

*Hommage respectueux de l'auteur
à Monsieur G. Kersch.*

THE THEORY
OF ROMANTIC COMEDY

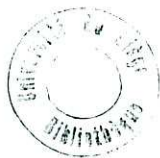
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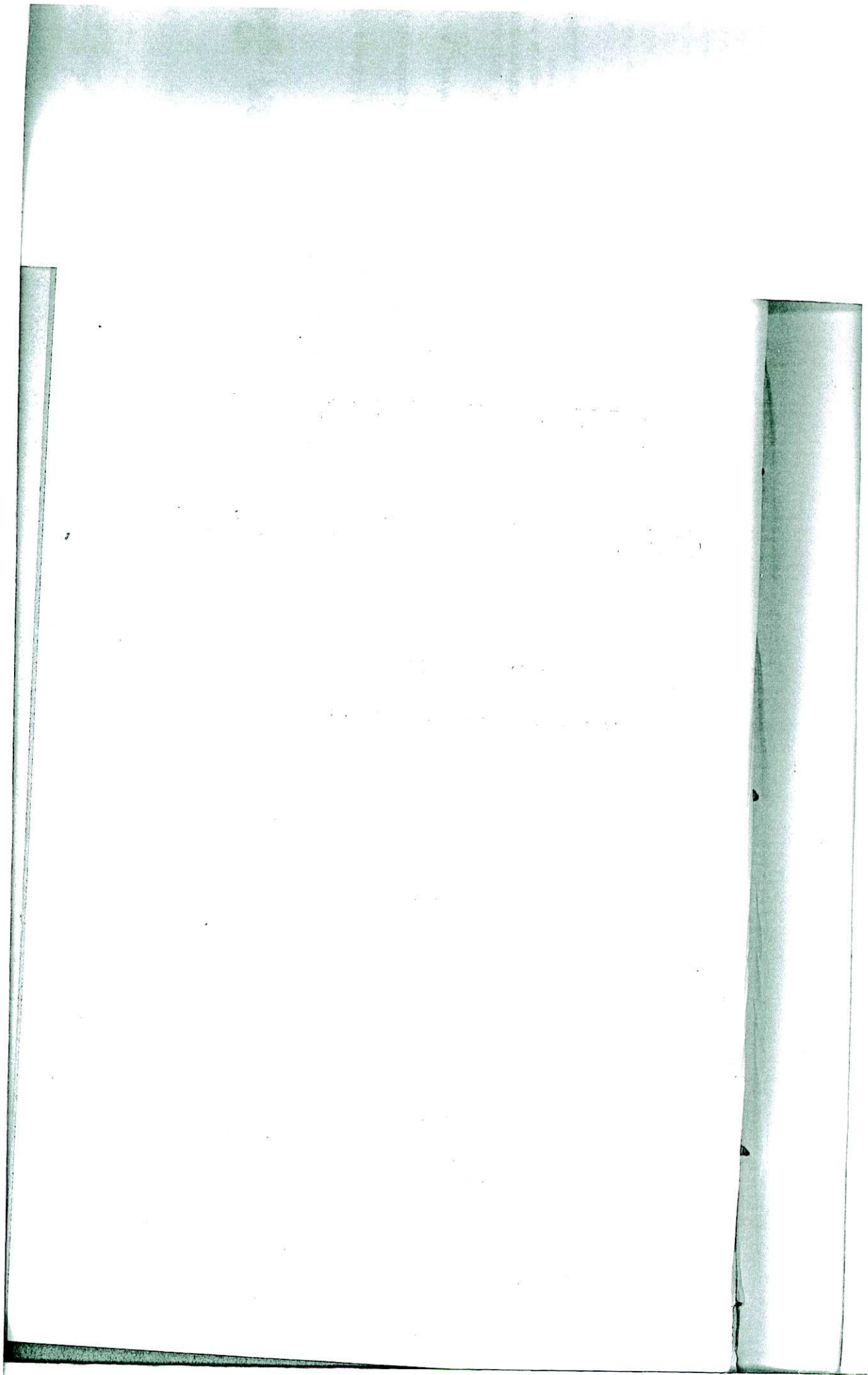
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I

Mr. Meredith's lecture on the Spirit of Comedy is so perfect in thought and expression, that hardly a word can be said in contradiction of, or in addition to, it. It has the supreme quality of books : to set its readers reflecting on parallel lines, to make them feel how much loose thinking and how many mis-statements of facts occur in other fields of literature, and how many confused notions have been allowed to accumulate through partiality and ignorance. For the subject of Mr. Meredith's study, the comedy of manners, is but a limited province of humorous literature, where we meet, in our author's opinion, only one masterpiece.

The borders of this province Mr. Meredith has drawn with precision, and the whole body of what is commonly called romantic or phantastic comedy he has, with good reason, left outside the scope of his study. If, nevertheless, he has not seen fit to mention this omission in the title of his lecture, it is for the obvious reason that romantic comedy is hardly recognised as a distinct literary *genre* by the modern generation of Englishmen, who have followed the French in their conception of the function of the comic spirit.

A very different notion prevailed among the English at the time of the Renaissance, and was accepted by the more recent criticism of Germany. The critics of the German romantic school and the philosophers who founded German aesthe-

tics about the middle of the XIXth century expounded a theory of comedy which perhaps comes short of Mr. Meredith's in its apprehension of the social value of the comic spirit and in its appreciation of Molière's powerful genius, but which ought to have attracted the notice of the countrymen of Shakespeare on account of its boundless admiration for the creator of Falstaff and of the melancholy Jacques. The Teutonic critics are louder and less half-hearted in the praise of Shakespeare's comedy than any British or foreign writers, just as German dramatic poets have more than others drawn on *Midsummer Night's Dream* und *Tempest* for inspiration. English writers have been prompt in recognising the spiritual kinship between German literature and Shakespearean comedy, in the shape of quotations from German authors in nearly every instance when Elizabethan comedy is discussed; but the sentences thus quoted and translated are hardly ever explained to the English reader, so as to enable him to grasp their real import, and the connection in which they stand to the general body of German philosophy and criticism. No wonder then, if the German theories of comedy and of the ludicrous, founded though they are on the analysis of English masterpieces, have to this day remained unfamiliar to the public of Great Britain. A brief summary of these theories and of their application to Shakespeare may thus be not unwelcome to the English reader.

The views that follow have little claim to the distinction of originality : students of German aesthetics will at once perceive how large a debt I owe to the profound but unwieldy volumes of Hegel and Vischer.

II

The teachings of German criticism on Shakespeare's comedy can best be introduced to readers of Dowden's authoritative book on Shakespeare's art and mind by stating that it exactly reverses the opinions of the English Professor. Whereas he lays the greatest stress on Shakespeare's earnestness, on his full sympathy for the endeavours and sufferings of struggling mankind on this our little earth, Schlegel and his countrymen extol phantastic comedy as the expression of unconstrained freedom, that shakes off the shackles of earthly life to disport itself in its own fancy and whim. The want of all serious purpose, the rejection of rules and laws are to them the very soul of a romantic play. Conscience, will and practical sense, the gods to whom Dowden offers perpetual incense, must be covered up or broken down, before the unfettered genius of poetic comedy can take his gambols about the stage.

Nor are these Germans short of arguments borrowed from Shakespeare's own works. The frequently recurring sentiment that life is but a dream, which Dowden strives to put aside or explain away, is one of their favourite themes. They would even persuade us that the wild pranks of Puck and the magic of Prospero can be as solid and more delightful to the mind than any grave tragedy or moral poem. Hebler points out four places in Shakespeare's works where human life is treated as, or compared to, a dream, (1) and he adds: "Truly such dreams are of greater import and worth than most things commonly seen waking. The visions of poetry are, if so taken,

(1) Measure for Measure. — Tempest. — Prologue of Taming of the Shrew. — Comedy of Errors.

and as sober Theseus seems inclined to suppose, mere dreams too, like those of lovers and lunatics, but they belong to another species, which unites with the most wakeful coolness, and teaches to seriously and thoroughly despise the kingdom of boors and Philistines, when compared with that of elves and spirits; herein it is supported by all higher views of life, and especially by science. For science also has had the truly honourable fate of being regarded as an idle reverie by such as share the standpoint of the master weaver Bottom, either before, or during, or after his metamorphosis. (1). »

It would not be easy to decide whether Hebler or Dowden is right : Shakespeare can no doubt be construed both ways, and I for one feel inclined to see some truth in the teachings of both schools of criticism, giving the Germans the credit of a more sympathetic insight into Shakespeare's comic genius. For whatever else may be thought of Dowden, he shall certainly not be accused of overvaluing Shakespeare's comedy, or of squandering his love on those two delightful heroes, Falstaff and the melancholy Jacques. His harshness to Jacques especially amounts almost to cruelty. He reproaches him with giving words instead of deeds ! We might as well dismiss Juliet to the basement, and advise her to roast a nourishing goose instead of lending her ear to that idle volatile, the nightingale. Shakespeare's comedy is indeed not recognised by Dowden as a distinct literary *genre* at all. The similarity between the two plays of fairyland, *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Tempest*, he passes lightly over as superficial or accidental (page 7) as if the genius of a great writer did not precisely lead him to select the form in deepest harmony with the mood he has to express.

(2) pp. 175-176.

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He never distinguishes between the humour that takes up a subordinate place in tragedy and the humour that pervades the whole plot of the merriest comedy.

Indeed the comedies receive a somewhat inadequate treatment at his hands. He describes the earlier of them as a young writer's preparations for his serious literary life, and the later as fruits of a period of sportive rest and recreation between the grave business of the histories and the tragedies. Such an explanation does not account for the appearance of a work of art at all, for why, we may ask, did not Shakespeare select some other species of pastime, and how could his mere rest have called such elaborate and highly poetic masterpieces into existence? Doubts of the same kind will make themselves felt, when Dowden teaches that comic relief is needed to do justice to every side of a subject, to bring it clear and complete before the mind's eye. This, like the explanation of the comedies as a pastime, is merely negative, and provides us with no kind of standard to measure the value of the comic scenes and characters. It might even be made the subject of an impertinent parody by any one who cared to explain that Julius Caesar was conceived as a recreation from the writing of *Twelfth Night*, or that the victory of Agincourt is meant as serious relief to the jesting of Falstaff. Such a tasteless parody would after all be nothing more than a consistent development of Dowden's theory; if the comic and tragic views are two halves of a complete criticism of life, then one ought to be as valuable and self-sufficient as the other, and neither can be understood as a mere relief or recreation.

Such a perfect symmetry of the two provinces of comedy and tragedy is in fact admitted in German systems of aesthetics, and this teaching underlies the criticisms of Shakespeare's comedies quoted or alluded to by Dowden. Indeed, he seems

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to have felt that German critics were peculiarly safe and clear-sighted guides in the comic province, and under their leading he nearly allows his judgment to stray over the bounds of matter of fact to which he endeavours strictly to confine it. So he writes of Shakespeare's humour : " When all the realities of this world and of time have been represented as far as they can be in their totality, Shakespeare measures these by absolute standards. He lays the measuring-rod of the infinite by the side of what is finite, and he perceives how little, how imperfect, the finite is. And he smiles at human greatness, while yet he pays loyal homage to what is great; he smiles at human love, and human joy, while yet they are deeply real to him (more real to him than they could possibly be to an eager intense Shelley); it is Prospero's smile upon seeing the new happiness of the youthful lovers... And he smiles at human sorrow, while he enters into the deep anguish of the soul; he knows that for it too there is an end and a quietus. The greatest poetic seers are not angry, or eager, or hortatory, or oburgatory, or shrill. Homer and Shakespeare are too great for contest;... men to whose unoffended, uncondemning sight, the whole of human nature reveals itself in a pathetic weakness with which they will not strive, or in mournful and transitory strength, which they dare not praise (1). Shakespeare sees with purged eyes; and he loves and pities men. But while this view of things from an extra-mundane point of vision is to be taken account of in any study of Shakespeare's mind and art, it must be insisted upon that the facts are at the same time thoroughly apprehended, studied and felt from the various points which are strictly finite and mundane (2)."

(1) Quoted by Dowden from Ruskin.

(2) pp. 356-357.

In the last sentence of this passage Dowden makes haste to return to the gross clay of our earth, as if he had already dwelt too long in the airy realms of Shakespeare's poetry of fairyland. This unexplored region of the fancy, of which he allows only a passing glimpse to his readers, is the favourite haunt of German criticism. Schlegel, Hegel, Vischer and the minor lights of aesthetics have striven to fully traverse and understand it, and the accounts given by them of their studies and discoveries are the subject of the present paper.

III

These studies were initiated by Kant, who in his *Kritik of Judgment* defines laughter as an emotion occasioned by the sudden resolution of a roused expectation into nothing (1). Thus Kant does not view the ludicrous as a permanent property of objects, but as a transitory emotion of the person who laughs, as a change in ideas and feelings, as a movement. Now this definition bears a close relation to the drama, which is full of action and movement. What is a play, but an appeal to the attention of the audience, rousing a curiosity that will be either satisfied or deceived?

In serious plays, the expectation terminates in some thoughtful mood or mournful emotion, in tragedy proper, it rises to the highest pitch and culminates in the passions of fear and pity. In merry plays, on the contrary, the expected troubles are smoothed down, and the end is nothing but a relief and comfort from the apprehensions roused by the difficulties of the beginning. This absence of violent feelings may

(1) Cf. Quintilian, VI, 3: in decipiendis expectationibus.

in a certain sense be called a negative winding up, or, in Kant's phrase, a resolution of the expectation into nothing.

The proximity between Kant's definition and the internal structure of the drama was perceived by William Schlegel, who erected a wholly original theory of comedy upon it (1).

The starting-point of Schlegel is the essential difference between poetry and daily life, notwithstanding the close connection that binds them together : poetry, comic and tragic, he takes to be not a copy from life, but a free and heightened picture of the moral forces at work within ourselves. The consciousness that all the things with which we are concerned are finite and perishable breeds an inexpressible melancholy, from which we can only escape by remembering that our destiny extends beyond this narrow world. The consciousness of the permanence of lofty moral principles among the frailties of all human concerns is the tragical mood. Its reverse, the comic mood, consists in forgetfulness of all such sorrowful cogitations, through the enjoyment of a present well-being. It mocks and lowers all things in order to draw some merriment from them. As high seriousness in the contemplation of a moral purpose is the state of mind suitable for tragic conceptions, so carelessness as to all the graver consequences of conduct opens our mind to the ludicrous, which amuses the understanding and delights the imagination without appealing to our moral sense.

The connection between these statements of Schlegel and the doctrine of Kant lies in their application to the winding up of the drama. Tragedy, belonging to the moral sphere (that

(1) Schlegel's theory has been attacked by Denis, who has misunderstood the allusions to Kant in Schlegel's lectures, and doubts whether they are not the result of an "*ineptie*" of the French translator.

of the cataric imperative) requires that all the evil consequences of human frailty should visit the hero, while comedy raises the expectation of such visitations without fulfilling it; to put it in Kant's words : it resolves itself into nothing. While tragedy obeys the inexorable laws of necessity (*ἀνάγκη*), comedy knows no other laws than those of an arbitrary and inventive fancy. Schlegel enumerates the following five requisites of comedy :

1. Unity of subject-matter.
2. Ludicrous quality of subject.
3. Vividness of effect.
4. Organic coherence, pointing to a definite aim.
5. The superior law, to which the others are subordinate, is that there should be felt a spirit of freedom and appearance of aimlessness throughout the work. This appearance of lawlessness may even occasionally be carried to the length of breaking through the dramatic form, so that an actor speaks for himself instead of keeping to his part, or addresses the audience instead of his fellow-players.

The reader will be aware that this definition of comedy would hardly apply to the *School for Scandal* or to the plays of Dumas : indeed, Schlegel has construed it chiefly with reference to the comedy of Aristophanes, which moves wholly in this phantastic world, and he condemns the comedy of manners as a cross-breed between pure old comedy and certain prosaic and tragical elements.

The weak point in Schlegel's theory is that it is mainly negative : after defining comedy as the reverse of tragedy, and deducting its characteristics from those of the opposite *genre*, he tells us that it defies or eludes the laws of morality and art, but he gives no positive hints as to its contents, except that in it the world of sense triumphs over the world of mind. A con-

sequence of this one-sidedness is that Schlegel is unable to do justice to the most voluminous and most admired comic literature of the past, viz. to the Latin drama of Plautus and Terence and to their followers in modern times, especially to Molière. But after all, this partiality was only a natural reaction against the injustice done to Aristophanes and Shakespeare by the pseudo-classical criticism of the eighteenth century.

In his eager vindication of the rights of poetry, even in the comic province, which had always been held to border most nearly on prose, in his praise of the unfettered freedom of genius, the romantic critic was opening the way for a sounder and more catholic view of the functions of humour and of the comic spirit. Schlegel's theory met with acceptance even in France, erewhile the citadel of pseudo-classicism. In Germany, it elicited a number of poems conforming to its standards and became the foundation of an ever growing body of aesthetic and critical writings.

IV.

The greatest of German aestheticians is Hegel. Unfortunately he is also the most difficult to understand. For it is easy neither to examine his aesthetic theories apart from the rest of his philosophical system, nor to unravel his real meaning while following him from one to another of the several standpoints from which he successively surveys the problems before him. He will resume the investigation of the same phenomenon at different stages, and at every fresh study bring another side of it into relief.

In one place he defines the ludicrous as "the annihilation of things which are unsubstantial in themselves, as a false

and contradictory phenomenon, a whim, e. g. wrongheadedness, caprice, against a powerful passion, or as a principle and maxim imagined to be sound (1). " — This definition includes Kant's notion of an expectation resolved into nothing, i. e. of an appearance that attempts to deceive and to be taken seriously, but soon vanishes into its emptiness. Another definition, which cannot be quoted literally, says in effect: when embodied in a human character, the ludicrous is the attempt of a man or woman to accomplish serious tasks for which they are utterly unfit, as their ability is but a conceit and unreal show. A contradiction is thus produced between the purpose and the means used to reach it, and no positive result is obtained.

This definition, which is fully developed in Hegel's theory of the drama, comes near Schlegel's doctrine, that comedy is the picture of a purposeless activity. Only Hegel believed with Aristotle, that a play is dramatically interesting by its constant working towards a definite purpose, and would probably have condemned a purposeless play as no play at all. The peculiar character of comedy he found in a contrast between the temper of the characters and the object which they pursue. If that object is unsubstantial, unimportant or naughty, and if it is not attained in the play, this failure need not cause any sadness to the audience, and may even be borne contentedly by the hero. This is the negative, but nevertheless happy ending of comedy.

Hegel's views, therefore, while historically connected with those of Kant and Schlegel, are substantially different. They also extend beyond the narrow province of literary

(1) *Aesthetik*. ed. 1835. I, 88.

criticism, to which the author of the Lectures on dramatic Art confines himself. Hegel detects the spirit of comedy in the history of the world and in the growth of the human soul and shows that a hidden kinship exists between the adventurous spirit of chivalry and love and the mental processes more properly described as ludicrous. The disconnected, wayward enterprises of knight-errantry, the obstinate and exclusive clinging of lovers to a single person, while many others might serve the same purpose, are phantastic exertions of noble moral feelings; and border on the sphere of the ludicrous by the arbitrariness of their self-appointed duties.

Whereas in these cases the most laughable consequences are reached by aiming at the highest moral perfection, a similar discrepancy between intentions and results can be obtained in the opposite direction. A worthy character may be cast into despicable circumstances, and spend its strength and ability on worthless pursuits. Such is the case of Shakespeare's comical heroes, whom Dowden treats with withering moral contempt. Hegel greets even Pistol as a fine fellow, who rises above his mean actions by the power of his intellect, takes his stand in life without grumbling or repentance, and is able to develop the free existence of a great man, if fate had so willed it (1). Falstaff, the " absolute hero " among such characters, is held up by German critics as the highest embodiment of comedy. They applaud his self-laudation as not only witty in himself, but the cause of wit in other men, a double spring of laughter, active and passive at once.

For German criticism does not shrink into sour discontent at the sight of easy-going fun and good-humour. The perfect

(1) Aesthetic. ed. 1837 II, 207.

blessedness of the jester, his disregard of external conventions and ignorance of self-restraint, are to Hegel happy symptoms of a gifted individuality, which can safely look down upon the miscarriage of its schemes and rises sublime above its own weaknesses and contradictions. The warm sympathy for merriment and even for mere joking evinced in these views of Hegel is more likely to lead to a clear appreciation of the moral and literary value of mirth than the high-strung seriousness of most British criticism.

There are situations in the lives of men as well as epochs in the history of nations which furnish proper occasion for nothing but satire and mockery. Such epochs are the turning-points in the world's history, when, the force of a ruling idea being spent, a back current sets in, and the national mind undertakes to pull down the ideals which it had laboriously built up. In such times of decay, when the weak points of a civilisation are the most conspicuous, and the whole social fabric appears clumsy and tottering, the great humorous writers appear and assist in clearing the air of obsolete notions and empty forms, which are no longer in keeping with the requirements of living society. Such a time was the end of ancient Greece, when the great scoffers Aristophanes and Lucian saluted the downfall of Jupiter and the whole of his Olympian train; such were the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the refined sentiments of knight-errantry were crumbling under the playful strokes of Ariosto and the scourge of Cervantes.

Such epochs are indeed not wanting in opportunities for grave meditations : the thoughtful will ponder on the melancholy ending of lofty dreams ; the enthusiasts will look eagerly forward to the rising of some new creed to be adopted. But the more powerful minds will allow themselves to be

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drawn away neither to the past nor to the future, but will heartily enter into the revolt of healthy reason against the nightmare of unreal conventionality, and strive to cast off the dead weight of cumbersome traditions. Falstaff's impudent neglect of the primary duties of knighthood, his supineness in serving his liege lord at war, and unchivalrous treatment of ladies, will seem less unpardonable if we remember that his prince forgot his duties and lost his self-respect, and that the females he dealt with were wanting in womanly charm and even in shame. Surely there are cases when the scoffer is right and the advocates for gravity and reverence wrong, when the public idols show their rottenness and only fools can be brought to worship them by dint of gilding them over and patching them up. For though the consciousness of a higher aim is ever active throughout mankind, yet the means used in the pursuit of this aim vary with each new form of society, and a constant rejection of antiquated conventions is needed to keep the social forms in harmony with the ever-changing consciences of men.

No system of philosophy has taken more account of this unceasing shifting of ideas than that of Hegel and his school, and therefore none has given a more comprehensive analysis of the ludicrous: As tragedy shows the subordination of all living forces to the moral law, so comedy sets loose the powers of caprice and accident, in the soul as well as in the outside world, and thus creates a world of topsy-turvydom. The senses overrule the reason, and the wanton will of the individual breaks through all restraints. If they grew into evil resolves and led to serious results, these freaks of the unfettered will might awaken moral disapprobation, but they remain innocuous by their very incoherence, for the comical hero is half-conscious of his own weakness, nor does he care to give

more than a passing attention to the idle aims he fitfully pursues. His own delight in his inconstancy and trifling is shared by the spectators of his fun, who not only laugh at him, but laugh with him in light-hearted sympathy.

In this outspoken sympathy with the whole scale of laughter lies the great superiority of German over foreign criticism : The neo-classics, in their satire and comedy of manners, always preserve a distant and strange manner towards the subjects of their merriment : their scornful derision hits the jester like contempt, and does not allow them to join in his foolery. The deeper wisdom of the Germans teaches us not only that there is but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous, but that both may meet in one and join hands without losing any of their distinctive charms. The very enjoyment of laughter is invested by them with a kind of sublimity which reminds us of Hobbes's definition of laughter as an enlargement and raising of the joker's individuality by conscious pride at his own powers and contempt for the defects of others. The debasing and narrow feeling of contempt is eliminated from Hobbes's definition by Zeising, who thus describes the unmingled raptures of merriment :

“ I enjoy the consciousness of subjective perfection, awakened by a trifling particular phenomenon — in that moment I am to myself a god blissful in myself. This consciousness of subjective perfection is by no means to be mistaken for pride. The essence of pride precisely consists in distinguishing, separating myself from all outside me. In the comical rapture, on the contrary, I put everything on the same level with me, I open the gates of my Ego to all, I let all laugh with and within me. Thus I do not raise myself above anything, for what I look down upon is a mere nothing — what pride can reside in this? — Accordingly the comical self-content in its

purity is the most harmless sentiment that can be imagined (1).

In the same broad spirit of universal benevolence, Goethe has not shrunk from confronting the scoffer with the Maker of the world, who expresses less dislike for his arch roguery than for any other fiend of lying :

- “ Ich habe deines Gleichen nie gehasst.
- ” Von allen Geistern, die verneinen.
- ” Ist mir der Schalk am Wenigsten zur Last. ”

The pantheist Vischer comments on this amenity of the Lord to the mocker Mephistopheles in a passage where he boldly asserts the proximity of the ludicrous to even the highest forms of the sublime.

Now this doctrine reverses the whole theory and practice of classical literature with reference to the comical *genre*. Aristotle's definition of the comical as a harmless ugliness and of comedy as a picture of low life does not seem to admit of the sublime as one of the elements of comedy, and the practice of the main body of classical literature, from Menander downwards, has been in agreement with it. German criticism brought to the foreground the two kinds of comedy that have tended to combine poetical and pathetic elements with the portraiture of human weaknesses : that of the Spaniards in the seventeenth century, and the romantic comedy of the Elizabethans, which had been neglected and underrated by all other schools of criticism. Here we find the greatest delicacy of feeling and nobility of thought and manners, along with caricatures of coarseness and stupidity. Here we find poetical fiction blending the grotesque with the refined, the most graceful flights of imagination with the utmost vulgarity of speech and thought. The seeming

(1) Quoted by Ueberhorst, II, 740.

contradiction implied in such fantastic combinations has always puzzled critics of the classical school as much as it had interested and attracted the romantics (1).

The two forms of the ludicrous that belong to the higher spheres of literature, that is to say, wit, which implies the sharpest intellectual insight, and humour, which includes the sweetest sentiment, are both mingled species of fun, compounded like the romantic comedy, and therefore peculiarly suited for it. One French neo-classic (2) opposes wit, which resides mainly in language and expression, to comedy proper, which is the result of observation, and consists in the presentment of the things themselves.

V.

These different species of the ludicrous have been represented in the epic branches of literature, from the mock-heroic *Batrachomyomachia* downwards to the novels of Fielding and those of Meredith. They have also been embodied in a large mass of dramatic literature, and have often been declared especially fitted for dramatic rendering. Hegel and Vischer especially have been loud in proclaiming that the comical *par excellence* is dramatic in its spirit and must needs find its highest expression in the drama. Now this sweeping statement requires at least some qualifications, for while it is obvious that the stage lends a life-like reality to its creations, which

(1) An ingenious and probably accurate account of it is given in the second part of Ueberhorst's book, on lines quite independent of former German philosophers, and in striking agreement with the Flemish critic Michiels.

(2) Philbert.

greatly heightens the joys of laughter, it is very doubtful whether the progress of the plot in a play, the suspense and fear it raises and allays, are not a hindrance to the full and careless relaxation which we expect from humorous literature.

The powerful effect of the farce on audiences of all times and nationalities is not perhaps so conclusive as might appear at first sight; for the farce, whatever its hygienic merits, can hardly be ranked as literature at all, because the element of thought is conspicuously absent from it. It may moreover be doubted whether it really is a drama even of the lower type, comparable for instance to the sentimental melodrama of our present stage, which, notwithstanding its vulgarity and coarseness, exhibits at least an attempt at intelligible, continuous action, and catastrophe foreshadowed and prepared from the first. The "happy ending" of most entertaining plays is usually no conclusion or ending at all, the incidents leading up to it are mere empty obstacles, blocking the way for a moment, and then dropping off, and the attention of the audience is diverted from the continuity of the plot towards a series of ill-connected situations and caricatures.

The opposition between the pure comical spirit and the drama has been pointed out by two French writers (1), who require of comedy, in the first place, a truthful, possible plot and a sympathetic interest in the characters and their fortunes, and only in the second place, the laughter-moving power which is a most valuable, but not highly literary quality of farce. This view, which has been conceived and put forward in flat contradiction of German criticism, is by no means unfounded, especially if we remember that dramatic effect is something

(1) Denis and Philbert.

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quite independent of scenic performance and of dialogue. A novel is often spoken of as intensely dramatic, while many works intended to be recited by actors on a stage, such as the Elizabethan masques, are quite devoid of an action suited to stir the emotions of an audience. According to our French critics, the dramatic interest that is missing in the purely comical part of a play must be borrowed from some additional element, which unites with its merely entertaining part, but this combination does not at present concern us.

The question now before us is : How far can the dramatic effect be derived from the ludicrous matter itself, and remain at one with it? The life of the drama consists in a struggle in which the hero's will engages either against himself, or against other characters, or against external circumstances. The dramatic interest is the fellow-feeling awakened in the audience by such a struggle. Now if the struggle is an idle, purposeless sport, as the theory of Schlegel requires, it will recreate, but it may not affect, and the more serious it becomes, the less amusing it shall be. This dilemma applies to each particular incident in the play, and most of all to the ultimate object towards which the whole is tending, that is the ending or catastrophe.

In tragedy, the ending is deeply impressive, and should accordingly be prepared by a constantly growing suspense. As death is the most dreadful of events to our un-Christian audiences, so marriage, or the preparation for young lives to come, is the most pleasant. Marriage accordingly has been the customary ending of comedy ever since the days of Menander. But is marriage in itself ludicrous? Love-making is no doubt usually attended by a good deal of fun, sometimes to the parties concerned and sometimes to the onlookers, but the interest taken in comedy-weddings will mostly be found to be senti-

mental, not ironical. The merely laughable incidents in plays are usually distinct from and often opposed to the love-story, which is nearly always serious, though not sad, at bottom. If we look about for a *dénouement* as essentially ludicrous as the catastrophe of tragedy is sad, we may be unable to find any, except the merely negative winding up, such as a pardon granted to a mischiefmaker or a reconciliation between quarreling parties. These must needs seem tame to the spectators, as they bring no positive enjoyment, but only relief from some preceding anxiety. The fact of their being nearly always combined with the union of lovers proves how unsatisfactory they are in themselves.

This absence of a purely comical catastrophe is but a consequence of the undramatic character of the purely ludicrous. It is not given to the human heart to join as intensely in others' joys as it can join in their troubles, and it is as hard to stir up full sympathy with good-natured fun, as it is easy to awaken pity for some imaginary sufferings. Pity indeed is ever so ready to move in the human breast that the writer of comedy is always obliged to be on his guard against it. If his heroes are at all interesting, their little misfortunes may easily be taken seriously by the audience, and the expected laugh may be missed. This incompatibility of laughter with emotion has especially been pointed out by Schlegel, and by an English author, from whom we shall quote the following words :

“ Comedy looking at... the follies... of men, withdraws its attention from the graver issues which concern the end of conduct... It brings out the negative side of life... It exhibits situations in which the sense of the ideal is lost under an outward gaiety, or its realisation wholly frustrated. It does not detach the essentials of life from the unreal appearances ;

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and though some elements of tragic earnestness may underlie the representation, comedy cannot, while remaining within its own strict limits, present, as tragedy does, a rounded and complete action, an image of universal human nature (1). "

This incompatibility of laughter with emotion is the main obstacle in the way of the comical dramatist, who will constantly be in danger, now of destroying all sympathy for his characters in order to make them entertaining, then of hampering our derision of them in his attempts to rouse a fellow-feeling for them.

VI

The opposition between two rival elements is nearly always felt in the comical drama, and W. Schlegel, the warmest advocate of a purely ludicrous comedy, without any serious addition, has been able to adduce but few instances of plays free from all admixture of serious interest, viz. the works of Aristophanes and Beaumont's *Knight of the Burning Pestle*. But even these instances are hardly to the point, for Aristophanes was no mere jester : he was a political partisan, and behind his wild pranks a definite purpose is felt; in Beaumont's play, the satirical tendency is obvious enough. No drama of any literary value can be said to be devoid of all serious interest, so that the combination of graver matter with the merely entertaining part of the play may be accepted as a general law of comedy.

Sometimes the ludicrous and serious elements are kept distinct, not only in the consciousness of authors and audiences

(1) Butcher, pp. 374-375. Cf Bergson, p. 142.

but even in the body of the play itself, which does not then attain to perfect harmony. In Latin and classical French comedy, the plot is double, notwithstanding the strong tendency of all classical literature towards unity of fable. The whole frame of the entertaining drama was thus broader and looser than that of tragedy. Along with this combination, or contamination, as Terence calls it, of several intrigues into one play, goes a combination of several sets of characters belonging to opposite moral and social types, acting with one another for a time, but not bound together by any tie of likeness or sympathy. Exceptions to this law of dualism are met with in two very different descriptions of comic literature, in the most refined comedy of character (*Les Femmes savantes*, *Le Misanthrope*), and in the farce. The one point of likeness between these two extremes, is the absence of a merely sentimental or pathetic interest, as all feeling is stifled in the first by subtle intellectual observation, in the second by the buoyancy of the animal spirits. Therefore the love story is in both indissolubly amalgamated into a single plot with the funny elements.

Dualism, being such a conspicuous feature of comedy, may perhaps be used as a means to discriminate between the several species of it which have been recognised from the days of Aristotle. The ancients distinguished the Old, Middle, and New Comedy, partly from historical accidents and partly from their own inner characteristics. The Germans have attempted systematic classifications grounded on abstract principles rather than historical connections, and have thus established two main classes that may command universal acceptance: On the one hand they put the comedy of manners initiated by Menander and practised by Molière and his followers, on the other the fantastic comedy of Aristophanes

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and the Elizabethans. They have carried their divisions and subdivisions much further, but the systems thus evolved have hitherto failed to elicit any general approval.

Might not the reason of this failure be sought in the fact that they have never taken the composite character of comedy into account, and that they have never tried to separate what was merely ludicrous from what was of sentimental interest? Might not an attempt be made to point out the characteristics which prevail in each several part of the comic drama, and thus to reach a satisfactory method of analysis and comparison, making a survey of the huge mass of comical literature possible?

VII

If we compare romantic and classical comedy from this standpoint, we find that they both contain a sentimental love-story, which provides the framework of the play, and the issue of which forms its conclusion. Upon this groundwork they both display a number of characters made ridiculous either by their personal defects or by their situations. The difference between both species does not lie in the subject but in its treatment by the author. The incidents and persons of the comedy of manners are meant for sober imitations from real life, their peculiarities are only heightened as much as is necessary for stage effect, and the entertainment provided for the audience is rather a quiet smile than a boisterous laugh.

Seeing the characters on the same level with his everyday experiences and feelings, the onlooker will be tempted to compare them with his own surroundings, and to apply to them the same rules of behaviour and action which apply in the common business of life. Hence the didactic tendency of the

comedy of manners. Many critics have pointed out that the lessons which it points are not of necessity in agreement with the higher moral laws, but rather with the dictates of prudence and worldly wisdom, which form the commonly accepted standards of conduct. The man of high principles and lofty aims is not a favourite with the classical comedy, which loves to detect his weak points and to rejoice at his failings, while it admires the cleverness of the practical man, whose honesty is tempered with discretion, and even the cheating of the downright rogue, if only he is lively and successful.

Charles Lamb is nearly the only writer who has had the courage to enter with full sympathy into this mood of pleasant naughtiness, which most other critics attempt either laboriously to misunderstand or foolishly to upbraid. The censure of W. Schlegel, though not wholly just, is more acceptable, because it rests on literary, and not on moral grounds : he reproves the classical comedy for grovelling in the vulgar regions of prose, instead of soaring into the lofty realms of poetry. This predominance of the prosaic temper makes itself felt in the two parts of the drama which we have distinguished : it leads to a lowering of the love story, which is degraded into a sordid family business or into a mere stirring of the senses, thus displaying only the coarser side of our human nature, and leaving the audience more or less cold. While the play of the finer feelings is thus kept within bounds, the ridiculous scenes and incidents are also toned down and preserved from exaggeration or excess. Grotesque characters are avoided altogether or banished into the background, and the fun is intellectual and sly rather than exuberant.

In some respects, this restraint is a sign of refinement and delicacy in the heart and mind, but our German critics blame it for its want of warmth and for its aloofness from the

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subjects of its pleasure. The audience of the classical comedy will smile, and sometimes sneer, with the author of the play, whose mind is winking at them from behind the screens, but they are not willing to join heartily in the fun and still less in the emotions of the characters themselves. The romantic comedy, on the contrary, aims as much at the heart as at the brain, cares more to be forcible than to be refined, and thus gives free scope both to the feelings and to the imagination.

Its love story will rise into yearning and passion, its ludicrous pictures sink into caricature and grotesque. It will transcend the bounds of reality to imagine new worlds of wonder, where commonsense resigns its scepter and where free play is allowed both to joy and to pathos.

VIII

The freedom from the trammels of everyday experience and commonsense claimed by romantic comedy is condemned by the classical critics as a defect. They urge that a faithful rendering of life is the main object of art, and that especially the comic artist's task is a minute portraiture of contemporary society. They insist that the law of causality, as we observe it in the daily course of our lives, should also apply to the fictions of the stage. Nay, they require that a play should be more strictly logical, more firmly knit together, than any series of real occurrences can be, for in their opinion a work of art should not only offer the consistency of a life-like fact, but also a harmonious picture of a typical case, uniting the most salient and regular features of many particular instances.

The Germans, on the contrary, maintain that a close copy from life is neither artistic nor poetic; as to the law of

causality, they only accept it for tragedy, which falls within the moral sphere, but not for comedy. They make a very sharp distinction between two different workings of this law: one, which they call subjective, is the action of the human character upon the outer world, and the other, the objective causality, or destiny, is the influence of external circumstances upon the conduct of man. To a certain extent, of course, all human events are brought about by the reciprocal actions and reactions of internal and external agencies, the human will being at once cause and effect in the mingled web of our lives. But the artist may be led to devote more or less attention to either side, and his work will affect us very differently if the inner workings of the individual conscience, with their powerful hold on the external circumstances of life are laid bare, or if the will of the single man is shown bending under the inexorable laws of society. Both views are true, both are fit for artistic rendering.

Ancient tragedy was the picture of fate and of its grasp on the fortunes of men. The tragedy of Shakespeare has often been described as the picture of the individual conscience, of man mastering and directing the current of his life. German critics have called it tragedy of character, while to ancient drama they gave the name of tragedy of fate. If the same distinction is applied to comedy, we shall find that Molière's plays mostly centre in a self-balanced mind, swayed by a ruling passion, and attempting to adjust external circumstances to its needs. It has long been known by the name of comedy of character. But as the weak and ridiculous sides of men's tempers are chiefly turned to the light, it is mainly a display of a distorted or wrong-headed character.

In the same way, argue the Germans, the fate prevalent in comedy must be a whimsical, unaccountable destiny which

plays with men's fortunes and feelings, thus not a fixed law, but a changeful caprice, not a permanently operating cause, but mere chance and luck. One of them (1) compares the regular course and harsh catastrophe of tragedy with the working of Divine Justice, and connects the fitful progress and fortunate issue of comedy with the operation of Divine Love, that deals with mankind not according to strict rules, but according to benevolent impulses, and gives them the benefit of any accidents that may happen to break into the effects of the unrelenting law.

Chance and luck are to the spirit of merriment what destiny and fate are to the serious side of human life. It will be remembered that chance is allowed a wide scope in most comedies of Shakespeare, and that design and purpose play but a very subordinate part in *Twelfth Night* and *As you like it*, for instance. The Germans have invented for them the name of comedies of chance, corresponding to that of tragedies of fate. The plots of such comedies must needs be intricate and lively, full of cross purposes and unexpected turns of events, while those of Molière's plays are sober to baldness.

Classical criticism of course reduces the influence of chance in a work of art to a minimum, or altogether denies it admission, as its working is likely to be illogical and disturbing. It is worthy of notice that Meredith, the most prominent advocate for the comedy of character, has given a large part to luck in the plots of several of his novels, and has been severely taken to task on that account. His disciple Le Gallienne raises the problem without even attempting to solve it. We

(1) Ulrici.

shall quote a short, but pregnant passage from him : “ This question of plot is indeed an easier one to settle in the case of the [subjective] than of the [objective drama], what happens *in* a man is less a question for the arbitrary invention of the novelist than what happens *to* him ; and I think this is felt when one comes to compare the ending of *The Egoist* and the ending of *Richard Feverel* or *Beauchamp's Career*. There is an element admitted into the working out of the two latter stories, which, of course, is operative in the subjective world as well, but hardly as constantly, or as volcanically — that of Chance. That it is no unimportant element of life we know, but how and when it is to be introduced into art is the question, one which is as old as it seems unanswerable. Our modern method of dealing with it would seem to be that the particular chances to which the *dramatis personae* are subjected shall be such as are not unlikely to arise out of their characters (1). ” — This is very unconclusive. Le Gallienne would have come nearer to a conclusion, had he accepted the distinction made by the Germans between the admission of chance into comedy and into tragedy. No doubt an unexpected catastrophe may often bring sadness with it, but it is never without a touch of irony, introduced by the disappointment of human foresight, and a sense of the incongruous. And the Germans seem on the whole to be right in thinking that man is more given to carelessness and merriment when conscious of the possibility of unaccountable changes than when he stands before an unavoidable fate. Mere luck has therefore a greater importance in humorous than in grave literature, and the greatest of all in fantastic comedy.

(1) Le Gallienne, p. 28.

The opposition between that and the comedy of manners does not reside only in the structure of the plot. Their characters also belong to quite different types. For if ridicule arises from within, it will be produced by some defect of the person himself, who will thus appear more or less contemptible and low, as Aristotle expressly intimates. The case will be quite different if ridicule befalls him from outside, if it arises from a fortuitous accident or circumstance : the character itself may then be worthy not only of sympathy, but even of admiration, as in the romantic plays of Shakespeare. Aristotle's distinction between higher and lower types has usually been understood to imply an opposition not of moral qualities but of social standing, kings and courtiers being excluded from comedy, slaves and plain citizens from tragedy. In this sense too, the heroes of romantic comedy belong to a better class than those of the comedy of manners, as the stage does not seem able to separate nobility of birth from that of the feelings and behaviour.

The sharp line which is thus found to divide the two kinds of comedy with reference both to the nature of the plot and the social circles selected for delineation extends also to the moral qualities and feelings brought upon the stage. In fantastic comedy, such defects as are necessary to raise laughter about the heroes will not be base vices or degrading blemishes, but merely transitory whims or such serious passions as will evoke a smile without rousing either contempt or anger. Chief among these is sexual love, which we are taught by modern literature to reverence as one of the most refined and ennobling emotions, though in real life it nearly always calls forth mirth.

The ancients hardly ever took love quite seriously : in the Latin comedy, it appears connected with vulgar feelings

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and base surroundings. In this too, the classical comedy was a faithful picture of average reality. But even the most unselfish and ideal attachment is mingled with much that is ridiculous. The extravagantly high estimate of a single person, to the detriment of many others of perhaps greater worth, the wilful delusion as to the amount of happiness that mortal man can confer upon his own kind, the stirring of the blood and senses which even the most innocent inclination carries with it, the unconscious dissimulation practised on the beloved person or on the bystanders, the fretfulness and flurried eagerness with which the most trifling words and gestures are analysed and commented upon, all these are delightful fun to the onlookers of the game. Not even the parties themselves, to whom the whole business has quite a momentous import, can abstain from frequent giggling and jesting, either from mere irritation of the nerves, or because in their cooler moments they discern how much frailty goes to the making of a good lover. Unite this fitfulness and excitement to a high-strung generosity and self-devotion, slightly exaggerate these virtues and defects, and you have the ideal hero of a romantic play.

The coyness and sensibility of the weaker sex, its inborn ability for intrigue and deceit, its softness and wilfulness, are still better suited for romantic comedy than the passions of a male. Therefore the loving maid has been studiously analysed and portrayed by the authors of fantastic plays. When her impulses and deceits come to govern the whole plot, the most unexpected and strangest meetings and mistakes are produced, and the conflict of contending purposes and tricks gives rise to a confusion which is ludicrous in itself, quite apart from the temper and dispositions of the characters concerned. Thus is formed the comedy of intrigue, which bears a close resemblance to the comedy of chance. In it the fickle will of the

hero plays the same mad pranks as are brought about by external circumstances in the latter species of drama.

By all these particulars the tone of the romantic play is raised above that of the comedy of character, and brought nearer to that of the serious drama. On the other hand, the freedom enjoyed by the poet's imaginative faculty displays itself in caricature and grotesque, which are the natural counterparts of wild romanticism. The dreamy, fanciful heroes of romantic comedy are attended by buffoons and antic or coarse servants, who follow them as a distorted and crooked shadow follows the erect and well-balanced figure of a man. In the Forest of Arden, country wenches and boorish swains mingle with courtiers and gentle people. Sancho Panzas are ever the companions of Don Quixotes; monsters and dragons surround the roaming knights of Ariosto.

Above these two favourite classes of characters hovers a third species, that of the mockers and mischief-makers, airy spirits like Puck, or merry jesters and clowns, whose irony hits right and left, sparing no person and no dignity. They give utterance to the real thoughts of the comic poet and keep the audience in the proper mood for enjoying the deeper meaning that underlies the apparent nonsense of the play. Their jesting will sometimes rise into poetry, as did the voice of the chorus in the works of Aristophanes. Their laughter pervades the whole comedy and binds its heterogeneous parts together, by subjecting them equally to their merry joking.

Summing up all these properties of the romantic play: the predominance of chance over will, the introduction of cultivated characters and refined feelings, relieved by their opposite extremes, we shall find them all leading to a poetic, fantastic mood, while the contrary qualities of the comedy of manners: commonplace events, middle-class characters and

everyday feelings, all imply the temper of prose. It is thus quite natural that wonderful occurrences, supernatural spells and magic should find a place in romantic comedy, while the care for money and housekeeping and the gross pleasures of sense are the chief business of classical comedy.

In the latter the shape and order of society are accepted as a frame and setting for the individual idiosyncrasies of the heroes, while in the former the whole world, including social, political and religious institutions, is derided, inasmuch as it is ruled by nonsense. So it was in the plays of Aristophanes and in the French *sotties* of the Middle-Ages, where all the *dramatis personae* were called *sots*. A wild imaginary world is conjured up, where neither the course of events nor the wills of men are in accordance with our everyday expectations and experiences. This upsetting of all usual standards is what the Germans call "*Weltverlachung*" or "*Weltvernichtungsidee*" which Dowden has quoted and translated as 'idea of world-destruction', but without making the exact meaning of it clear to his readers. Now this destruction of the world is the exact opposite of the moral culture and study of facts which Dowden praises as the underlying idea of Shakespeare's work. It is rather akin to Hebler's conception of life as a dream, and of poetry as an embodiment of this dream in a harmonious shape (1). W. Schlegel chooses it as his text for an utter condemnation of the prose of life and of the comedy of manners, which in his eyes is nothing but the undue intrusion of prose into creative literature.

The logical outcome of those views on *world-destruction*

(1) See pp. 9-10.

is a poetry of topsy-turvydom, such as was created only by the boldest humorous poets, e. g. Schlegel's favourite Aristophanes and Rabelais. The romantic drama of modern times has hardly ever ventured to roam so far into the regions of nonsense, if we except Gilbert's Savoy operas, which can hardly claim a place in the higher literature, and the wild comedies of the German romantic Tieck, which are neither fit for the stage nor indeed tolerable when read.

IX

Many comedies of modern writers remain, which, without belonging altogether to the realms of fancy and whimsical satire, transcend the limits of everyday life, reject all the accepted rules of causality and experience, and breathe the spirit of adventure and unfettered passion.

Some of these creations of a wilful and poetic individualism appear in the plain dress and use the pedestrian language of common life : they might at first blush be mistaken for ordinary studies of contemporary manners, if a spiritual meaning did not make itself felt behind the seemingly trivial characters and incidents. Such are many of Ibsen's social plays, especially " The Wild Duck " which is brimful of a bitter, sarcastic laughter, such George Moore's allegoric plays on the conflicts between spiritual aspirations and the temptations of society. All those works may be styled compromises between the modern call for outward realism and truthfulness and the inward want for a higher, abstract idea or teaching : the thought and inspiration are foreign, or even averse to the worldly interests of our material life, but this very transcen-

dental thought is imaged and brought home to us through the medium of commonplace figures and prosaic dialogue.

It has been noticed that comedy is much better suited than tragedy for the interpretation of general ideas. The weakness of the emotions in it leaves the intellect free for observation and reflection, and the greater scope left to the poet in the selection or invention of the plot allows him to adapt it to his pre-conceived ideas. This generalising power consists not in beautifying and raising an object above the common level, but in laying peculiar stress on some of its features, which are thus brought into prominence. An individual may appear overmastered by a single passion, or even be lowered till he becomes a mere instrument or puppet, impersonating an abstract principle. In the latter case, he will sometimes sink into a symbol, a 'materialised or incarnate idea (1)'. The comedy of Aristophanes has been described as an abstraction embodied in a fantastic and burlesque play (2), and the later comedy has always been closely connected with didactic and satirical literature. This proximity to the province of morals and experience is illustrated by the title of two of Shakespeare's works, which are named from proverbs (3) like the *proverbes* of that other writer of romantic comedies, Alfred de Musset.

Of course the allegory is not always veiled by such a faithful imitation of modern manners as it is in Ibsen and George Moore. In times of bolder poetic imagination, the playwright will not suffer the little world he moves across the

(1) Butcher, 371-372.

(2) Denis, I, 266.

(3) *Measure for Measure* and *All's well that ends well*.

stage to be less fanciful and ingenious than the mind that gave it birth, and will ransack the whole wonderland for adequate expounders of his thought. The great comic poet of Greece was not content with the huge store of supernatural legends which he found ready to his hands in the mythology of his people : beside the gods of Olympus he raised a whole host of imaginary creatures born of his fertile brains. Even so did Shakespeare draw from the tales and beliefs of the common folk of England, while retaining a Maker's privilege for re-shaping and combining anew whatever he borrowed from oral tradition, songs or books.

The spell of Shakespeare's plays of fairyland awakened the dormant powers of German poetry, and ever since Goethe's vivid pictures of witchcraft and daemonology, the German drama has been bold in fashioning superhuman characters drawn from the old Teutonic god-lore, or the more modern superstitions of the people. A rich vein of humour pervades the whole of *Faust*, but Tieck's *Puss in Boots* is the most prominent offshoot of this tendency in the merely comic line, while Gerhart Hauptmann's more recent *The Sunken Bell* adds the poignancy of tragical depth to the motley colour and quaint speech of a Silesian satyr-play. From Germany, the fairy-play extended to Norway, where Ibsen wrote *Peer Gynt* before turning to the production of his social plays, and an attempt to revive it in the United Kingdom itself was made by a student of Celtic folklore, W. B. Yeats. But in neither of these writers is the comic spirit paramount. The Irishman indeed is grave and even sad ; the Norwegian, though brighter, is earnest and thoughtful.

A latent spark of " world-derision " is still unceasingly smouldering in the lower regions of stage life, where the drama has ceased to be literary, while remaining lively and

attractive to half-educated audiences. Its light may now and then be seen glimmering under the embers of coarseness and stupidity by the spectators of a *revue* performed near the Paris Boulevards, or of the ruder imitations in which the good people of Brussels take delight. The spirit of Aristophanes sleeps and even snores underneath the heavy weight of our theatrical feebleness, but we must not despair of its awakening, and the little gods of modern Parliaments may, as Longfellow says of greater deities,

“ stand white and aghast with fear ”

and remember the immortality of Cleon, unless indeed they are wise enough to discern the great distance that divides the spirited, good-natured fun of broad caricature from the sour and self-collected attitude of the satirical portrait-drawer.

The latter aims at producing a faithful, unflattering likeness, and at calling forth contempt or moral censure in the spectator; the chief object of the former is merriment, as open and unanimous as can be: it enjoys exaggeration more than close similitude to a model, and would drown all serious concerns in an overwhelming flood of joy.

X

This conception of the function of laughter is not only more humane, but also more philosophical than that prevailing in the comedy of manners and defended by the classical school of criticism: for as no sublunary thing is quite free from frailty, no one can claim to be exempt from ridicule. Being the common lot of mankind, the latter ceases to be

a badge of contempt or reprobation, and can be openly enjoyed by all without humiliation or sorrow to any. While freely confessing that romantic comedy is more tolerant of folly than the comedy of manners, the advocates of satirical laughter intimate that the latter is more valuable because its import is more serious, because it appeals to firm principles and leads to practical conclusions, which can be useful in the judgment and conduct of our lives. It stocks the mind with knowledge of the world and of itself. It cultivates the capacity for close and subtle observation and for sober self-command. It is a search-light that can be turned on all earthly institutions and persons, to show up their weak sides, and correct their mistakes. Its social function is happily expressed by Michiels, when writing :

“ As the dogs run round the flocks, so the comic spirit keeps men from straying beyond the rules and habits of society. ”

However wise and beneficial this utilitarian conception may be in its proper sphere, it has no reference to fantastic comedy. No regard for morals or expediency, no wish for wider experience or better behaviour is paramount in the mind of the romantic poet. If he cares for reflecting life, it is not by faithfully portraying its features, but by boldly inventing symbolic or typical figures to express true thoughts in an imaginary or fantastic dress. This right of creation, which has ever been allowed to poets, cannot be denied to the followers of Aristophanes and Shakespeare, nor can they be accused of distorting life, if the new characters shaped by them deviate from the commonplace and regular, provided they are self-consistent and effective as works of art. If artists in colour and form are allowed to carve and paint the human body combined with animal forms in mermaids, sphinxes, centaurs.

and fauns, who shall forbid the artist in words to represent the brutish instincts and beastly dulness of man's soul by means of similar fancied combinations of ideas and feelings? How far the caricaturist may venture in this direction is not for pedants to decide from *a-priori* rules, but for sympathetic taste to discern after the artist's task is accomplished.

Meredith himself is far too wise and broad-minded a critic to have hinted any disapproval of romantic comedy in his admirable plea for the comedy of manners. But the same discretion is not met with among earlier critics on the same side. The French especially have been clamorous in their dislike of all comedy that has not a moral purpose in view. Without venturing to disparage their idol as much as Schlegel did, we may repeat that fantastic comedy is more tolerant of human weaknesses and less confined to any single age, class, or form of society, that it embraces all kinds of folly in benevolent mirth, that in its bold imagery and free invention it is closely akin to the loftiest poetical spirit, with which it is often met in unison.

All these qualities have been pointed out and praised abundantly by the Germans; and it is hardly to be understood that their teaching should have found so little response in the country of Shakespeare and Beaumont (1). That it has been known and appreciated is witnessed by the following words of Butcher, with which we shall conclude our essay :

“ It is chiefly through humour of the deeper sort that

(1) Of course there are many divergent views among the Germans themselves. We shall only quote the following from Haym : “ It was a necessity for Shakespeare to press poetry into accomplishing tasks that are now much better performed by music, owing to the rich development it has since enjoyed. (p. 91). ”

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modern comedy has acquired its generalising power. To the humorist there is no such thing as individual folly, but only folly universal in a world of fools. Humour annihilates the finite. As Coleridge says, the little is made great and the great little, in order to destroy both, because all is equal in contrast with the infinite.”



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- II. I
- III. S
- IV. F
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