as killing sheep, beating men to death, two men vomiting in each other's faces, a pack of dogs trying to mount a woman, and so on.

Most comedy before the rise of the novel is Aristotelian in nature. Aristotle argues in the *Poetics* that comedy arises from a perceived defect or ugliness that should not be so painful that we feel compassion, since compassion is the enemy of laughter. The Renaissance theorist of laughter, Laurent Joubert, in his *Traité du ris* (1579), expanded on

Aristotle by arguing that ugliness and the lack of strong emotion were crucial to comedy. We may feel sadness at witnessing something ugly, said Joubert, but in order for comedy to work we must in the end feel a pleasure at the lack of our compassion. Thus, when a man is stripped of his clothes, the sight of his genitals is shameful and ugly, and is yet 'unworthy of pity', so we laugh. Secular or modern tragi-comedy, the comedy of forgiveness, is almost the inversion of the Aristotelian idea. It is almost entirely the creation of the modern novel—with the huge exception of Shakespeare, whose role in the creation of the modern novelistic art of combined pathos and comedy is the subject of this book's first essay. If religious comedy is punishment for those who deserve it, secular comedy is forgiveness for those who don't. If correction implies transparency, then forgiveness—at least, secular forgiveness—implies deliberate opacity, the drawing of a veil, a willingness to let obscurity go free. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet learns that laughing-at is cruel (it is what her irresponsible father is always doing, not to mention the rebarbative Bingley sisters). Instead, she will laugh with Darcy, which entails being laughed at *by* him. For Austen, getting married—or rather, falling in love—is the conversion of laughing-at into laughing-with, since each lover, balancing the other, laughs equally at the other, and creates a new form of laughter, a kind of equal laughter. Laughing with Darcy, and loving him, leads Elizabeth to realise that she was wrong to judge him as harshly as she did, that she may take many years to get to know him properly. It involves her in the deeply secular concession that, as Philip Roth has it in *American Pastoral*, 'getting people right is not what living is all about. It's getting them wrong that is living.' Her shallower, more easily satisfied sister,' merely smiles' when she marries Wickham, says Elizabeth. But she says, marrying Darcy, 'I laugh.'

Religious comedy, however slippery it may get—and few texts, technically speaking, are as slippery as *The Praise of*

Folly – is fundamentally stable. There is the stability of didacticism, for one thing; the works of Alberti, Erasmus and Molière, for instance, are edifying projects, conceived as lessons as well as entertainments. It is our task to extract what they preach. We can judge the stability of satire from the fixedness of its typology, the certainty of recognising broad categories of human folly: hypocrisy, misanthropy, pomposity, foolishness, clerical dereliction of duty, and so on. In such comedy, there is frequently the stability of allegory or fable, whereby a decoding of the story is implicitly promised; or there is the guarantee of retribution and formal moral closure. Molière offers perhaps the best example of this stability: the form of his plays tends towards the closure of punishment. The hypocritical Tartuffe is arrested by the King's men at the end; Monsieur Jourdain, the pompous would-be gentleman, is mocked and vanquished at the end of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*.

It is true that this comedy always has the potential to spill over its borders—what Bakhtin celebrated in Rabelais as 'the carnivalesque'. It is true, too, that any neat division between religious and secular comedy would seem threatened by the apparent anti-religiousness of writers like Erasmus and Rabelais. But the anti-religiousness of pre-modern comedy is often closer to anti-clericalism; as it were, the waste of religion is being mocked rather than its nutrition. Molière may have 'corrected', in the character of Tartuffe, an atrociously hypocritical priest – and in turn been censured by the Catholic Church—but the play is careful to separate Tartuffe's perversion of religion from its true practice. Cléante reminds Orgon, who is Tartuffe's infatuated and finally disillusioned host, that 'you mustn't think that everybody is like him and that there aren't sincerely devout men left nowadays. Leave such foolish inferences to the free-thinkers, separate real virtue from its outward appearance.' Hypocrisy, like blasphemy, is one of those modes of behaviour that, in order to work, needs the

existence of the positive of which it is the distorted negative. It is an essentially stable category of thought. Or at least, it is an essentially stable category when, as in Molière and Rabelais, it is heavily marked precisely as ‘hypocrisy’. One of the wonders of the great Russian novel *The Golovlyov Family*, written in the 1870s by Saltykov-Shchedrin, and discussed in this book, is that the apparently stable category of the hypocrite, a Russian Tartuffe, is put into the uncertain world of the novel rather than the theatre. Whereas Molière is constantly telling us, in effect, ‘Gauge how false and hypocritical Tartuffe is by looking at the decent characters,’ Shchedrin says, in effect, ‘How do you know if Porphiry is a hypocrite if everyone else is hypocritical too?’ As the novel progresses, so Porphiry, the Russian Tartuffe, mutates from a hypocrite into a solipsist or fantasist. He merges with his equally degenerate world; he is deprived of an audience. We are no longer theatregoers, confident that the hypocrisy we see on stage can be seen through; we are solitary novel readers, somewhat unsure of whether we are in the stalls or on the stage.

The comedy of what I want to call ‘irresponsibility’ or unreliability is a kind of subset of the comedy of forgiveness; and although it has roots in Shakespearean comedy (especially soliloquy), it seems to me the wonderful creation of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novel. This comedy, or tragi-comedy, of the modern novel replaces the knowable with the unknowable, transparency with unreliability, and this is surely in direct proportion to the growth of characters’ fictive inner lives. The novelistic idea that we have bottomless interiors which may only be partially disclosed to us *must* create a new form of comedy, based on the management of our incomprehension rather than on the victory of our complete knowledge: Svevo’s Zeno is the cardinal example; Henry Green’s butler, Raunce, is a softer representative. This kind of comedy is also found in Chekhov, Verga, Hrabal, Henry Green, Bellow, Nabokov,

Joseph Roth, Tolstoy, Naipaul, Gogol and Hamsun, many of whom are discussed in this book.

One way of looking at the ‘irresponsible self’ in comedy is to examine the difference, in fiction, between reliably unreliable narration and unreliably unreliable narration. Generally, we know when an unreliable narrator is being unreliable because the author is alerting us, reliably, to that narrator’s unreliability. (Swift works likes this.) But the modern novel brings us that wonderful character, the *un*reliably *un*reliable narrator, manipulated so brilliantly by Svevo and Hrabal and Nabokov and Verga. This category of storytelling can only work, can only be comic, if we think initially that we know more about a character than he knows himself – thus we are lulled at first into the comedy of correction – only to be taught that we finally know less about that character than we thought we knew at the outset; thus we are lulled into the comedy of forgiveness. Reliably unreliable narrators are often funny, playful, witty; but they don’t move us as deeply as unreliably unreliable narrators. (It might be said that the comedy of correction may amuse us but it rarely moves us, because it does not intend to – this is true of a modern comedian of ‘correction’ like Waugh – whereas the comedy of forgiveness has as one of its aims the generation of sympathetic emotion.) The short stories of Giovanni Verga appear to enact a comedy of correction – they seem at first terribly cruel stories – only to reveal that a complex literary art is being used to make the reader resist the comedy of correction and to supply instead his own tragi-comedy of forgiveness. And Verga performs this magical task by manipulating an unreliable narration.

In Erasmus’s *The Praise of Folly* (1511), two types of comedy, the old and the new, can be seen side by side – indeed, one can see the art of the novel push through for a second, and then retreat. The book’s narrator, it will be remembered, is Folly herself, who, as she explains, is dressed in the traditional cap and bells of the licensed court

fool. She is addressing an audience, and has come to praise herself. Isn't it the case, she asks, that the most foolish people are the happiest? Children and old people are the happiest of all, because they are saved from the tedium of life that afflicts the rest of us. Folly says that she keeps many marriages going, because it is essential that husband and wife not know the truth about each other's faults. If one could look down on life, who would not see 'how miserable and messy childbirth is, how toilsome it is to bring children up, how defenceless they are against injuries', and so on. Who would not commit suicide? But in fact, those who are most likely to commit suicide are those who have come closest to wisdom. By contrast, the foolish are happiest because blissfully unaware of life's hardships, and it is Folly herself who works this magic.

Erasmus pretty much invented the paradoxical encomium, in which the subject of the speech is also the speaker, and in which a narrator proposes her own foolishness as the best way to live. This is essentially unreliable narration, the smudged hermeneutics in which we learn to see what the narrator is failing to say about herself, how she is fallible in ways not known to her but obvious to us, and so on. Erasmus uses Folly's fallibility to avoid having his meanings pinned down; it is a form of literary escape, frolicsome in itself but also necessary in an age of religious censorship and retribution. Thus, if Folly is really foolish, what she proposes about life – despite its obvious wisdom – cannot be entirely wise. For instance, when Folly says that life is really just hardship and toil, we credit the unblinkered accuracy of the analysis. That is what life is like. Yet Folly proposes that in order to live happily one has to blinker oneself from this horror – blinker oneself from the accuracy of Folly's own analysis. So Folly is right, while offering to blind people to that rightness. Can she still then be right? This is the paradox of 'foolish wisdom', familiar to us from the Fool in *King Lear*.

Erasmus makes his unreliable narration work most fruitfully for him when he reaches his true subject, the abuses of the contemporary Church. Aren't those Christians, asks Folly, who 'find great comfort in soothing self-delusions about fictitious pardons for their sins, measuring out the times in purgatory down to the droplets of a waterclock', aren't such people completely foolish? But aren't they very content? That is because Folly has come to their aid and made them foolish. If a philosopher, says Folly, were to point out how stupid all this religious observance is, how much happiness he would take away from ordinary ignorant believers! Likewise the theologians, who enjoy discussing such things as 'whether God could have taken on the nature of a woman, of the devil, of an ass, of a cucumber, of a piece of flint'. Folly praises those popes and priests who dress themselves in fine garments and enjoy the fruits of the world. How miserable the popes would be if they really had to imitate the life of Christ, with its poverty and labour and contemptus mundi. This is funny, and also cleverly slippery.

Folly's very praise of such nonsense reveals its suspect quality more powerfully than if Erasmus himself were simply writing a tract against it. This is one of those moments where *The Praise of Folly* leaves its religious and satirical roots and, anticipating the techniques of the novel form, benefits enormously from its own literary complexity, ushering in a new kind of comedy.

However, the book begins to wobble, and it wobbles on just this faultline, between the old and the new, the religious and the secular. As Erasmus continues his mockery of clerical abuses and theological absurdity, so Folly's 'praise' of such folly begins to recede, and we encounter several pages of straightforward, if highly entertaining, satire and mockery. Erasmus, as it were, begins to speak in his own voice. And he realises this, making Folly quickly concede that she should stop talking so angrily about popes and

priests ‘lest I should seem to be composing a satire rather than delivering an encomium’. This is a literary uncertainty, the moment at which Erasmus either chooses not to, or cannot, maintain the consistency of the unreliable narrator, and diverts instead to the stability, the didacticism, of satire. Folly, *as a character*, is finally less important to Erasmus than the content of Folly’s message. Old religious comedy asserts itself, and wins back ground from new, secular, comedy; *The Praise of Folly* stops being slippery and jokey and gets a little self-justifyingly hard and angry.

These are junctions, wherein one sees mixtures of the old and new comedy, the pre-novelistic and novelistic: Erasmus offers one, and among novelists Cervantes, Austen and Sterne provide the best examples. In Cervantes there are the old elements of satire, correction, punitive violence, farcical shenanigans – Don Quixote and Sancho Panza vomiting in each other’s faces, for instance – and even allegory; and there are also glimpses of a newer, more complicated, more internal comedy. Don Quixote’s finally unknowable fantasy excites our compassion as much as it prompts our mockery at the end of the book. Sterne’s characters are not fully realised creatures with interior lives – they are not quite novelistic, indeed at times they seem to belong to a long, banging satirical poem; Sterne gives Uncle Toby and Mr Shandy their ‘hobby-horses’, their ‘Cervantick’ unitary obsessions, which make them vivid single essences, bright blots of colour. Yet Sterne’s comic world sometimes breathes a very modern forgiveness, and there are moments of mingled tears and laughter which powerfully suggest a new kind of comedy.

Austen may be the most interestingly riven, the most transitional of all these writers. In her work, broadly put, there are the minor characters, who seem to belong to the theatre, and who are theatrically mocked and ‘corrected’ by the author in her old eighteenth-century satiric mode; and there are the great heroines of the books, the sole

possessors of interior consciousness, heroic *because* they exercise their consciousness, who seem to belong to the newer world of the novel and not of the theatre, and who are not mocked but gradually comprehended and finally forgiven (we forgive Emma, even though we know, morally speaking, that we are not ‘supposed to’).

II

I want to avoid over-assertion. There are many kinds of comedy, of course. There are no straight lines, and no dead termini. Religious comedy does not just write its will to secular comedy and then expire. ‘Correction’ does not somehow magically become ‘forgiveness’ at some convenient moment in the nineteenth century, as the novel reaches its pre-eminence. When Beckett very funnily mocks the pedantry of Catholicism at the end of *Molloy* – ‘Does it really matter with which hand one asperges the podex?” Is it true that the infant Saint-Roch refused suck on Friday?’ ‘How long do we have to wait for the Antichrist?’ – he sounds like Erasmus mocking the theologians in *The Praise of Folly*; there is the question of the essentially religious Flaubert; the thoroughly ‘unreliable’ Hamsun is also saturated in Lutheran notions of punishment and disgrace; Kundera, who frequently invokes Rabelais, Diderot and Cervantes, seems much more an antique comedian than a modern one, for all the Prague sex games. (Like Rabelais, he is robust rather than funny, and suggestive rather than moving.) Bergson’s twentieth-century theory of comedy, which argues for ‘the absence of feeling that usually accompanies laughter’, is almost indistinguishable from Rabelaisian practice. And if by ‘religious’ one means the dream of transparency, the victory of knowing over the haze of unreliability, the existence of a stable system of human categorisation and a certain odour of didacticism, then

religious comedy continues to flourish well into an unreligious age. One finds this corrective strain still in political theatre (Dario Fo, for instance, who is proud of his roots in *commedia dell'arte*), in dystopian allegory (Margaret Atwood, who can be bitingly and satirically funny), in the daily 'corrections' of the tabloid press (who, precisely, need icons like Princess Diana and Mother Teresa so that they can have devils like Camilla Parker-Bowles and Hillary Clinton), and in the kind of brisk social comedy that descends from Evelyn Waugh, Kingsley Amis and Muriel Spark.

Against this, the comedy of irresponsibility is characterised by the mingling of emotions that Gogol famously called 'laughter through tears'. Perhaps the right word for this distinctive modern comedy is 'humour'. Freud distinguishes humour from comedy and the joke. He is particularly interested in 'broken humour', which he defines as 'the humour that smiles through tears'. He argues that this kind of humorous pleasure arises from the prevention of an emotion. A sympathy that the reader has prepared is blocked by a comic occurrence, and transferred onto a matter of secondary importance. I discuss this humour in my essay on the great Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal. What Freud leaves dangling, and what one would want to add to his analysis, is that just because one's sympathy is blocked and transferred – Freud sounds rather Aristotelian here – it does not cease to be sympathy. On the contrary, sympathy is intensified by its blockage. Verga's stories act like this, as do Chekhov's.

This kind of comedy seems to me the creation of modern fiction (and by that I mean late nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction) because it exchanges typology for the examination of the individual, and the religious dream of complete or stable knowledge for the uncertainty of incomplete knowledge. Compare Joubert and Pirandello. Joubert, in his *Traité du ris*, argues that 'empty promises of visual pleasure cause laughter' (in the words of his best

modern commentator, Gregory de Rocher). If it is announced that we are to see a beautiful young maiden, and we are introduced instead to a withered old hag, we laugh, especially if she is 'dirty, smelly, drooling, toothless, flat-nosed, bandy-legged, humpy, bumpy, stinking, twisted, filthy, knotty, full of lice, and more deformed than ugliness itself'. Pirandello, without explicitly referring to Joubert, seems to reply to him in his essay, 'L'Umorismo'. Suppose we see an old woman, says Pirandello, heavily made up and inappropriately dressed, in fashions more befitting a woman half her age. She at first seems comic, on the traditional Joubertian principle that incongruity and self-delusion are funny. (And they are.) But if we begin to try to enter the woman's head, if we try to merge with her – while acknowledging that we cannot utterly know her motives – our laughter turns to pity. We undergo a 'perception of the opposite', and wonder if the woman is not herself distressed by her appearance and all the yearning to be young it represents. This mingled amusement and pity Pirandello calls humour. Pirandello saw humour as a modern invention, an enlargement of the old comic tradition. (Though it is fair to say that this is almost exactly Adam Smith's definition of 'sympathy' in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*; but then Smith, I think, was in advance of the novel's powers when he wrote his book. He was looking ahead, as it were, to something beyond him, to a form that did not yet quite exist.)

Pirandello's picture is valuable because it proposes that we try to become the old woman in our attempt to sympathise with her, while also suggesting that this may be an ultimately frustrated enterprise. Modern tragi-comic fiction does not offer a guarantee of reliable knowledge; yet paradoxically, it continues to believe in the revelation of character, continues to believe that the attempt to know a character is worthwhile, even if it is beautifully frustrated. What has changed is the definition of 'character', which is

now much deeper than is allowed for in pre-modern fiction. Henry James, reviewing *Middlemarch*, argued, unfairly, that George Eliot hemmed in her characters with too much authorial essayism – that she wanted to know them too well, in effect. He called for the fictional creation of characters 'in the old plastic, irresponsible sense'. I think by 'old' James meant Shakespeare, the essential progenitor of the English novel; but by old he really also meant new – he meant his own kind of fiction, in which characters are free to contradict themselves without being corrected by the author, are free to make mistakes without fearing authorial judgement; that they are, 'like people in real life, to be inferred by the reader', as Coleridge described Shakespeare's characters. In such fiction, the reader is not to be overly helped by the author. We must find out for ourselves how much we know of a character, and we may find that what we know is that we do not know enough (as we do not 'know' why Isabel Archer returns to Gilbert Osmond).

Bergson said that one definition of comedy was watching people dancing to music through a window, without our being able to hear their music. Bergson's idea of comedy belongs somewhat to the 'corrective' school, to the world of Molière, of satire, and of mechanical farce. In the Bergsonian vision, the watcher has an advantage over the dancers. He comprehends them, sees how foolish they look and knows why they are dancing. He comprehends them because he is deprived of their music. His deprivation is his strength. But what if his deprivation was his weakness? What if that watcher did not *know* that the dancers were dancing to music? What if he had no idea why they were dancing? What if he felt no advantage over them, but felt, with mingled laughter and pity, that he was watching some awful dance of death, in which he too was obscurely implicated? (Camus offers as an example of 'the absurd' seeing a man talking on the phone behind a glass partition. You wonder,

he says, ‘why he is alive’.) This alternative picture comes closest to my notion of the modern novel’s unreliability or irresponsibility, a state in which the reader may not always know why a character does something or may not know how to ‘read’ a passage, and feels that in order to find these things out, he must try to merge with the characters in their uncertainty. Such a person is no longer the cruelly laughing Yahweh or Jupiter, and no longer the correctively laughing theatregoer, but simply the modern reader, gloriously thrown into the same mixed and free dimension as the novel’s characters.

‘This is an important book . . . Wood is probably at his best more often than any other living critic.’ Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Observer*

‘It is [Wood’s] secure observation that makes these essays so engaging and ultimately puts this corrective missionary critic on the side of the secular angels.’ Russell Celyn Jones, *The Times*

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‘Wood is better equipped than almost any other contemporary critic with fine phrases and plain-spoken observations to attract new readers.’ Morgan Falconer, *Hampstead and Highgate Express*

Shakespeare and the pathos of rambling

In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates is puzzled about how we make use of what we already know. Take a mathematician, he says. Such a person must already have in his head all the numbers he will work with. Yet when he counts numbers, he sets out, as it were, to learn from himself things that he already knows. The same, continues Socrates, is true of a scholar, starting to read the same book for the umpteenth time. This is a paradox of redundancy, in which we have to unnaturally forget what we would naturally remember in order to learn something 'new' – in some ways, a rather unnatural process.

Plato's simile suggestively describes how the flow of consciousness is depicted in fiction and drama. For one obvious element of the depiction of consciousness in literature is that it is paradoxically redundant. A flow of thought is invisible; it does not represent itself. The one thing we do not do with our minds is turn their contents into narratives, or even into unpunctuated monologues. Perhaps most of the time, as Nabokov complained about Joyce, we do not think in words at all. As soon as a fictional character thinks in any depth, the writer has to represent something which is not normally represented, and the character doing the thinking often has the air of Socrates' mathematician, learning anew from himself something he would already know. The representation of consciousness in fiction hovers between a redundant remembering and a struggle against forgetting.

And this is literature's special burden, its special creation. For if the philosophical question is How do we know ourselves?, the literary question is always both the

philosophical question of how we know ourselves and the literary-technical question of how we then *represent* knowing ourselves. The formal or technical redundancy I am talking about is clear enough when we look at the origins of the stream of consciousness, which lie in the dramatic soliloquy; and if we in turn look at the origins of the soliloquy, which lie in prayer. In Greek and Senecan tragedy, the moment when a character confides his thoughts or agonies or intentions to the audience often occurs at a moment of prayer or religious self-exhortation: the hero addresses a shrine, or makes a sacrifice, or calls on the gods to forgive or punish him (or punish his enemies), and the audience 'overhears' – such is the convention – this self-statement. It is a little like reading the Psalms. Shakespeare's soliloquies retain that prayerful or religious quality of intention-making and self-exhortation: Edmund calling on the gods to stand up for bastards, or Lear calling to the gods, or Lady Macbeth's 'Unsex me here', or her husband's final soliloquy ('Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow'), which borrows from Psalm 90.

Of course, most of Shakespeare's soliloquies are addressed to the audience, so we become God by proxy, the Delphic oracle that never replies. Soliloquy may be seen, then, as not merely an address, but as speech with an interlocutor who does not respond – as blocked conversation, and blocked intention. Again, this may flow from the idea of prayer, especially prayer as the frustration of wishes: for merely to speak to God is to be frustrated by His silence. This aspect of prayerful consciousness is obviously present in the novel in the form of the epiphany and solitary fantasy; what is Proust's madeleine but a secularised communion wafer, the Host by which the worshipper begins to examine himself?

But if soliloquy is often a kind of conversation with people who don't respond, then one might wonder: why do heroes and heroines bother to speak to us non-responders at all? Of

course they' must', for the author's technical and literary reasons: because the reader needs to know things about them, and they need to know things about themselves. But beyond this technical demand, perhaps they 'must' speak to us in this way for a more human and metaphysical reason: in some essential way, they are reminding the reader and themselves that they exist. Perhaps the metaphysical need arises, in part, from the author's literary-technical need?

Go back to Plato's idea of paradoxical redundancy. In life, people do not narrate their intentions and feelings as the soliloquy makes them do, speaking them out loud. In the soliloquy, the mind does not so much describe itself as describe itself as a narrator would, from the outside (as a narrator does, of course, in most novels). Shakespeare's contribution is that, while always a dramatist, he also prefigures the novel. For Shakespeare's world is not just one of soliloquies so much as a soliloquising world, in which people speak often at rather than to each other. In Shakespeare, the notion of the soliloquy as a blocked conversation is transferred to conversation itself between characters; you might say in fact that much conversation in Shakespeare is blocked soliloquy. Thus it is that Shakespeare explodes the traditional soliloquy even as he expands it, and essentially invents the stream of consciousness.

Shakespeare is a great developer of what might be called rambling consciousness, those moments when a character is allowed to drift, to go on mental safaris, to travel into apparent irrelevance, to be beside the point. It is through rambling that absent-mindedness in the modern novel appears. In Shakespeare, these moments generally occur not in soliloquy but in conversation, when a character begins to produce a monologue. There is an interesting moment, for instance, in *All's Well That Ends Well*, when Bertram is first introduced to the King of France. Instead of receiving Bertram in the usual way, and asking after him,

the King starts reminiscing about Bertram's father, whom he obviously loved:

> Youth [he says to Bertram], thou bear'st thy
> father's face;
> Frank nature, rather curious than in haste,
> Hath well compos'd thee . . .
> I would I had that corporal soundness now
> As when thy father and myself in friendship
> First tried our soldiership. He did look far
> Into the service of the time, and was
> Discipled of the bravest. He lasted long,
> But on us both did haggish age steal on,
> And wore us out of act. It much repairs me
> To talk of your good father. In his youth
> He had the wit which I can well observe
> Today in our young lords . . .

Bertram tries to interject with various politenesses, but the King rambles on self-involvedly for another 60 or so lines. Bertram thanks the King for remembering his father so royally, and the King starts again:

> Would I were with him! He would always say –
> Methinks I hear him now; his plausive words
> He scattered not in ears, but grafted them
> To grow there and to bear . . .
> 'Let me not live', quoth he,
> 'After my flame lacks oil, to be the snuff
> Of younger spirits, whose apprehensive senses
> All but new things disdain, whose judgements
> are
> Mere fathers of their garments, whose
> constancies
> Expire before their fashions.' This he wished.
> I after him do after him wish too . . .

When a courtier reminds the King that he is loved, he ignores him and asks Bertram how long it has been since the death of the physician who was at the bedside of his old friend, and thus is blamed by the King for letting him die. Six months, replies Bertram. ‘If he were living I would try him yet’, says the King, angrily. The King is a bit like Hotspur, who talks only to himself and who is reprimanded for ‘tying his ear only to his own tongue’. The elegiac comedy of this scene arises from the prospect of a man so fiercely clinging to his past, and so self-involvedly ignoring his interlocutor. The King talks as if he is in conversation, but he is only in self-conversation, and happily contradicts himself, saying at the start that he sees the same kind of wit in the young lords as he did in his late friend, and ending by saying that he agrees with his late friend that the young are feckless, and he wishes he was in his grave.

Here we witness a character who may be mistaken but who is not inauthentic. Memory is amoral because in literature authenticity trumps morals. The self-use of memory allows a character to live in error, as it were, but always be forgiven, since what is important about memory is that it seems true to that character. Shakespeare’s characters feel real to us in part because they feel real to *themselves*, take their own private universes for granted, and in particular their memories and pasts. Indeed, Shakespeare’s characters manage to hold the paradox that they feel real to themselves but do not necessarily know themselves, which is the very paradox of consciousness, since I have no way of knowing that I do not actually know myself.

John Berryman noticed a passage in Act 4 of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in which the clown, Launce, tells the audience about his dog, Crab. ‘Here we attend,’ writes Berryman, ‘for the first time in English comedy, to a definite and irresistible *personality*, absorbed in its delicious subject to the exclusion of all else, confused, and engaging.’ Launce

upbraids Crab for pissing in a gentleman's hall and recalls that the gentleman ordered that poor Crab be whipped. Launce tells us that he went to 'the fellow that whips the dogs' and told him that it was not Crab that pissed but Launce himself. Thus Launce was whipped from the hall. 'How many masters would do this for his servant?' asks Launce of his dog, and develops the question:

Nay, I'll be sworn, I have sat in the stocks for puddings he hath stol'n, otherwise he had been executed; I have stood on the pillory for geese he hath kill'd, otherwise he had suffer'd for't. Thou thinkst not of this now. Nay, I remember the trick you serv'd me when I took my leave of Madam Silvia. Did not I bid thee still mark me and do as I do? When didst thou see me heave up my leg and make water against a gentlewoman's farthingale? Didst thou ever see me do such a trick?

How finely, in this passage, we are really eavesdropping on a man who is not talking to us but talking to his dog ('Thou thinkst not of this now'). Of course, Launce is really talking to himself, too. Again, we see how Shakespeare dares to fill the soliloquy with a character's apparent irrelevances. And one of these 'irrelevances' is a character's determination to persist with analogy and metaphor, as Launce does, seemingly only to please himself – his little conceit that he has become his dog's servant. Again and again in Shakespeare's soliloquies, the dramatist repeatedly 'risks' letting his characters use metaphor for their own ends, lets them develop their figures of thought and speech as *they* might develop them. We know that Launce is babbling to himself in part because he is pressing his (i.e. Shakespeare's) analogy to such 'selfish' length.

In a soliloquising world, like Shakespeare's, in which characters often speak at each other while mistakenly supposing that they are talking with them, the distinction