



## WORDS OF HUMOR

by Jerome Klinkowitz

A few years before he won the 1976 Nobel Prize for Literature, Saul Bellow was having a hard time of it as a guest at Northern Illinois University in De Kalb. The two English Department professors who were supposed to meet him for dinner hadn't shown up, so he stood by himself in the student union, watching a rerun of "Lost in Space" on the lounge TV while several hundred students milled around, wondering who he was. Two hours later, across town, a couple of graduate students thought they saw him at the Shamrock, finishing a beer and a radar-range sandwich and asking the bartender where University Hall might be.

We knew it was Bellow for sure when he stormed past the flustered professors, marched out on stage, and without a word of introduction opened a paperback of *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) and started reading.

"What made me take this trip to Africa?" he began, beet-red with anger but also weary with resignation. The combination made for a perfect voice. ". . . There is no quick explanation. Things got worse and worse and worse and pretty soon they were too complicated."

Within a few pages, Bellow had the audience in stitches and had begun laughing himself, although the story wasn't what you'd call *funny*. "When I came back from the war," he read to us, "it was with the thought of becoming a pig farmer, which maybe illustrates what I thought of life in general." Henderson, the character who fears that death will "annihilate" him, that "nothing will remain, and there will be nothing left but junk," plots a comic revenge on his family, on his Hudson River Valley estate, and on the world:

I took all the handsome old farm buildings, the carriage house with paneled stalls—in the old days a rich man's horses were handled like opera singers—and the fine old barn with the belvedere above the hayloft, a beautiful piece of architecture, and I filled them up with pigs, a pig kingdom, with pig houses on the lawn and in the

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flower garden. The greenhouse, too—I let them root out the old bulbs. Statues from Florence and Salzburg were turned over. The place stank of swill and pigs and the mashes cooking, and dung. Furious, my neighbors got the health officer after me. I dared him to take me to law. "Hendersons have been on this property over two hundred years," I said to this man, a certain Dr. Bullock.

By my then wife, Frances, no word was said except, "Please keep them off the driveway."

"You'd better not hurt any of them," I said to her. "Those animals have become a part of me."

The comedy was in his voice—in Henderson's, and in Bellow's. "This is my most vocal novel," Bellow admitted during a break, after he'd cooled down and the audience had warmed up. "Because of distractions and disruptions I'd missed several deadlines in finishing the manuscript, and so my publisher sent out a stenographer to take down my dictation until the thing was done." From the clutter of drafts, notes, and fragments, Bellow had assembled this marvelous portrait of a man on the brink of despair fighting his way back to mental and moral stability by seeing how threats to them can be comically silly. As the hero of *Herzog* (1964) later tells himself, "For Christ's sake, don't cry, you idiot! Live or die, but don't poison everything!"

And so Bellow gives us the comedy of survival. Among his contemporaries, Philip Roth expresses it in a less overtly moral fashion, Bernard Malamud in more.

Roth shows us Neil Klugman fretting over life among the relatives. "Life was a throwing off for poor Aunt Gladys, her greatest joys were taking out the garbage, emptying her pantry, and making threadbare bundles for what she still referred to as the Poor Jews in Palestine," Neil admits early in *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959). "I only hope she dies with an empty refrigerator, otherwise she'll ruin eternity for everyone else, what with her Velveeta turning green, and her navel oranges growing fuzzy jackets down below."

Malamud sounds a deeper note of resignation as his grocer Morris Bober is felled by a robber's blow in *The Assistant* (1957). Running through his life of sadness as he hits the deck, Malamud concludes: "He fell without a cry. The end fitted the day. It was his luck, others had better." The music is either hilariously funny or comically bitter, but the instrument in each is the human voice, moving fiction closer toward its basic component, words.

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The technique is not uniquely Jewish-American. In his own manner, John Updike presents characters just as sickened by the junk of life, yet able to find humor, style, and eventually meaning within it. In *Rabbit, Run* (1960) Updike's protagonist is sickened by his degrading job, drab apartment, and frumpy wife (who spends her afternoons with a bottle of bourbon and soap operas followed by "The Mickey Mouse Club") but responds comically to the same materials when he runs off with a girl friend. "They have gone bowling once and have seen four movies—*Gigi*; *Bell, Book and Candle*; *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*; and *The Shaggy Dog*," Updike recounts. "He saw so many snippets from *The Shaggy Dog* on the Mickey Mouse Club that he was curious to see the whole thing. It was like looking through a photograph album with about half familiar faces. The scene where the rocket goes through the roof and Fred MacMurray runs out with the coffee pot he knew as well as his own face."

#### The Materials at Hand

Updike loves trivia, as do most readers, and starting with his earliest *New Yorker* poems he has been able to take small instances of contemporary silliness and elevate them, by his lyric style, into funny, telling truths about our lives. Even Bellow likes to prompt his readers into chuckles of recognition; his novel *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) is a perfect mix of popular and intellectual mores of the past three decades.

Bellow, Malamud, Roth, and Updike use orderly plots, recognizable situations, and carefully drawn characters. Their humor—and their hopes—come from their characters who, in the manner of fictive artists, create a more acceptable world from the materials at hand.

Writing about these materials in 1960, Philip Roth complained "that the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality." The publicized atrocities of World War II, the frantic pace of life after the war,

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and the commercialization of culture and politics in the '50s, Roth despaired, were "a kind of embarrassment" to an author's "meager imagination." A long line of American writers—Ben Franklin, Washington Irving, A. B. Longstreet, George Washington Harris, Mark Twain, William Faulkner—could draw their humor from situations easily contained by the human imagination. Life could still follow art, and the most improbable tall tale or cock-and-bull story had a way of coming true, or at least of catching the spirit of what everyone sensed was true. But how does one exaggerate the fact of 6 million killed in death camps? Or tell a tale any taller than that of one man free to push a single button and destroy the Earth? With such things on one's mind, the world looks different, and contemporary writers can only chuckle about the pettiness of it all and find refuge elsewhere.

The social disorientation that climaxed later in the 1960s found two novels adequate to it at the very start of the decade: Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) and Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962). Both culled their subject matter from previous decades—bomber raids over Italy during World War II and repression in mental hospitals—yet both moved beyond "the same old stories" toward new stylistic expressions.

"The Texan turned out to be good-natured, generous and likable," Yossarian says in the first chapter of *Catch-22*. "In three days no one could stand him." Heller tells of a colonel in the sick ward who "dwelt in a vortex of specialists" unable to diagnose his illness:

There was a urologist for his urine, a lymphologist for his lymph, an endocrinologist for his endocrines, a psychologist for his psyche, a dermatologist for his derma; there was a pathologist for his pathos, a cystologist for his cysts, and a bald and pedantic cetologist from the zoology department at Harvard who had been shanghaied ruthlessly into the Medical Corps by a faulty anode in an I.B.M. machine and spent his sessions with the dying colonel trying to discuss *Moby Dick* with him.

The fighting itself gets far less attention than the bureaucracy, malingering, and profiteering of the 256th Bomber Squadron; and even those actions are less important, and less comic, than the fractured, disconnected syntax that tries to connect them. The wackiness of this little part of World War II is expressed in the very sentences Heller writes—contradictory statements that march together in a lock-step order of solemn foolery. Toward the end of his career, Mark Twain raged over a God who creates death and destruction; Yossarian, in the face of

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death and destruction far beyond Twain's ken, keeps a sense of perspective and personal meaning only by exclaiming, "Good God, how much reverence can you have for a Supreme Being who finds it necessary to include such phenomena as phlegm and tooth decay in His divine system of creation?"

### Exhaustion?

Kesey's Randall Patrick McMurphy is another stylist of the absurd who walks into the sterile, closely played world of a 1950's mental ward with the challenge, "Who's the bull goose loony here?" His swagger and bravado are revolutionary acts meant to restore the inmates' virile humanity. Looking back over his career, which has taken him from county jails to military stockades and prison workfarms, McMurphy shapes it into an all-American myth, expressed in properly vocal fashion: "I been a bull goose catskinner for every gyppo logging operation in the Northwest and bull goose gambler all the way from Korea, was even bull goose pea weeder on that pea farm at Pendleton—so I figure if I'm bound to be a loony, then I'm bound to be a stompdown dadgum good one."

McMurphy's antics and the larger world around him are described by the book's narrator, Chief "Broom" Bromden. He too has a special perception: of phone wires whistling in the walls, electric current roaring through conduits to the appliances surrounding him, fog machines deliberately obscuring the ward, and nuts-and-bolts technicians pulling spare parts in and out of the patients at will. The voice in which he tells his story is similarly charged. "I been silent so long now it's gonna roar out of me like floodwaters and you think the guy telling this is ranting and raving my *God*; you think this is too horrible to have really happened, this is too awful to be the truth! But, please," he begs, asking that we share his allegiance to imagination, "It's the truth even if it didn't happen."

It is this imaginative truth that has made Heller's and Kesey's novels endure while other books of the Black Humor phase in American fiction have been forgotten. James Purdy, J. P. Donleavy, Terry Southern, and Bruce Jay Friedman, who at the start of the '60s seemed so promising with their irreverent, offbeat humor (Southern once wrote a story about a new toy for little girls, the "Cathy Curse" doll), never found an appropriate style for their silliness. Limited to content alone, their humor dissipated into the sick jokes of social realism.

Three other writers who first earned the Black Humor tag—John Hawkes, Thomas Pynchon, and John Barth—have es-

caped it by going just the opposite route, into almost pure style. Predictably, their best audiences are the college professors and academic critics who relish Hawkes's pastiche of existential poses, Pynchon's farcical, labyrinthine systems of plot and character, and Barth's comedy of self-exhaustion. Barth, in fact, has argued that in terms of creative writing everything has already been done, and that this exhaustion of literary modes by centuries of use leaves his own generation with no possibilities. Today's novelists, he says, can only burlesque and parody the earlier models. Hence, his comedy takes such forms as the epic journey of a sperm cell in search of an ovum, the rewriting of an 18th-century British novel in contemporary America, or the spectacle of Barth himself cavorting with Dunyazade, Scheherazade, and other mythic personages who hold more reality for him than characters he might otherwise create.

"It seems a country-headed thing to say," William H. Gass wrote in *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1970), "that literature is language, that stories and the places and the people in them are merely made of words as chairs are made of smoothed sticks and sometimes of cloth and metal tubes." Gass and writers as various as Donald Barthelme, Richard Brautigan, Robert Coover, and Kurt Vonnegut seem to share a common delight in "the ease with which we . . . pass clamorous pages into soundless dreams. That novels should be made out of words, and merely words, is shocking, really," Gass concludes. "It's as though you had discovered that your wife were made of rubber: the bliss of all those years, the fears . . . from sponge."

### Imagine That

Barthelme & Company, unlike Barth and Pynchon, don't want to misplace this new intelligence, and certainly don't want to spoil the fun. They realize that there is enough magic in words to sustain a story. Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America* (1967) uses simply expressed comparisons to create fiction, as when "the rain, like a mechanic, began in the late autumn" or the trout "wait there like airplane tickets for us to come."

Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967) adapts the fairy tale to LBJ's America. There, a prince wandering in off-cue from the Rapunzel story, fails to respond to "Snow White's hair initiative," and the ruler conducts "the President's war on poetry." Language is action. Language can also be character, to the extent of getting up and walking away. "I wanted to make a far-reaching reevaluation," one of the dwarfs in *Snow White* complains. "I had in mind launching a three-pronged assault, but

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the prongs wandered off seduced by fires and clowns." In Gass's *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (1968), footnotes finally chase the text of his story off the page.

These writers create fiction that believes in its own reality, beyond the parodies of Pynchon and Barth. In *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968), Robert Coover tells the story of a man who passes time by playing a cardtable baseball game of his own invention. Gradually the action in the novel drifts down to the artificial surface, where athletes play out their careers, debate the principles of earthly existence, and like death-of-God theologians ponder how there can be any meaning to life at all, as they gaze blindly into a sun emblazoned with the words "100 Watts."

Words—just words—can create entirely new realities. The funniest writer doing this is Kurt Vonnegut, and he makes fun of himself in the process. It is Vonnegut who, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), gave us the imaginative machinery to end war: Take a war movie and run it backwards. Think of the imaginative possibilities, he says. As with the engineer who first thought up the heat pump, the technological hardware for it will follow.

Though the trauma of his own life dates from the World War II firebombing of Dresden (where he was a prisoner of war), Vonnegut's style finds its roots in what he considers to have been America's time of hardest adversity: the Great Depression of the 1930's, when the brilliant radio and film comedians mended broken spirits with the relief of humor.

Sitting with me in the Mona Lisa restaurant in New York City, sketching out his literary biography, Vonnegut is constitutionally unable to let anything go by without a joke. "The firebombing of Dresden," he ponders—a subject he doesn't like to think about—"one hundred and sixty thousand people killed, most of them civilians. The largest military massacre in European history. Think of that." It didn't end the war one second earlier, didn't save one American (or any other) life. The raid served no purpose whatsoever, and it agonized Vonnegut so to write about it that the only way he can face it now is with a grim joke. "Only one person profited by that raid," he says. "Me. I made three dollars for every man, woman, and child killed. Imagine that."