

## Virtue and Laughter: the point of art and the meaning of life

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In any piece of sustained intellectual writing there will be found a circumambient framework, shaping the writer's thoughts and feelings towards a particular perspective,<sup>1</sup> the sort of thing dignified for grander writers than ourselves as a 'vision'. Now I take for granted that aesthetic arguments are intrinsically, though not identically, entangled with political ones, where politics concerns itself with state legitimacy and obligation, as well as with power and wealth. I also take for granted that a political and historical epoch ended convulsively in 1989, after which totalitarianisms in either a reactionary or a progressive form (Fascism and Stalinism) became unthinkable.

The titanic and global struggle of one with the other, and of both with the eventual victor, which (rather clumsily) I shall call liberal-democratic-oligarchism and is what we live under in Europe and North America, may only be seen in the perspective of a tragic vision. Not only the monstrous slaughter of Fascist imperialism, world war and cold war warrants this title (16 million people died in cold warfare, 50 million in global war, 20 million of them Russian, God knows how many in the Fascist incursions in China and Africa in the 1920s and 30s). It is not only the gigantic scale of destruction which made this epoch a tragic one, it was also the magnitude and the splendour of the human values, however distorted by demagoguery, for which men and women fought and died. Even the horribleness of Fascism was shot through with in themselves noble appeals to a love of country and the fulfilments of loyal comradeship.

These were the clashes of vast social orders, and the deaths of individuals, even in squalor and needlessness, were touched with their momentousness. Nor was the tragedy over when peace came in 1945, for the social order itself still broke and ended lives in the name of higher purposes: the defeat of communism, the achievement of individual freedom, the accomplishment of prosperity, the protection of what was ours against the invasion of the

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<sup>1</sup> Although this essay is only formally perspectivist to the extent that any post-Nietzschean ethical argument is bound to be.

aliens. Raymond Williams catches the grandeur of the moment as well as its fearfulness in a personal declaration from the heart of Cold War :

I have known tragedy in the life of a man driven back to silence, in an unregarded working life. In his ordinary and private death, I saw a terrifying loss of connection between men, and even between father and son: a loss of connection which was, however, a particular social and historical fact: a measurable distance between his desire and his endurance, and between both and the purposes and meanings which the general life offered him. I have known this tragedy more widely since. I have seen the loss of connection built into a works and a city, and men and women broken by the pressure to accept this as normal, and by the deferment and corrosion of hope and desire. I have known also, as a whole culture has known, a tragic action framing these worlds, yet also, paradoxically and bitterly, breaking into them: an action of war and social revolution on so great a scale that it is continually and understandably reduced to the abstractions of political history, yet an action that cannot finally be held at this level and distance, by those who have known it as the history of real men and women, or by those who know, as a quite personal fact, that the action is not yet ended.<sup>2</sup>

It's over now. For the perspective along which we all of us look in order to see the action of our time is now necessarily comic. What Samuel Huntington calls the clash of civilisations cannot for our epoch be framed as tragedy. The grotesqueries of murder at the World Trade Center or in Baghdad are only explicable, as we daily learn from the commentators, by recourse to what Kenneth Burke, theorist of comedy,<sup>3</sup> calls 'the maximum of forensic complexity'.

It is a quirky definition of comedy but one sees what he means. Tragedy encompasses human misery and cruelty, and counterposes them in a simple, terrible gesture, to heroism and compassion. Comedy redescribes horror as stupidity, vileness as error, and the 'cynical brutality' (Burke's phrase) which is the consequence of affronted sentimentality (as when starving crowds across the globe fight for the packages of food dropped from the air) is explicable merely as shameless cheating. The comic vision complicates the explanation of conduct as far as it will go. It is 'the perspective on incongruity' and, as Burke added, in promulgating his doctrine of 'dramatism' as *the* instrument for the interpretation of cultures:

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, revised edition, London: Verso, 1979, p14.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Burke, *On Symbols and Society*, ed Gusfield, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, p171.

In equating "dramatic" with "dialectic" we automatically have also our perspective for the analysis of history, which is a dramatic process, involving dialectical opposition. Every document bequeathed to us by history must be treated ... as the answer or rejoinder to assertions current in the situation in which it arose.<sup>4</sup>

The comic vision is replete with the recognition of ambiguities, and relishes its awareness of them as the necessary instrument of 'maximum consciousness' in action. It is a pleasure then to contrive the kind of prose in which such thought would have to live and express itself. It would be paradoxical, aphoristic, chiasmic, queasy, joke-filled, slow to action, elusively heretical, anti-managerial (i.e. non-programmatic), unselfpitying ... this is the wisdom of comedy, and the discovery of a sane, affirmative speech (Auden's words) the only way for the human scientist to find a method.

## II

The comic vision, I claim, is the only one giving any sort of rational view of the world as it is at present, sufficient to make the path shine a little, lighting up the way ahead not too far, keeping your speed down, ensuring what Burke calls 'a trained incapacity'. It is probable that seeing this way has something in it, as Richard Norman suggests,<sup>5</sup> of the old *Gestalt* puzzle-picture in which you can perceive either the face of an old, haglike woman looking one way or the profile of a beautiful young one looking the other, but never both at once. A world-view is a cognitive and feelingful *Gestalt* perception of a similar order.

Comic vision is a spacious mansion and accommodates many frames of thought. In estimating the condition of intellectual life at the present time however, in the second section of this paper we find two frames of wholly uncomic vision (and untragic also). They are reciprocal. The first is taught in all academies, and is the product of the doomed and almost century-old attempt to turn the human into the natural sciences, to provide an arithmetical notation for all behaviour, and to vindicate empirical observation according to canons of unattainable objectivity. I shall call the first, in a rather ponderous phrase mostly borrowed from Alisdair MacIntyre, 'social-scientific method as the ideology of managerial authority'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, New York: Prentice Hall, 1945, p511.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Norman, 'On seeing things differently', in Beehler R and Drengson A, *The Philosophy of Society*, London: Methuen, 1978.

<sup>6</sup> Alisdair MacIntyre, *The MacIntyre Reader*, K Knight (ed), Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998.

The second is its complementary obverse, a long shriek of protest against everything the bloody managers will not heed and cannot abide. It is no less irrational and no less reckless with the facts. I shall call it 'intellectual methodism as the ideology of sanctimonious helplessness'.

In the first method-according-to-doctrine, managerialism for short, the point of successful inquiry is to match goals to outcomes (as they say), to bring within the consensual circle the inevitable diversity and disagreements within a competition of interests, thereby to exclude from the field of meanings and the valuation of the good anything which fails to fit the frame. The most gigantic as well as the most lethal example of this system of thought is to be found in everyday politics where society is defined as the adjunct of the economy rather than vice versa, and where the notion of a 'just price' can make no sense, or in the innumerable instances whereby precious and cherished ways of life - farmers, for instance, or corner shops - are ruthlessly eliminated by corporate power and theorised into dissolution by the fideistic concept of convenience shopping and its cathedral, the mall. In the smaller local life of the university, there is now only a faltering conception of intellectual life as the common pursuit of specifically intellectual virtues, transcending the partisanship of departmental competitions, realisable only in a shared valuation of those virtues and the mutual recognition of the social solidarity on which they rest.

It is reference to this larger context of political argument which is so lacking not only in the interminable arguments about the allocation of resources which is the static noise of intellectual life, but very much apparent in all the policy evaluation research which gets the money and the attention. It is precisely there that alternative definitions of the common good are ruled out, and radical contestation of the dominant theories exorcised as so many ghosts from a past one can now see through. In education, phantoms from the progressive-permissive-creative shadows of the 1960s are simply waved away by the hard factualists of the literacy strategy, for example. Questions about the value of what is being read simply cannot be raised in systems of competence-evaluation. In this way, managerialism suppresses dissent and the uncomfortable, useful conflict which must go with it.

The trick is brought off methodically: if all social phenomena are classifiable as separate empirical variables, then in the name of scientifically holding the experiment steady, it is normal to treat some variables as outside the field of relevant measurement (this is obvious in

any attitude survey, especially those making use of five-point scales, questionnaires and the inanity of 'the depth interview'). As MacIntyre says,

But the beliefs, the interpretations, which constitute the ordering of the world to be investigated, which make the available range of variables what it is, these underlying constitutive beliefs, concepts and interpretations will have disappeared from view.<sup>7</sup>

These mechanisms of selection are then put to the service of social manipulation. For it is the aim and legitimation of management and the research it hires to simplify the world and to render social commotion and its discontents amenable and safe, safe because atomised (a crowd is always a threat), amenable because individualised (hence the put-down, 'but that's just *your* opinion').

The manager proves himself or herself competent by meeting targets, controlling dissenters and establishing causes. Within this structure of obligations, a purported knowledge of causes (so often mere superstition) is the attribute of the safe pair of hands put in charge to steer the ship through its difficult waters. Failure is by this token failure of causal knowledge and manipulative ability. Research is the source of such knowledge. Hence policy research is endlessly sustainable, either to confirm success or repair failure.

Thus social-science-as-funded and managerial authority interlock. Schemes of classification must be fixed and indisputable. Thus, 'scientific management' for those same taxonomic schemes must be interchangeable: the research councils and government departments will only pay for research they can recognise. The classifications entail the rules; they match 'findings' to practice, and practice to desired outcomes.

By this point, social science methodology, on dreadful courses to learn which so many doctoral students have contemplated suicide, is indistinguishable from the ideology of managerialism. MacIntyre, former Catholic Trotskyite, wistfully invokes the idea of tradition, an adequate tradition being one capable of 'holding together conflicting social, political and even metaphysical claims in a creative way'.<sup>8</sup> Liberal oligarchism has, however, almost destroyed the idea of a tradition. This is why creativity is now discussed in terms of

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<sup>7</sup> MacIntyre in Knight (1998) p60.

<sup>8</sup> MacIntyre in Knight (1998) p67.

its availability for technical rationalisation, and thought is replaced on the curriculum by 'thinking skills'.

### III

The antidote to all this - for plenty of people have noticed how bad things are for the life of the mind - is then thought to be to track down old power itself, the lumbering Nobodaddy of Anglophone culture and society, and shout names at it when, as is very easy to do, it is found in action, and in action on behalf of rich against poor, white against black, men against women, clever against dim, deserving against feckless.

This move politicises absolutely *everything*, and replaces judgement with feelgood opposition. It was Karl Mannheim, fifty years ago, who asked whether 'it must be assumed that only that is politics which is preparation for an insurrection? Is not the continual transformation of people and conditions also action?' and he went on to note that those who borrow method and rhetoric from the mighty Marxist tradition for the analysis of power, are entering an always murderous struggle to be in the right, 'to be attempting to demolish the basis of one's opponent's social and intellectual existence'. After demolition, class victory. The trouble is that the class in question has seceded from the struggle, and the Party which formed itself in order to keep the huge and childlike monster of the proletariat up to the political mark has been abandoned by absolutely every one of its members apart from a few desperadoes trying to reposition *New Left Review* on the head of a pin.

So the guerrillas of anti-managerialism, however strong one's sympathy for whom, turn out to be fighting less on behalf of the good society and more in the hope of tenure. They see, correctly enough, the monstrousness of the managerialist enemy, but can only oppose it with mud pies and stink bombs. After all, the adjective 'corporate' presumably must include George Soros and the millions he has spent not only on his university foundation in Prague but also on his electioneering against George Bush. Identifying, as a condition of intellectual inquiry, with the wretched of the earth must also, if one is to practise a human science scientifically, commit the cultural student to judgements as to the cruelty and brutality of ways of life amongst the underclass whose victimhood provides the cause.

The decent-spirited student is then at a loss. She sees that a Foucauldian insistence on the power quotient of academic discourse makes it impossible to tell the truth, and that to endorse identity politics as the seat of authenticity means it is just fine for Serbs to kill Bosnians, but her discovery can only throw her into a delirium. Her predicament is acute although not irreparable, as we shall see. It is caused by a certain blindness in her way of seeing her subject-matter. Worse, in the etiquette book of the intellectual virtues which I am compiling here, is the less forgivable myopia which commends sincere personal feeling and moral sympathy of a womanly kind for the put-upon, including oneself. So one such homilectic reads, 'I make no pretense to offer an objective battlefield dispatch ... [I shall] demonstrate the intellectual shoddiness of [my opponents'] attacks and counter the dead-end political and philosophical assumptions that motivate their misreadings'.<sup>9</sup> Outraged self-importance is an intellectual failure, which it must be an attribute of any sufficiently human science to eradicate as a function of its method. It is not that the guerrillas are mistaken that they need a theory of the sentiments - or of what Hume so finely called 'the civil affections'. It is that the sentiments they endorse compel upon their advocates the irresistible sweetness of sentimentality, self-righteousness, and of a high-toned assumption of protectiveness towards all *les misérables* as well as of the role of injured party in any intellectual clash of wills, a certainty that a view is more credible for the fact that they hold it.

Such failings transpire oozily from a dozen instances in the pages of journals like *Social Text* (as witness Alan Sokal's famous spoof), *Representations*, *Hypatia*, such collections as James Clifford edited (on anthropology) as *Writing Culture* and his *Routes*, Fabian's *Time and the Other*, or Peters's collection from which I am quoting.<sup>10</sup>

In a contribution to the latter, called, inevitably, 'Disciplined Absences', the author offers to provide, no less, 'the missing discourse of a feminist politics of emotion'. Here we find not only the dire curlicues of Cultural Studies calligraphy - the forward slash and its multi-modality (culture / power / history), the phrasal fashion accessories (binary, resonate with, lability, critiquing, paradigm), the exaggerated use of inverted commas ( the hermeneutics of suspicion ) - but also the utter incapacity to say *anything* new. All she can rehearse are

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Markley in *After the Disciplines: the emergence of culture studies*, M Peters (ed), Westport CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> James Clifford and George Marcus, *Writing Culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986; James Clifford, *Routes*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997; Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

deathly banalities about 'the dominant ideology's appropriation of feminism' and 'the gendered particularities of our subjective positioning', a diction with which it is impossible to think (or feel) accurately and with discrimination.

It is true and important that we need to realign passion and the mind in action, although some disciplines (maths, philosophy, history) already do so without fuss. But the powerless opponents of management who have bent themselves to the devising of a human idiom without any taint of exploitation can only come up with the theorisation of narcissism.<sup>11</sup> They repudiate the dissatisfactions of consumerism by seeking an immaterial and socially placeless intimacy which rests neither on power nor interest. At heart, our fantasy commando longs for a deep cleansing of the self from *all* social institutions in the name of a perfect purity of free aspiration best realised in a series of personal intimacies unfettered by dead tradition. The good society is no society; the only truths are personal; the glowing centre of the personal is sexual.

No doubt there is a genuine good somewhere mixed up in these saccharine delusions. But as currently voiced, the opposition hasn't a hope of slowing the march of the managers. Triteness, much inflated by both sanctimony and a hatefully pretentious vocabulary, has taught that power *is* rather than how rulers conduct themselves; that wretchedness is bad for people rather than inquiring how things might come out better; that even to essay understanding of the Others is to contribute to their oppression, rather than to reject such moral hypochondria as compounding uselessness with self-righteousness. (Indeed, the attractions of victimhood have proved irresistible even to such distinguished, well-paid and conspicuously under-victimised doyens of our style as Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha.)

The old obligation to keep up hope in the good society as well as to find such points of redemption as one can in the bad is surely the right balancing point for all or any of the human sciences. Interpretation rather than insurrection is the goal, and the hermeneutic act is necessarily performed against a moral horizon. To find happiness in others' lives demands a moral sympathy coterminous with the imagination, such that an answer is found, temporarily and in time, to the question, how can such-and-such a life be lived well?

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<sup>11</sup> See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W W Norton, 1979) - a bit under-argued and over-polemical, but stirring.

## IV

It is time to keep my promise and to sharpen the point of art. If these are the frames of mind of the times and if those times are best envisioned as comic, what shall art teach us of the intellectual virtues, and teach us in such a way that those virtues irradiate our studies, our thought and our writing, for the good?

An intellectual method is no more than the configuring of the relevant virtues as features of a serious conversation. But each of the virtues can only take on the kind of life the social institutions of the day permit. It was John Stuart Mill who pointed out that if a virtue is insufficiently practised in a given way of life, it will die. Our way of life, in the rich countries of the world, for example, gives little exercise for physical courage, and the high value still set upon courage means that people deliberately contrive sporting circumstances - mountaineering, freefall parachuting, walking across Antarctica - in which to practise it. Changes in social institutions and in the ordinality of values have meant that the virtues of manliness and womanliness in general and of chivalry in particular have also become attenuated. Indeed, as Don Quixote showed us four centuries ago, to attempt to be chivalrous is just to become silly. (The joke - on us and him - is then that he still doesn't see it.)

It follows that to be a virtuous scholar now is not the same thing as being a scholarly contemporary of, say, Karl Marx and T H Green in 1882. Yet both those moral examples understood freedom herself not just as a value but as a virtue: to be free was and is to be upright, self-directed, self-aware, unafraid, rational, active, purposeful. The moral force of these qualities is brought out with great courage by Milan Kundera in his two classic fables, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Joke*. In the first, the Angel of the Lord understands that the Devil's laughter is at the expense of God's beautifully ordained creation (and Kundera is of the Devil's camp); in the second, a graffiti joke is taken by the Communist police with wooden, deathly seriousness. Totalitarianism, the lesson of both books is, must regulate laughter. A laughing woman is a much too free woman.

Historically, it has been an impolite thing to extol laughter. The aestheticians of the Renaissance - Castiglione, Rabelais, Vives - followed Aristotle in seeing comedy as corrective of human stupidity, and laughter as sign and instrument of ridicule and derision. A

century later, for Ben Jonson, Thomas Hobbes and Robert Burton<sup>12</sup> alike, laughter was inseparable from both condemnation of others' fatuity and glorification of one's own superiority. By the 18th century, as part of what Norbert Elias entitles in his anthropology of domestic life, *The Civilising Process*, genteel people were at pains to suppress this 'vile and shocking deformation of the visage' and 'frightful noise' which was laughter (Lord Chesterfield's very words in his letters about etiquette to his son). Far better to permit the *sous-rire* than the outright *rire*. Even now, we would look askance at *coarse* laughter, uneasy at uncontrollable chav bellows from the other end of the public bar.

This thick and curious deposit in cultural meaning has its force in my account of the intellectual virtues, for our free laughter at the expense of, say, the jargon of management or the vain gibberish of pious postcolonialism is a proper relief of our labours. The defence of the obvious fact that all foreigners are funny has to be made not only on behalf of stand-up comedians but also on behalf of that self-criticality which must be numbered amongst the virtues enjoined by method. For we are all foreigners except at home, and my *haut-bourgeois* Englishness is as comic as this man's Islamic bigotries (still, tricky to say so, as Salman Rushdie found out).

Laughter in that direction may indeed have a touch of cruelty about it, but it is a light enough punishment for the hosts of the Philistines and the enemies of intellect who beset us, above all - or anyway directly above *us* - from within the gates of the university. Nonetheless, it will be useful to discriminate between laughing *at* and laughing *with*, as well as to add to our quota the kind of laughter which breaks out from a spilling over of wellbeing, and expresses happiness, for sure, but also an uncomplicated *joie de vivre*. It is that which informs (gives form to) the most joyful and laughter-filled tracts of English and American literature: Shakespeare's comedies, early Dickens, Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, *Alice in Wonderland*, any amount of Mark Twain, Saul Bellow, all these before we even begin on the splendid era of the best BBC comedy running from the *Goon Show* to Victoria Wood.

Laughing *at* may be necessary, salutary and not intrinsically self-applauding. Laughing *with* is however inseparable from nobler virtues: tolerance, sympathy, loving-kindness, all among the intellectual as well as the social virtues. To be laughed at (to be laughable) may be sometimes discomfiting, but if the person laughing is a person you love, then, on a good day,

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<sup>12</sup> In *Timber*, *The Element of Laws*, and *The Anatomy of Melancholy*.

any resentment dissolves into the recognition that they are right to be laughing and, ruefully at first, then fondly, you join in.

James Wood writes:

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.<sup>13</sup>

Laughter of this sort should characterise the good life of the ideal academic community, one in which staff and students are alike bound together, as T S Eliot put it once, 'by the common pursuit of true judgement'. Within this good society, jokes are not the weapons of competition and subordination but of forgiveness (as they are in good families).

The devices of literature and art - of as mixed a bag of artworks as *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Ulysses*, *Annie Hall*, *Arcadia*, the paintings of Roy Lichtenstein or Matisse's late cut-out pictures, the best episodes of *Porridge*, the short stories and their cartoons of James Thurber, the TV criticism of Clive James - are deliberately opaque. They keep reader or spectator in a constant state of uncertainty as to what to think, who may be trusted, how much of what one is told is reliable, whether one has or has not had a true glimpse of a character's *inner* life - the life we have so been taught by the great Romantic tradition to cherish as ours, and as the definition of who we really are.

In spite of the drivelling sentimentalists of self-discovery, no-one can be anybody outside a set of social roles and solidly built social institutions. Virtues live lives embodied in socially factual relationships, whether of people or institutions. The institutional purpose of university inquiry is, first, to discover how the world is, and second, to imagine how it ought to be. Such inquiry takes the consistent unreliability of things, whether in life or art, and tries to clarify and straighten it out. This is reasonable and necessary, but it will embed the virtue of stoicism in our method if we keep our stitching and unstitching of natural behaviour or human motives down to a minimum. Only bring into the daylight what you need for your

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<sup>13</sup> James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self: on laughter and the novel*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2004, p6.

purposes. Do not try to get everything in. The original medieval dictum of William of Ockham, 'Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem' (in our terms, minimise utterly all entities and explanations) holds for theories, but it need hold neither for arguments nor for observations. Indeed, the best part of the human sciences in their everyday journeyman labours is exactly the sort of abundance and excess, the delight in local colour and in human fatheadedness or nobility which characterise the novel. To accomplish this is to win what in an older moral tradition was called grace and the means of salvation. Secular salvation, I suggest, is to be won by laughter: laughter-at where necessary, -with where possible, for the joy of life whenever it wells up.

The point of art for the scholar is then for her to be certain that her own inquiry comes up to art's own standard of truth-telling. 'A bad work of art,' R G Collingwood tells us, 'is the unsuccessful attempt to become conscious of a given emotion: it is what Spinoza calls an inadequate idea of an affection'. Collingwood continues:

Now, a consciousness which thus fails to grasp its own emotions is a corrupt or untruthful consciousness. For its failure (like any other failure) is not a mere blankness; it is not a doing nothing; it is a misdoing something; it is activity, but blundering or frustrated activity. A person who tries to become conscious of a given emotion, and fails, is no longer in a state of sheer unconsciousness or innocence about that emotion; he has done something about it, but that something is not to express it. What he has done is either to shirk it or dodge it: to disguise it from himself by pretending either that the emotion he feels is not that one but a different one, or that the person who feels it is not himself, but some one else: two alternatives which are so far from being mutually exclusive that in fact they are always concurrent and correlative.<sup>14</sup>

Nobody can pursue intellectual inquiry dispassionately. Passion and intellect are inseparable. What we are trying to do in our quest for judicious and accurate thought, so misleadingly described as 'objectivity', is to shape in ourselves the right feelings for the task, feelings in the human sciences coterminous with such virtues as moral sympathy, tolerant attentiveness, kindly amusement, sardonic detachment, courteous grace.

Consciousness itself is a concentrating of the mind upon something. Consciousness dominates the psychic flow of feeling. Feeling becomes thereby domesticated. An

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<sup>14</sup> R G Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938, p282. The theory of consciousness which follows is summarised from Collingwood.

impression is converted by this activity into an idea. The imagination is the new form which feeling takes when consciousness has taken over. Truthful consciousness is the activity of matching feeling and idea. False consciousness fixes the feeling untruthfully. Thus, we direct our imagination towards the new impression in our mind. We recognise that the idea into which we are converting it is painful or uncomfortable or horrific. We cannot domesticate it for further imaginative use. We lie to ourselves about it (and, of course, if we could only bring ourselves to admit it, know perfectly well what we are doing). This is the corruption of consciousness. To take Collingwood's example, a bawling six-year-old may be quietened by distracting her, or she may be quietened by insisting she face her rage and, slowly and sulkily, dominate it.

Coming down to breakfast out of temper, but refusing to allow that the ill humour so evident in the atmosphere is our own, we are distressed to find the whole family suffering agonies of crossness.<sup>15</sup>

Good art is the test of the corruption of consciousness, but so is good scholarship, which should always set itself to become good art. The comic vision, and the laughter which is its natural expression, is the solvent of corrupt consciousness and the medicine which can cure lying to ourselves.

## V

There is always the question of good manners. Manners tell us how to speak in different parts of the conversation of humankind. Sometimes manners coincide with the balance which I shall argue in a moment is both necessary and discoverable between how the world is and how it ought to be, that balance which is the source of meaning in life. But sometimes manners are little local accidents, 'conventional' as we say, suggesting something arbitrary and absurd. One such convention is the exclusion of deliberate comedy from writing in the human sciences (or anyway excluded until one is senior enough to get away with it; I will remember a colleague disapproving of the incomparable anthropological writing of Clifford Geertz because 'he is always so very funny').

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<sup>15</sup> Collingwood (1938) p218.

This being a lecture about laughter and academic conventions on the whole not being much of a laugh, this is perhaps the moment to give an example of the kind of writing our social scientific reportage might try to learn from. It is superbly vivid, carefully narrated, truthful to the facts and almost unmarked by such poetical-rhetorical tricks as metaphor which Thomas Hobbes forbade as impeding reason.<sup>16</sup> The comedy reposes in the bareness of the narrative, its reticence at key moments, its timing. The example is taken from James Thurber's short reminiscence of his boyhood, *The Night the Ghost Got In*.<sup>17</sup> He and his brother are woken by the sound of footsteps pounding round the kitchen. They go to the top of the stairs.

Instantly the steps began again, circled the dining-room table like a man running, and started up the stairs towards us, heavily, two at a time. The light still shone palely down the stairs; we saw nothing coming; we only heard the steps. Herman rushed to his room and slammed the door. I slammed shut the door at the stairs top and held my knee against it. After a long minute, I slowly opened it again. There was nothing there. There was no sound. None of us ever heard the ghost again.

The slamming of the doors had aroused mother: she peered out of her room. "What on earth are you boys doing?" she demanded. Herman ventured out of his room. "Nothing," he said, gruffly, but he was, in colour, a light green. "What was all that running around downstairs?" said mother. So she had heard the steps, too! We just looked at her. "Burglars!" she shouted intuitively. I tried to quiet her by starting lightly downstairs.

"Come on, Herman," I said.

"I'll stay with mother," he said. "She's all excited."

I stepped back on to the landing.

"Don't either of you go a step," said mother. "We'll call the police." Since the phone was downstairs, I didn't see how we were going to call the police - nor did I want the police - but mother made one of her quick, incomparable decisions. She flung up a window of her bedroom, which faced the bedroom windows of the house of a neighbour, picked up a shoe, and whammed it through a pane of glass across the narrow space that separated the two houses. Glass tinkled into the bedroom occupied by a retired engraver named Bodwell and his wife. Bodwell had been for some years in rather a bad way and was subject to mild "attacks". Most everybody we knew or lived near had *some* kind of attacks.

It was now about two o'clock of a moonless night; clouds hung black and low. Bodwell was at the window in a minute, shouting, frothing a little, shaking his fist. "We'll sell the house and go back to Peoria," we could hear Mrs Bodwell saying. It was some time before mother "got through" to Bodwell. "Burglars!" she shouted. "Burglars in the house!" Herman and I hadn't dared to tell her that it was not burglars but ghosts, for she was even more afraid of ghosts than of burglars. Bodwell at first thought that she meant there were burglars in his house, but finally he quieted down and called the

<sup>16</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp294ff.

<sup>17</sup> James Thurber, *The Thurber Carnival*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965, pp232-5.

police for us over an extension phone by his bed. After he had disappeared from the window, mother suddenly made as if to throw another shoe, not because there was further need of it but, as she later explained, because the thrill of heaving a shoe through a window glass had enormously taken her fancy. I prevented her.

The police were on hand in a commendably short time: a Ford sedan full of them, two on motor-cycles, and a patrol wagon with about eight in it and a few reporters. They began banging at our front door. Flashlights shot streaks of gleam up and down the walls, across the yard, down the walk between our house and Bodwell's. "Open up!" cried a hoarse voice. "We're men from Headquarters!" I wanted to go down and let them in, since there they were, but mother wouldn't hear of it. "You haven't a stitch on," she pointed out. "You'd catch your death." I wound the towel around me again. Finally the cops put their shoulders to our big heavy front door with its thick bevelled glass and broke it in: I could hear a rending of wood and a splash of glass on the floor of the hall. Their lights played all over the living-room and criss-crossed nervously in the dining-room, stabbed into hallways, shot up the front stairs and finally up the back. They caught me standing in my towel at the top. A heavy policeman bounded up the steps. "Who are you?" he demanded. "I live here," I said. "Well, whattsa matta, ya hot?" he asked. It was, as a matter of fact, cold; I went to my room and pulled on some trousers. On my way out, a cop stuck a gun into my ribs. "Whatta you doin' here?" he demanded. "I live here," I said.

The officer in charge reported to mother. "No sign of nobody, lady," he said. "Musta got away - whatt'd he look like?" "There were two or three of them," mother said, "whooping and carrying on and slamming doors." "Funny," said the cop. "All ya windows and doors was locked on the inside tight as a tick."

Downstairs, we could hear the tramping of the other police. Police were all over the place; doors were yanked open, drawers were yanked open, windows were shot up and pulled down, furniture fell with dull thumps. A half-dozen policemen emerged out of the darkness of the front hallway upstairs. They began to ransack the floor: pulled beds away from walls, tore clothes off hooks in the closets, pulled suitcases and boxes off shelves. One of them found an old zither that Roy had won in a pool tournament. "Looky here, Joe," he said strumming it with a big paw. The cop named Joe took it and turned it over. "What is it?" he asked me. "It's an old zither our guinea pig used to sleep on," I said. It was true that a pet guinea pig we once had would never sleep anywhere except on the zither, but I should never have said so. Joe and the other cop looked at me a long time. They put the zither back on a shelf.

It's a painful disappointment that I cannot read on to the end, during which Grandfather, asleep in the attic during a phase in which he believes he is back as an officer in the Civil War, becomes persuaded that the police are deserters from the Union cause ( 'Back to the lines, ye lily-livered dogs ' ). The solemn usefulness of the incomparable Thurber is however that his story illustrates so happily the reciprocal location of meaning in life. In David

Wiggins's aphorism, '... it is true both that we [value] something because we think it is good, and that the same thing is good because, being what it is, we [value] it'. Thus, Thurber's story makes us laugh and we love laughter, but the story is intrinsically funny in any case, both in the telling and in the action, and this is plainly true (objectively so, if you must). Thurber looks along Burke's 'perspective of incongruity' (by God, he does).

So this is how to look for meaning. We bring our desires to the world and implore it to signify something; at the same time the world is as it is, and we will find 'out there' the meanings it has and which, by and large, we learn to want. That is to say, we bring to life a desire to make it meaningful (this is what literacy theorists recognise when they write of 'meaning-making'), but life in its turn *has* its own meanings. Language itself is the readiest example: every new sentence demonstrates new meanings, and yet (Humpty Dumpty notwithstanding) you cannot make it mean anything you like. Imagine a beautiful view from a much-loved house - a favourite holiday home, let's say. It is cherished and desired not because of the state of feeling it will reliably cause in you, but because of the value and meaning contained in the place. It is the place and its view which is loved, not the state of feeling.

In all intellectual inquiry the best in us and the best of us are struggling to give due weight to the interests and allegiances we carry everywhere with us, and to find endorsement and extension of these commitments in our modes of study. The demands of value-neutrality in the name of 'objectivity', so grotesquely made in doctoral methods courses, can only be refused. The same person (the course tutor, I fear) will at the same time contend that there is in any case no way of adjudicating between value-preferences ('it's all subjective'), hence value-neutrality is the only position - what Thomas Nagel, in a precious book proving how impossible a position it is to find, calls 'the view from nowhere'.<sup>18</sup>

Both assertions mistake fatheadedness for hardnosedness. Wiggins says briskly, '... the possibility simply does not exist for a theorist to stand off entirely from the language of his subjects or from the viewpoint that gives this its sense'.<sup>19</sup> The engagement with other people, the very movement of translation of their actions or texts into the observer's words brings him

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

<sup>19</sup> Wiggins (1991) p113.

or her within the hermeneutic circle of the people concerned. The observer becomes a participant in the act of translation and reporting.

The second objection to the presence of value, that as it's all subjective it's all meaningless, may be met by agreeing that our distinctions of worth or value judgements correspond to no 'primary' or objective qualities in the world. The beautiful landscape is 'really' and blankly just rocks and stones and trees. But how on earth could there be such properties? Value, especially the paramount value of human rationality, cannot be separated from human activity.

This dissolves the division between fact and value, at least in human inquiry. It is completely unimportant that value properties are not primary or objective qualities: they cannot be. They are intrinsic to human activity. They can, however, be distinguished by both objective and subjective description, and of course these descriptions can readily include an account of how these values direct judgement and practice. Meaning in human life is rooted in an arbitrary, contingent, unreasoned inventiveness which is a fundamental feature of what it is to be human.

Such inventiveness plays off more or less successfully against what particular human beings discover is really there. So this individual, having a hopeful (or desperate) disposition, discovers in the world enough to justify that character. "This cannot happen unless world and person are to some great extent reciprocally suited". They often aren't.

Suited or not, however, our doctrine of worth will have it that value and meaning may be tracked down at either end of human endeavour: either from *within* individuals as they find intrinsic surges of value attribution given by body or spirit, or from *outside* individuals, insofar as value seems apparent in those human activities which human nature itself seems generally to find some point in pursuing. Vivid meaning takes its charge and glows with its light when people in some corner of a foreign land bring together the intrinsic and extrinsic sources of power.

Let me end by finding the meaning of life in a very funny little parable taken from the tabloid comic strip *Andy Capp*, a cartoon whose compression, imaginative force and simplicity of line has the unmistakable presence of art. Andy, feet up, is slumped in an armchair smoking

a fag. The downtrodden Flo is reading the paper. Both, of course, are Geordies. She speaks. 'It says here that there are people who don't smoke, don't drink, don't have sex, and they live to be a hundred'. Andy: 'Serve them right'.

FRED INGLIS