

itself and the range of available words shrinks, chapter by chapter, initial letter by initial letter, until A is reached again.

These works are probably more fun to read about than to read. Such drastic and all-embracing constraints obviously preclude the composition of a novel according to normal procedures — starting with a thematic and/or narrative kernel, which is expanded by the invention of actions and actants according to some kind of narrative logic. The challenge is to tell any kind of coherent story at all within the self-imposed constraints of the form; and the motive, presumably (apart from the writer's satisfaction in testing his own ingenuity) is the hope that the constraints will yield the kind of pleasure that comes from the achievement of formal symmetry against odds, and also lead to the generation of meanings that would not otherwise have occurred to the author. In this respect such experiments in prose resemble very ordinary features of poetry, such as rhyme and stanzaic form. They seem to constitute a deliberate transgression of the boundary that normally separates these two forms of discourse, and, astonishingly clever as they are, to be "marginal" to the art of fiction.

23 The Comic Novel

"Let's see now; what's the exact title you've given it?" Dixon looked out of the window at the fields wheeling past, bright green after a wet April. It wasn't the double-exposure effect of the last half-minute's talk that had dumbfounded him, for such incidents formed the staple material of Welch colloquies; it was the prospect of reciting the title of the article he'd written. It was a perfect title, in that it crystallized the article's niggling mindlessness, its funereal parade of yawn-enforcing facts, the pseudo-light it threw upon non-problems. Dixon had read, or begun to read, dozens like it, but his own seemed worse than most in its air of being convinced of its own usefulness and significance. "In considering this strangely neglected topic," it began. This what neglected topic? This strangely what topic? This strangely neglected what? His thinking all this without having defiled and set fire to the typescript only made him appear to himself as more of a hypocrite and fool. "Let's see," he echoed Welch in a pretended effort of memory: "oh yes; *The Economic Influence of the Developments in Shipbuilding Techniques, 1450 to 1485*. After all, that's what it's . . ."

Unable to finish his sentence, he looked to his left again to find a man's face staring into his own from about nine inches away. The face, which filled with alarm as he gazed, belonged to the driver of a van which Welch had elected to pass on a sharp bend between two stone walls. A huge bus now swung into view from further round the bend. Welch slowed slightly, thus ensuring that they would still be next to the van when the bus reached them, and said with decision: "Well, that ought to do it nicely, I should say."

KINGSLEY AMIS *Lucky Jim* (1954)

THE COMIC NOVEL is a very English, or at least British and Irish, kind of fiction, that does not always travel well. Reviewing one of Kingsley Amis's later novels, *Jake's Thing*, John Updike said rather condescendingly, "his ambition and reputation alike remain in thrall to the 'comic novel'," adding: "There is no need to write 'funny novels' when life's actual juxtapositions, set down attentively, are comedy enough." Enough for whom, one has to ask. Certainly the English novel tradition is remarkable for the number of comic novels among its classics, from the work of Fielding, and Sterne and Smollett in the eighteenth century, through Jane Austen and Dickens in the nineteenth, to Evelyn Waugh in the twentieth. Even novelists whose primary intention is not to write funny novels, such as George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and E. M. Forster, have scenes in their fiction which make us laugh aloud, even on repeated acquaintance.

Comedy in fiction would appear to have two primary sources, though they are intimately connected: situation (which entails character — a situation that is comic for one character wouldn't necessarily be so for another) and style. Both depend crucially upon timing, that is to say, the order in which the words, and the information they carry, are arranged. The principle can be illustrated by a single sentence from Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall*. At the beginning of the novel, the shy, unassuming hero, Paul Pennyfeather, an Oxford undergraduate, is divested of his trousers by a party of drunken aristocratic hearties, and with monstrous injustice is sent down from the University for indecent behaviour. The first chapter concludes:

"God damn and blast them all to hell," said Paul Pennyfeather meekly to himself as he drove to the station, and then he felt rather ashamed, because he rarely swore.

If we laugh at this, and I think most readers do, it is because of the delayed appearance of the word "meekly": what appears, as the sentence begins, to be a long-overdue explosion of righteous anger by the victimized hero turns out to be no such thing, but a further exemplification of his timidity and passiveness. The effect would be destroyed if the sentence ran: "Paul Pennyfeather said meekly

to himself, as he drove to the station, 'God damn and blast them all to hell . . .'" This suggests another characteristic of comedy in fiction: a combination of surprise (Paul is at last expressing his feelings) and conformity to pattern (no he isn't after all).

Humour is a notoriously subjective matter, but it would be a very stony-hearted reader who did not crack a smile at the passage from *Lucky Jim*, which exhibits all these properties of comic fiction in a highly polished form. As a temporary assistant lecturer at a provincial university, Jim Dixon is totally dependent for the continuance of his employment on his absent-minded professor's patronage, which itself requires that Jim should demonstrate his professional competence by publishing a scholarly article. Jim despises both his professor and the rituals of academic scholarship, but cannot afford to say so. His resentment is therefore interiorized, sometimes in fantasies of violence (e.g. "to tie Welch up in his chair and beat him about the head and shoulders with a bottle until he disclosed why, without being French himself, he'd given his sons French names") and at other times, as here, in satirical mental commentary upon the behaviour, discourses and institutional codes which oppress him.

The style of *Lucky Jim* introduced a new tone of voice into English fiction. It was educated but classless, eloquent but not conventionally elegant. In its scrupulous, sceptical precision it owed something to the "ordinary language" philosophy that dominated Oxford when Amis was a student (an influence particularly evident in "the pseudo-light it threw upon non-problems"). It is full of little surprises, qualifications and reversals, which satirically deconstruct clichés and stock responses.

Dixon doesn't immediately answer Welch's question about the title of his article, though "it wasn't the double-exposure effect of the last half-minute's talk that had dumbfounded him." If it wasn't, why tell us? There are two reasons: (1) it makes an amusing metaphorical comment on Welch's irritating habit of saying, as if he had just thought of it, something Jim has just said himself, and (2) it creates a delay, a tiny moment of comic suspense, that enhances the revelation of the real reason for Jim's silence: his embarrassment at having to recite the title of his article. It is a

"perfect" title only in the ironical sense that it distils every feature of academic discourse that Jim despises. "Dixon had read, *or begun to read*, dozens like it . . ." The phrase I have italicized tells us much about Jim's bored and impatient perusal of academic journals. His superbly destructive analysis of the article's opening sentence, in which each word of a conventional scholarly formula is subjected in turn to derisive interrogation, needs no further comment. There follows a characteristic condemnation by Jim of his own intellectual bad faith, a condition from which he will eventually release himself involuntarily by his drunken lecture on Merrie England. Then, at long last, we get the title of the article, an epitome of dryasdust scholarship that many academic readers of my acquaintance have committed to memory. This utterance could have followed immediately upon Welch's question without detriment to narrative cohesion, but with a huge loss of comic effect.

Jim's powerlessness is physically epitomized by his being a passenger in Welch's car, and a helpless victim of his appalling driving. The banal and apparently superfluous earlier sentence about Dixon looking out of the car at the green fields now proves to have a function. Looking through the same window moments later, Jim is startled to find "a man's face staring into his from about nine inches away." Surprise is combined with conformity to pattern (Welch's incompetence). A slow-motion effect is created by the leisurely precision of the language ("about nine inches away", "filled with alarm", "had elected to pass") contrasting comically with the speed with which the imminent collision approaches. The reader is not told immediately what is happening, but made to infer it, re-enacting the character's surprise and alarm. It's all in the timing.

24 Magic Realism

And then suddenly they were all singing the three or four simple notes again, speeding up the steps of their dance, fleeing rest and sleep, outstripping time, and filling their innocence with strength. Everyone was smiling, and Eluard leaned down to a girl he had his arm around and said,

A man possessed by peace never stops smiling.

And she laughed and stamped the ground a little harder and rose a few inches above the pavement, pulling the others along with her, and before long not one of them was touching the ground, they were taking two steps in place and one step forward without touching the ground, yes, they were rising up over Wenceslaus Square, their ring the very image of a giant wreath taking flight, and I ran off after them down on the ground, I kept looking up at them, and they floated on, lifting first one leg, then the other, and down below - Prague with its cafés full of poets and its jails full of traitors, and in the crematorium they were just finishing off one Socialist representative and one surrealist, and the smoke climbed to the heavens like a good omen, and I heard Eluard's metallic voice intoning,

Love is at work it is tireless,

and I ran after that voice through the streets in the hope of keeping up with that wonderful wreath of bodies rising above the city, and I realized with anguish in my heart that they were flying like birds and I was falling like a stone, that they had wings and I would never have any.

MILAN KUNDERA *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1978)