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# Belly Laughs: Body Humor in Contemporary American Literature and Film

David Gillota

*University of Miami*, davidgillota@hotmail.com

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

BELLY LAUGHS: BODY HUMOR IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN  
LITERATURE AND FILM

By

David Gillota

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty  
of the University of Miami  
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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
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BELLY LAUGHS: BODY HUMOR IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN  
LITERATURE AND FILM

David Gillota

Approved:

---

Dr. Lindsey Tucker  
Professor of English

---

Dr. Terri A. Scandura  
Dean of the Graduate School

---

Dr. Joseph Alkana  
Associate Professor of English

---

Dr. Zack Bowen  
Professor of English

---

Dr. Elaine B. Safer  
Professor of English  
University of Delaware

GILLOTA, DAVID

(Ph.D., English)

Belly Laughs: Body Humor in  
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Scholars are more than happy to laugh at but seem somewhat reluctant to discuss body humor, which is perhaps the most neglected form of comedy in recent criticism. In this dissertation, I examine the ways in which contemporary American writers and filmmakers use body humor in their works, not only in moments of so-called “comic relief” but also as a valid way of exploring many of the same issues that postmodern artists typically interrogate in their more somber moments. The writers discussed in this project—Philip Roth, Thomas Pynchon, Charles Johnson, and Woody Allen—were chosen for the divergent ways in which they present the body’s comic predicament in psychological, metaphysical, and historical situations.

The introduction explains the diverse traditions that these artists draw upon and considers how various theoretical approaches can affect our understanding of body humor. The first chapter examines Jewish-American novelist Philip Roth’s use of absurd and grotesque body imagery as manifestations of his characters’ moral dilemmas. The second chapter looks at how slapstick comedy informs a worldview dominated by paranoia and chaos in Thomas Pynchon’s novels. Chapter Three looks at Woody Allen’s early films, in which he parodies and revises the slapstick cinematic tradition of artists like Charlie Chaplin and The Marx Brothers. Chapter Four considers African-American writer and cartoonist Charles Johnson’s depiction of the ways in which the body’s desires and pitfalls complicate the quest for spiritual enlightenment.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Conceptualizing Body Humor

In 1949 writer and film critic James Agee published the essay “Comedy’s Greatest Era” in *Life* magazine. Agee celebrates the bygone years of silent cinema and laments what he sees as the then current state of cinematic comedy, which he declares is decidedly unfunny. For Agee, the decline of American movies began with the introduction of sound; the “talkies” pushed out of the forefront some of film’s greatest comic geniuses, most notably Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd. Agee’s blatant nostalgia for silent comedies is not particularly surprising. Many film critics today would similarly bewail the state of contemporary cinema and view the late forties as a golden age in its own right. What is notable about Agee’s essay is his willingness as a critic to discuss physical comedy with the same sort of seriousness that is usually reserved for the likes of Orson Welles or Alfred Hitchcock. Agee’s attention to the physical is rare, even for critics that discuss artists whose names are nearly synonymous with slapstick. As William Paul remarks, critics usually recognize “the vulgar sources of [Charlie Chaplin’s] material, although usually to point out how much he transcends them ... the vulgarity is often acknowledged in order to be dismissed” (79). Agee, on the other hand, revels in the vulgar aspects of comedy, asserting that it was the job of the silent comedian “to be as funny as possible physically, without the help or hindrance of words” (394). He then goes on to describe with gusto how the silent comedians

zipped and caromed about the pristine world of the screen as jazzily as a convention of water bugs. Words can hardly suggest how energetically they collided and bounced apart, meeting in full gallop around the corner of a house; how hard and how often they fell on their backsides; or with what fantastically adroit clumsiness they got themselves fouled up in folding ladders, garden hoses,

tethered animals and each other's headlong cross purposes. The gestures were ferociously emphatic; not a line or motion of the body was wasted or inarticulate. (396)

Agee's enthusiasm for physical comedy was rare enough in 1949; today such admiration for slapstick from an important critic, in either the academic or the pop-cultural arena, is nearly unthinkable. As Alan Dale points out, "the term [slapstick] is now often used by itself as a pejorative, meaning 'merely' low physical comedy" (1). Vulgar comedy and slapstick are rarely considered appropriate mediums for serious art, and humor involving the body, even in serious works, is usually passed over as simple comic relief.

Despite the general neglect of physical comedy, the body is integral to humor on the most basic level. Henri Bergson, perhaps the most influential humor theorist in the modern era, argues that all comedy derives from a "mechanical inelasticity" in human behavior, and he illustrates this concept with the example of a man who, due to his mechanical manner of walking, falls in the street (66-67). Writing even before the use of the term *slapstick*, Bergson posits the unstable human body as the dominant image in his definition of the comic. Freud, another important influence on our understanding of humor, also recognizes the body's comedic capabilities. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud describes comic "unmasking" as "degrading the dignity of individuals by directing attention to the frailties which they share with all humanity, but in particular the dependence of their mental functions on bodily needs" (202). These insights are useful, but we really do not need Bergson and Freud to tell us that bodies incite laughter. Anybody who has ever giggled at unexpected flatulence or watched one of Agee's beloved silent films (or even a Roadrunner cartoon) can attest to this fact. The

human body, in all of its weakness and instability, has the undeniable power to make us laugh.

In this dissertation, I explore representations of the body's comic potential and assert the larger implications of this comedy in contemporary work. In doing so, I challenge Agee's claim that good physical comedy died with the silent era and argue that slapstick comedians left an indelible mark on contemporary culture in literature as well as film. The influences of silent cinema, vaudeville, and other mediums of vulgar comedy have shaped the way that many contemporary artists represent the body in their works. This project also addresses arguments that view body humor in its myriad manifestations as unworthy of critical investigation. Numerous artists who are otherwise taken seriously by film and literature scholars tend to have the comic aspects of their works passed over, especially those comic aspects that deal explicitly with the body. Since the 1960s, however, American artists have infused body humor with new significance and developed it in ways that not only provide comic relief but that also actively contribute to their works' larger thematic issues. This dissertation looks closely at four such contemporary artists in the United States—Philip Roth, Thomas Pynchon, Woody Allen, and Charles Johnson—and illuminates the ways in which they use humor to complicate their depictions of human bodies.

There are conceivably many other contemporary figures who could be considered in this project. Kurt Vonnegut (who even has a minor novel titled *Slapstick*), John Barth, Joseph Heller, John Kennedy Toole, Ishmael Reed, Tom Robbins, Terry Southern, Mel Brooks, and Stanley Kubrick (in *Dr. Strangelove*) are only a few of the artists who also use physical comedy. But I have chosen the figures in this project, aside from my



personal interest in them, because each one uses body humor in a distinct manner, both thematically and in terms of aesthetic construction. I have avoided choosing artists who would allow me to approach each other with an identical set of critical tools. Rather, I hope that in demonstrating the vastly different ways that, for instance, Charles Johnson and Woody Allen use body humor, I can indicate the rich possibilities inherent in physical comedy. While this dissertation only considers a small sampling of artists, I wish to reveal a broad spectrum of issues, ranging from race and gender to spirituality and chaos theory, with which body humor intersects.

### **Bodies and Humor in Contemporary America**

All of the artists under discussion are related, in varying degrees, to the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s. Thomas Pynchon has perhaps the most intimate relationship with the 1960s political movements. Critics often see his work as growing directly out of a 1960s ideology, and in his fourth novel *Vineland* (1990), he treats the rise and fall of sixties idealism in detail. Charles Johnson, at the beginning of his career, identified with the Black Nationalist movement of the late sixties and early seventies, and his two books of cartoons, *Black Humor* (1970) and *Half-Past Nation Time* (1972), are entrenched in contemporary politics. Johnson has since distanced himself from Black Nationalism, taking a more philosophical approach towards African-American issues. Philip Roth generally avoids political polemics, but the unrest of the 1960s provided a welcome environment for the explicit sexual discussions of Roth's wildly successful fourth book *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). And Roth's next work, *Our Gang* (1971), blatantly attacks the Nixon administration and the Vietnam War. More recently, *American Pastoral* (1997) tells a Vietnam-era story of a suburban-girl turned political

terrorist. Like Roth, Woody Allen rarely engages in political issues; although some of his early films, particularly *Bananas* (1971), are obviously informed by 1960s sentiments. In a broader sense, Allen is generally considered to be part of a group of experimental “auteur” filmmakers in the 1970s (along with Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, John Cassavetes, and many others) whose success is often attributed to changing audience and studio expectations brought about by the various political and social struggles of the era.

Reacting to a perceived Puritanism in 1950s culture, the Kennedy assassinations, the Korean and Vietnam wars, the civil rights movement, the rise of feminism, and a score of other events and attitudes, these artists have found humor to be one of the most readily available tools of questioning the aesthetic or political status quo. Discourses about how the body is treated, represented, and understood also figure prominently in the cultural upheaval of the period. Bodily differences are at the root of debates concerning race and gender, and it is bodily violence that fuels criticisms of American Imperialism during the Cold War and civil rights movements. Even conversations concerning “family values” have at their core issues about how individual bodies should behave, be dressed, and interact with each other in the public and private spheres. The artists studied in this dissertation use humor to engage with and critique these bodily discourses. By writing the body comically, these artists illuminate the often absurd status of human bodies in the contemporary world, and they subvert the idealized and stereotypical representations of the body that are or have been dominant in the popular consciousness.

As early as the 1960s, critics began noticing that comedy had become a dominant mode for many American postmodernists. In his foreword to *Black Humor* (1965), Bruce

Jay Friedman notes that “the satirist has had his ground usurped by the newspaper reporter” causing contemporary fiction writers “to sail into darker waters somewhere out beyond satire” (x). Contemporary American reality, Friedman suggests, is more absurd than traditional fiction writers could imagine. Contemporary writers therefore must find new “darker” ways to aesthetically grasp the complexities of the contemporary era, which are themselves absurdly comic. Friedman labels the result Black Humor.

Since Friedman’s anthology, many other scholars have contributed to our understanding of this comic movement. In *The Contemporary American Comic Epic* (1988), Elaine B. Safer posits a trend in American letters in which writers comically subvert the traditional epic form in order to “satirize all institutions and systems of knowledge—instead of celebrating a nationalistic or religious vision” (14). Linda Hutcheon also contributes significantly to our understanding of comic modes in the contemporary era. In *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), Hutcheon investigates contemporary uses of parody in order to argue that postmodernists draw from established aesthetic forms in order to comically deflate their cultural power.<sup>1</sup> These critical works remain useful, but in the past decade (at least) there has been a significant decrease in the attention paid to comic forms. The turn away from comedy in contemporary criticism does not mirror a similar decline in the output of comic artists. All four of the figures in this study are alive and actively producing new material, and there are many younger writers and filmmakers adding to

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<sup>1</sup> Other important critical works in this period that consider the role of American postmodernist humor include Max Shulz’s *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* (1973) and Richard Hawk’s *A Cheerful Nihilism* (1971). The latter considers dark humor in the entire history of American literature but pays close attention to contemporary developments.

American comic literature as well.<sup>2</sup> This project therefore does not only call attention to one overlooked comic form, body humor; it also seeks to renew interest in comedy in general.

If recent years have seen a wane in the critical interest paid to humor studies, work on the body itself has proliferated to stunning proportions. The human body and its representations has always been central to new historicist and psychoanalytic theories, especially those of Foucault, Freud, and Lacan, but more recently, it has garnered the interest of critics working in the areas of gender studies, queer theory, trauma, the subaltern, and disability studies. While I certainly do not intend to assign all of these approaches to a single category, I wish to point out that they all share an interest in the role that the body plays in power dynamics. As Daniel Punday notes, “the body has emerged as a site where the power and problems of reference play themselves out” (1). Judith Butler may provide the most rigorous exploration of these “problems of reference.” Butler undermines the most seemingly concrete aspects of bodily life, arguing that it is a “cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies” (*Bodies* 3). Contemporary treatments of the body in film and literature often work to deflate these “cultural norms” by exposing the ways that those in positions of power represent the bodies of the powerless and by celebrating the means by which subjected groups may in turn rewrite their own bodies. Critical studies of bodily representations in film and literature not only provide insight into individual artistic works, but they also contribute to political and social discussions about the role of the body in contemporary life. A case in point is Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*, which posits the suffering human body as

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<sup>2</sup> Writers such as David Foster Wallace, Sherman Alexie, Michael Chabon, Gary Shteyngart, and Katherine Dunn all make comic uses of the body; and filmmakers Judd Apatow, Quentin Tarantino, Joel and Ethan Coen, and Wes Anderson also have new and interesting ways of presenting body humor.

the site of political struggle. Writing simultaneously as an activist and a literary critic, Scarry looks closely at both literary works and political documents to reveal the ways in which rhetorical strategies shift attention away from the reality of literal bodies that are tortured, wounded, or killed. Scarry juxtaposes impersonal political language with depictions of actual suffering bodies and highlights the fictions created by the abuses of power.

Given the gravity of such issues, it is not surprising that most critics who study the body do not address it as an object of humor. Those who do acknowledge the body's potential for comedy usually focus on the harmful effects that comic representations of the body have and have had on subjugated groups. The humorous body is very often the body that deviates from the social norm: comic images of the bodies of oppressed individuals are often used by the dominant culture in order to support policies and attitudes of oppression. Mary Russo notes how classical comedy often uses comic female grotesque figures as a foil to accentuate the allure of more "beautiful" normative female bodies: "the whorish matron, the crone, the ugly stepsisters, and the nurse are brought onstage for comparison and then dismissed" (40). Nearly every group that has ever been oppressed, colonized, or objectified has suffered from similarly demeaning bodily representations. The exaggerated Jewish nose, slanted Asian eyes, large African lips: any bodily marking that can be construed as a difference will inevitably be used for comic effects. Perhaps the most powerful example in the United States is the image of the minstrel-show "darker" in which stereotypical traits of drunkenness, stupidity, and laziness are automatically associated with tar-black skin, bright red lips, and an ability to

dance and sing. The “humor” in such depictions occurs only for those in power and is created at the expense of the powerless.

But body humor also has the potential to deflate power structures. Thomas Pynchon, discussed in Chapter Two of this dissertation, realizes this potential perhaps more than any other contemporary artist. In a seemingly throwaway line of Pynchon’s 1973 novel *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the narrator mentions the Soviet Radnichny’s “brilliant but doomed conspiracy to hit Stalin in the face with a grape chiffon pie” (353). The political implications behind Radnichny’s conspiracy are suggestive of the ways that the body can work to diffuse and destabilize power. Throwing a pie in Stalin’s face would accomplish more than assassinating him ever could. Making Stalin the victim of slapstick violence would transform his image from an invincible leader to a human being. Shifting the emphasis from Stalin’s fictional projection of power to his literal body degrades the ideology behind his power. Charlie Chaplin understood this fact when he turned Hitler and Mussolini into comic buffoons in *The Great Dictator* (1940), and in recent U.S. history, Bill Clinton’s sexual escapades served as fodder for a seemingly endless stream of jokes and did much to erode the image of presidential power.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary artists also deflate power structures by rewriting and reclaiming previously offensive bodily stereotypes. Charles Johnson, discussed in Chapter Four, revises minstrelsy and uses a sophisticated, philosophical form of physical comedy to restore the mind and spirit to the African-American body, which is so often imagined as soulless and brainless.<sup>4</sup> Philip Roth and Woody Allen, discussed in Chapters One and

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<sup>3</sup> A similar example in recent American history is President Gerald Ford’s infamous stumbling, made famous by the outrageous slapstick gags performed by Chevy Chase on *Saturday Night Live*.

Three, similarly use stereotypical images of the Jewish body and Jewish sexuality, but they do so in ways that complicate or invert accepted notions of such bodies. Body humor, then, is highly ambivalent. Depending upon its context, a slapstick joke can be offensive or subversive, juvenile or sophisticated. In this dissertation, I investigate these ambiguities in order to reveal the aesthetic strategies through which artists can turn a simple stumble or fall into a cultural critique.

### **The Comedy of Male Bodies**

The subject of masculinity is an underlying theme of this project. All of the writers I discuss are male; most of their main characters are male as well; so a discussion of body humor in these works therefore becomes a study of the comedy of specifically *male* bodies. The works studied in this dissertation suggest a trend in contemporary American literature and film in which male artists (perhaps influenced by the numerous feminist critiques of traditional masculinity) present the masculine subject in an increasingly comic manner. I connect this tendency of contemporary male artists to write comic male bodies to recent postmodern projects that deflate power structures, collapse grand narratives, and give voice to subjected groups. Judith Butler, describing traditional representations of gender, asserts that males are typically depicted “as a disembodied universality and the feminine get[s] constructed as a disavowed corporeality” (*Gender* 16). By focusing on male bodies *as bodies*, the contemporary artists discussed here undermine traditional representations of masculinity as a universal disembodiment. And in presenting the male body as primarily comic, clumsy, weak, or insecure, these artists

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<sup>4</sup> Also see Spike Lee’s film *Bamboozled* (2000) for an excellent comic repudiation of minstrel shows. Lee imagines the effects of a twenty-first century televised minstrel show marketed as satire.

subvert the mythic American image of the strong, powerful male who conquers or tames his environment.

This comic depiction of male bodies can be appreciated when seen in context with representations of the male body in other periods. Peter Brooks, making a point similar to Butler's, notes that the male body since the nineteenth century rarely receives attention in literary or artistic works: "Precisely because it is the norm, the male body is veiled from inquiry, taken as the agent and not the object of knowing: the gaze is 'phallic,' its object is not... [d]espite—or because of—the attention paid to viewing woman naked, the paternal phallus may be the ultimate taboo object of our culture" (15).<sup>5</sup> Brooks acknowledges that this taboo was not always in place. In the classical Greek world, the male nude is considered an object of beauty, but after the Renaissance, Brooks notes, the male body "is supposed to be heroic rather than erotic. It is regularly presented in postures of action, combat, or struggle" (16-17). The heroic male body is still very much with us today, as demonstrated by actors like Russell Crowe, The Rock, or Vin Diesel, but postmodern literature and film often use humor to create foils for these mainstream action heroes. If we accept Brooks' assertion that the Hellenic male body is erotic and that the modern male body, when represented at all, is heroic, then I suggest that we view the postmodern male body as comic.

Prior to the contemporary era, comic male bodies were often treated similarly to the female grotesques, who "are brought on stage for comparison and then dismissed" (Russo 40). To give one example, Shakespeare's obese epicurean Falstaff is a popular and entertaining figure, but his comic antics are ultimately rejected for the "real" heroism

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<sup>5</sup> Brooks supports this last claim with the fact that it is precisely the unveiled penis that, in contemporary culture, differentiates between "soft core" and "hard core" pornography (15-16).



of Prince Hal. The physical comedians of silent-era Hollywood come closer to the type of comic manhood posited by postmodern revisionists, and their influence is present in the work of the artists discussed here. The stumbling and insecure men played by Chaplin or Keaton are not used as foils to illuminate the more traditional heroism of other men, and the villains in the early silent films are frequently the tough, abusive, burly type of “macho” men associated with classic masculine constructions. On the other hand, these silent-era filmmakers do not completely reject traditional male roles either. Very often the climax of a silent comedy consists of the clumsy slapstick protagonist rising to the occasion and performing some unexpected feat of manly heroism that wins him the girl, defeats the villain, and saves the day. The entire plot of Buster Keaton’s Civil War comedy *The General* (1927) is driven by the main character’s need to prove his bravery in some military endeavor so that he can gain the favor of a girl, a task which he accomplishes in the end by recapturing a stolen train for the South. The bumbling heroes in the postmodern narratives considered here rarely achieve such a victory.

Rather, the writers studied in this dissertation mock traditional notions of heroic masculinity and deflate the cultural constructs that reinforce them. Thomas Pynchon recognizes the mythic phallus as a grand narrative and uses slapstick comedy to undermine the power of colonialism and imperialism that it often represents. Woody Allen places his weak, anti-masculine persona at the center of various historical moments and uses it as a foil to comically destabilize more romantic depictions of “manly” heroism. Charles Johnson complicates traditional depictions of masculinity by exploring the fact that stereotypical “disembodied” manliness applies only to white men, while black men, like women, are often seen as purely corporeal. Even Philip Roth, who is

frequently accused of misogyny,<sup>6</sup> comically mocks the power that phallogocentric cultural constructions have on the inner lives of contemporary men.

In their critique of traditional notions of masculinity, many of the works discussed in this project may be seen as contemporaneous with another important offshoot of the 1960s counterculture: the “male liberation” movement in the mid to late 1970s. Sally Robinson notes that in this period

a barrage of books...emerged to detail the predicament of straight white, professional men whose lives were imagined to have been thrown into crisis by the various liberation movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. Popular studies of, and novels about, men trying to come to terms with a masculinity recently attacked as dangerous rely on a set of rhetorical figures to negotiate between the privileges of patriarchal power and the guilt induced by the feminist critique of that power. (206)

Robinson goes on to explain that in the rhetoric of this movement, the traditional conception of masculinity has forced men to “repress, suppress, and even oppress; and, as a result, male bodies and male minds are on the verge of shutting down” (206).<sup>7</sup> While the writers in this project do not support such easy rationalizations for the history of oppression instigated by males, they do suggest through their comedy that the male body may indeed shut down, or at least *fall* down, from its inability to adhere to traditional cultural standards. I by no means wish to suggest that the men depicted in these works serve as any sort of ideal males, in touch with their emotions and ready to undo their

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<sup>6</sup> The most famous misogynist charge against Roth came in Vivian Gornick’s 1976 cover story for the *Village Voice*. The article shows pictures of Roth, Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, and Henry Miller, and the headline reads “Why Do These Men Hate Women?”. More recently, Julia Keller wrote an article in the *Chicago Tribune* titled “Philip Roth Hates Women” (June 1, 2006). Keller’s argument is actually not as hostile as her headline would indicate, but she nonetheless asserts that Roth “edit[s] the souls out of his female characters.”

<sup>7</sup> Among the male liberation books that Robinson cites are Herb Godlberg’s *The Hazards of Being Male: Surviving the Myth of Masculine Privilege*, Warren Farrell’s *The Liberated Man: Beyond Masculinity: Freeing Men and Their Relationship with Women*, and Marc Feigen Fasteau’s *The Male Machine*.

gender. Rather, they are chained to classical definitions of manliness, and the body humor of these narratives occurs not only when they literally trip and fall but also when they stumble over narrow conceptions of their own bodies. Pynchon's Tyrone Slothrop may be the most extreme example of a character tied to his manhood. His penis, as one of *Gravity's Rainbow's* many songs states, is "not his own" (217). It is, on the most literal level, a construction created by his culture, his nation, and even his own father. Philip Roth's heroes do not fair much better. Influenced by modern conceptions of manliness, men like Alex Portnoy and Peter Tarnapol become obsessed with their bodily, and in particular, their sexual lives. They are unable to view their male genitals as simply a fleshly matter of biology; instead, they expect their penises to live up to the impossible standards of the mythic phallus. The bumbling schlemiels in the early Woody Allen films have nearly the opposite problem. They are resigned to accept their status as weak and physically inept (although often sexually adroit) males, but the cultures in which they find themselves expect them to enact impossible feats of masculine bravery, such as lead revolutions, participate in duels, and fight in battles. And Charles Johnson's men, particularly in his neo-slave narratives, must negotiate between the reductive paths of white and black masculinity in order to extricate themselves from narrow conceptions of self and body. All of these authors thus use body humor as a means to revise traditional depictions of masculinity. Rather than simply lamenting modern manhood as a oppressive force in the lives of contemporary men—as is suggested by the men's liberation texts—the writers in this project use comedy to dismantle and critique circumscribed representations of manliness.

## **The Chapters**

This dissertation has four major chapters, moving in roughly chronological order. Chapter One looks closely at the first half of Philip Roth's career and illuminates a trajectory in Roth's early work in which he develops a unique psychological form of body humor that is dependent on the comic disjunction between mental fantasy and physical reality. Roth's treatment of the dichotomy between mind and body ties his work to a tradition of Jewish humor in which high and low areas of culture and life are forced to coexist. Jewish comedy frequently has a bathetic structure, juxtaposing the sacred and the profane or the intellectual and the physical; Roth places this comic formula in the context of Jewish-American manhood, perhaps suggesting that the hyphenated existence of the Jewish-American man is one that must negotiate between the stereotypically "high" Jewish culture of intellectual pursuits and the "low" American culture of baseball, casual sex, and fast food. Roth's body humor also reflects modern conceptions of the body. While the medieval carnivalesque body, as Bakhtin has argued, is inextricably tied to other bodies and to the world itself, the modern body is seen as closed and individual. Roth's men have hyper-modernized bodies that are disconnected from the rest of the world but capable of responding to subtle internal cues. His body humor is therefore not a Rabelaisian celebration of the cycle of life but rather a wry commentary on the isolation of the modern individual.

Roth's treatment of mind/body relations begins with the early short story "Novotny's Pain" (1960), in which a young soldier suffers from apparently psychosomatic lower back pain and becomes the target of ridicule from his comrades in

the Army. In this story, Roth humorously dramatizes the consequences that mental states such as guilt or shame can have on the body, and, in turn, he illuminates the effects that bodily life can have on the mind. By placing this struggle between mind and body in a hypermasculine military setting, Roth intensifies the comic shame of Novotny's bodily failure. Using this story as a model, I show how over the next twenty-plus years, Roth rewrites Novotny's dilemma in multiple texts, each time adding new complications to the basic mind/body dichotomy. In *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), Alex Portnoy's overwhelming sex-drive goes to war with his conscience, and the battleground is Portnoy's body, particularly his genitals, which he imagines as the site of punishment for his sexual transgressions. His fantasies of retribution are finally realized as his guilt causes psychosomatic impotence. In *The Breast* (1972), Roth takes a turn for the grotesque and tells the story of David Kepesh, a Kafka professor who inexplicably transforms into a giant female breast. Despite the obvious hilarity of this situation, Kepesh reacts to his plight with earnest sobriety, once again creating a comic disjunction between mind and body. *My Life as a Man* (1974) explicitly deals with masculinity as author Peter Tarnapol, through a series of writings, attempts to come to terms with narrow conceptions of manhood. Tarnapol struggles to reconcile the material (and uneventful) reality of his male body with the mythic aura of responsibility and heroism that he feels manliness should entail. And in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), Roth rewrites Novotny's dilemma one more time, giving his alter-ego Nathan Zuckerman a mysterious and overwhelming pain in his neck and shoulders. In his quest to understand and overcome his pain, Zuckerman attempts to reintegrate himself into the world of the material bodily principle (to use Bakhtin's term) and entertains the delusion that he will

become a medical doctor. Zuckerman's attempt is a failure, but his struggle illuminates the plight of all of Roth's body-obsessed protagonists. These men are modernized and individualized; their bodies are closed systems, separate from the rest of the world. The cruel, sad joke that Roth's texts demonstrate is that each man is essentially alone, with only his own fragile body for company.

Thomas Pynchon, the subject of Chapter Two, provides a sharp contrast to Roth's psychological body humor. Rather than focusing on the private lives and thoughts of individuals, Pynchon's physical comedy (like many of his fictional techniques) is cinematic and deals with the status of bodies in the material world. In his novels, Pynchon adapts slapstick routines from American movies, particularly from the silent era, and integrates them into his postmodern worlds of global conspiracies, mass death, and paranoia. I argue that in placing irreverent physical comedy in various bleak and somber contexts, Pynchon simultaneously illuminates both the comic and tragic aspects of postmodern bodies. Pynchon's physical comedy emphasizes both death and renewal, entropy and regeneration. I thus use the term *jocoserious* (borrowed from Joyce scholar Robert H. Bell) to describe Pynchon's ambivalent body humor in which any firm vantage point from which readers attempt to view Pynchon's bodies is destabilized by his contradictory treatment of them.

The chapter discusses Pynchon's first two long novels, *V.* (1963) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). While in these works Pynchon's body humor intersects with many of his major themes, I focus a large part of my own argument on the ways that physical comedy informs our understanding of Pynchon's scientific metaphors. Beginning with *V.*, I look at the intersection between body humor and entropy, the second law of

thermodynamics that states that all closed systems tend toward disorder. While many critics have discussed Pynchon's use of entropic decline as a metaphor for the perceived moral and cultural decline in twentieth-century history, I show how Pynchon's slapstick comedy complicates this metaphor. Throughout *V.*, images of comic and unstable bodies contribute explicitly to one of the novel's most dominant thematic preoccupations: the dichotomy between the animate and the inanimate world. This dichotomy suggests an entropic view of the twentieth century in which all that is animate or alive is eventually leading towards inanimate death. By using physical comedy and images of destruction simultaneously, Pynchon creates a jocoserious view of entropy, one that irreverently highlights the comic aspects of decline while also illuminating the terrifying qualities of a seemingly innocuous humor.

In my discussion of *Gravity's Rainbow*, I continue to explore the connection between scientific metaphors and slapstick. In the later novel, Pynchon's physical comedy becomes increasingly cinematic, as the slapstick gags incorporate readily recognizable images from silent film comedy, such as banana peels, seltzer bottles, and pie fights. Entropy still plays a significant role in *Gravity's Rainbow*, but it often takes a back seat to statistical theory, Pavlovian psychology, and even rocket science—all of which are explicitly tied to Pynchon's body humor. *Gravity's Rainbow* also connects the German V-2 rockets to the bodies of several characters, most explicitly Tyrone Slothrop, whose penis is mysteriously tied to the V-2 rocket strikes on London. Through this connection, the novel mocks cultural obsessions with the phallus and undermines violent constructions of masculinity. This element also continues Pynchon's jocoserious vision,

as the novel juxtaposes absurdly comic images of rocket bodies (such as those described in a series of bawdy limericks) with grim and chilling images of rocket death.

Chapter Three continues to explore this cinematic view of the body, considering the early work of writer and filmmaker Woody Allen. Allen's fragile physical appearance is often essential to his comedy, and the cinematic medium makes it possible for Allen to use his own body as a comic prop. While most critics focus on Allen's work since his critically acclaimed film *Annie Hall* (1977), I look instead at the period just before *Annie Hall*, when Allen's work was driven more by physical and visual comedy than by the verbal wit for which he is commonly recognized. I argue that in this early stage of Allen's career, he emerges as the key cinematic descendent of the silent-era slapstick pioneers. But rather than nostalgically repeating familiar material from a bygone era, Allen revises silent slapstick, adapting it to his own time period and integrating it into other cinematic forms. Using Linda Hutcheon's conception of "complicitous critique," I argue that Allen approaches slapstick from a postmodern perspective, parodying classic works even as he celebrates them. Allen's revisionary approach to physical comedy reveals his own unique aesthetic as well as cinematic slapstick's unnoticed potential to contribute to postmodern discourse.

After looking briefly at two of Allen's early one-act plays, "God" and "Death," I move on to discuss five of his major full-length features: *Take the Money and Run* (1969), *Bananas* (1971), *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Sex\* (But Were Afraid to Ask)* (1972), *Sleeper* (1973), and *Love and Death* (1975). In each of these films, Allen inserts his clumsy, neurotic persona into a different political context. In *Take the Money and Run*, Allen plays an inept criminal; in *Bananas*, he plays a New



Yorker who mistakenly gets ensnared in a South American revolution; in *Sleeper*, he plays a twentieth-century man who wakes up one day to find himself in a futuristic Orwellian police state; in *Love and Death*, he is a weak, cowardly Russian who finds himself embroiled in an attempt to assassinate Napoleon. And *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Sex*, which is structured as a series of bawdy sketches, presents Allen as a not-funny medieval court-jester, an oblivious Italian lover, a clumsy sexual scientist, and a cowardly sperm cell. Full of chase scenes, outrageous sight gags, two-dimensional characters, and improbable plots, these films are amongst Allen's most comic. Somewhat paradoxically, these supposedly silly films also consider much larger historical and political issues than the majority of Allen's later comedies, which tend to focus on the private lives of upper-middle class intellectuals. This integration of absurd comedy into diverse historical situations places Allen's work in a similar framework as that of many postmodern writers of the time, especially Pynchon. Like Pynchon, Allen recognizes the humor lurking behind the most somber narratives. Allen's comedy critiques society's tendency to present history as a series of wars and revolutions led by strong, important men. By placing his weak and clownish alter-egos into highly charged political situations, Allen renders silly our grand narratives of progress through war and revolution and gives history over to the powerless schlemiels who are so often written out of historical narratives altogether.

In the final chapter, I look at the body humor of philosopher, fiction writer, and cartoonist Charles Johnson. Johnson's comic view of the body picks up on many of the themes that preoccupy the other artists in this project. Like Pynchon and Allen, Johnson puts his bumbling protagonists into historical situations in order to interrogate and revise

the ways that we read the body's placement in history. And like Roth, Johnson's heroes are intelligent men (and women) whose minds are often at odds with their bodily drives. But as a practicing Buddhist and an African-American, Johnson adds unique perspectives on bodily life that separate him from the other artists in this dissertation. In his fiction as well as in numerous essays and interviews, Johnson readily acknowledges the myriad of problems that stem from having a body and in particular from having an African-American body. Johnson uses his background in philosophy and Buddhism in order to assert the need for a phenomenological approach to bodily life, suggesting that desires and racial complications can be overcome or even transcended if subjects learn to view their bodies from a proper distance. In his essays and interviews, Johnson often makes this point explicitly, but in his fiction, Johnson's approach to bodily life is both more subtle and complex, and humor becomes a primary method of achieving this distance. Johnson's comedy, ranging from plain slapstick to complex psychological humor, dramatizes the struggles that every subject inevitably has with his or her body. But Johnson's humor not only serves to illustrate bodily strife; rather, his fiction offers comic perspectives of the body as a means for his characters to overcome reductive representations. For the individual in Johnson's world, body humor is posited as a viable solution to harmful bodily associations.

My analysis deals mainly with Johnson's neo-slave narratives *Oxherding Tale* (1984) and *Middle Passage* (1995). In *Oxherding Tale*, the slave Andrew Hawkins is conceived, in a night of madcap comic errors, to a white mother and a black father. This gendered inversion of the typical slave narrative establishes a physical instability that follows Andrew for the entire novel. As in most slave narratives, the novel follows

Andrew on a picaresque journey towards freedom, but rather than simple physical freedom from the bondage of slavery, Andrew's tale also builds towards a metaphysical freedom from bodily desire and the psychological constraints of his race and family history. Andrew not only works to dodge the machinations of masters and slavecatchers, but he also must deal with his own body, which is plagued by sexual desire, drug addiction, and a general clumsy awkwardness that threatens to thwart his every attempt at gaining freedom. Johnson's novel *Middle Passage* relates the story of Rutherford Calhoun, a recently freed slave who unwittingly stows away on the slave ship *Republic* in order to avoid marriage and debt. Like Andrew Hawkins before him, Rutherford's search for physical freedom becomes a metaphysical quest for freedom from the constraints of bodily desire. Literally trapped in a middle space between white slavers and African captives, Rutherford negotiates not only the literal dangers besetting the *Republic* at sea, but also his own tenuous cultural position as an African-American. Eventually, both Rutherford and Andrew achieve their freedom and find their place as husbands and fathers. These protagonists undergo endless comic mishaps before they can be at rest with their unstable bodies, and for both men, humor is essential to achieve the proper distance necessary to overcome their physical plight.

All of the writers in this project use humorous representations of the body to complicate their narratives. But while they all share an interest in undermining traditional and stereotypical constructions of the body, each artist approaches body humor from a unique perspective, using different aesthetic tools. Viewing these distinct artists together therefore reveals the multiple disciplines with which body humor intersects. For the body is central to nearly every aspect of human life, and body humor, as these artists

illustrate, is a unique way of critiquing and complicating nearly every discipline, ranging from history and philosophy to physical science and psychology. Body humor in the hands of these contemporary artists is more than simple comic relief or lowbrow hijinks; it is a sophisticated means of resistance and revision.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Body in Shame: Philip Roth's Physical Comedy

“Following my examination by the neurologist, I decided to stop worrying about the ‘significance’ of my condition and to try to consider myself, as the neurologist obviously did, to be one hundred and eighty pounds of living tissue subject to the pathology of the species, rather than a character in a novel whose disease the reader may be encouraged to diagnose by way of moral, psychological, or metaphysical hypotheses” (57).

—Nathan Zuckerman, From *My Life as a Man*

In his 1951 essay “The Nature of Jewish Laughter,” Irving Howe explores the cultural significance of the Jewish people’s famous sense of humor. Authentic Jewish humor, for Howe, emerges from the East European *shtetls*, or small Jewish villages, and is best characterized by the stories of Yiddish writer Sholom Aleichem. Howe argues that this humor arises out of a recognition of the distance between the Jews’ persecuted position in the world and their perceived rightful place as God’s Chosen People. Thus “the characteristic strategy of [Jewish] humor was an irony which measured the distance between pretension and actuality, held it up for public inspection and then made of it the salt of self-ridicule” (19). For Howe then, Jewish humor is particularly serious, for it provides “a unique distillation of the sorrows and insights of the race” (16).<sup>8</sup> In his goal to maintain the social significance of Jewish humor, Howe makes sure to separate it from what he sees as popular, lowbrow comedy: “The usual ingredients of current American humor—stylized insult, slapstick, horseplay, cruel practical jokes—are seldom present in Jewish humor. Rather is it disturbing and upsetting, its phrases dipped in tragedy” (19).

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<sup>8</sup> Howe’s definition of Jewish humor is fairly canonical, and most critics who discuss Jewish comedy usually approach it in a similar manner. Sarah Blacher Cohen uses Howe’s definition in her own assessment of Jewish comedy that arises from the ironic fact that “God had singled [the Jews] out to be a light unto the nations, but had given them a benighted existence” (“Varieties” 2). Robert Alter recognizes a similar disparity, but for him, Jewish humor works mainly as a de-mythologizing force: “Jewish humor typically drains the charge of cosmic significance from suffering by grounding it in a world of homey practical realities” (26). Mark Shechner views the discrepancy primarily in linguistic terms, asserting that the Jew’s simultaneous use of Hebrew (the language of God) and Yiddish (the language of the marketplace) has created contradictions in Jewish culture that foster a “habit of self-irony” (“Dear Mr. Einstein” 146).

He elaborates further, explaining that Jewish humor “is seldom obscene, for [it] is too fascinated with the ridiculousness of man’s total condition to be interested in his quickly decaying physical parts” (22). Howe concludes with a lament for the loss of this humor, stating that the remnants that have “percolated into American life [are] a sad substitute” for genuine Jewish humor, “which mocks pomp and wealth, which shatters pretension and which upholds the poor and the suffering” (24).

Considering this assessment of Jewish comedy, it should come as no surprise that the comic novels of Jewish-American author Philip Roth do not meet with Howe’s approval. Roughly twenty years after publishing “The Nature of Jewish Laughter,” Howe wrote a now infamous essay, “Philip Roth Reconsidered,” in which he accused Roth of writing out of “a thin personal culture” and suggested that Roth had no claim to the Jewish literary tradition out of which his earliest short stories, published in *Goodbye, Columbus*, seemed to emerge (73). Howe’s frustration is generated mainly by Roth’s widely successful fourth book *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969), which contains many of the “usual ingredients of American humor” that Howe, in 1951, argued have no part in Jewish humor. Indeed, *Portnoy’s Complaint* deliberately makes use of slapstick, bathroom jokes, and sexual humor, and spends countless pages detailing man’s “quickly decaying physical parts.” Roth’s follow-up books, *Our Gang* (1971) and *The Breast* (1972), are equally scatological and also receive Howe’s condemnation. While Howe was not alone in his disapproval, immediately after his attack was published, numerous critics came to Roth’s defense. More importantly, Roth has since written an astonishing series of critically acclaimed novels, firmly establishing his place as a major literary figure and thus rendering moot any need for defense at all. Therefore, rather than belatedly coming

to Roth's aid in the well-known Roth/Howe conflict (Roth obviously does not require my help), I hope to use Howe's assessment of Jewish humor, and his delineation between it and American humor, in order to approach Roth's distinctively Jewish-American humor.

Roth's comedy maintains the basic structure of Jewish humor, as outlined by Howe, which ironically measures the "distance between pretension and actuality." But Roth Americanizes (and modernizes) this humor by focusing it not on the plight of an entire race, the Jewish people, but on the lives of individual men. More specifically, Roth focuses his comedy on the male body. He presents comic depictions of the male anatomy, juxtaposing the physical realities of masculinity with mythic projections of manliness, usually at the expense of the latter. In displaying the discord between myth and reality, Roth relies on the sort of silly, outrageous physical comedy that is typically associated with "lowbrow" American humor. Roth's use of physical comedy and slapstick gags link him to popular American comedians like Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and the Marx Brothers.<sup>9</sup> But Roth's method of juxtaposing his absurd comic bodies with unrealized ideals simultaneously roots his fiction in a Jewish comic tradition.

Roth's body humor is most prevalent in his early career. In this period, Roth writes a series of body-obsessed male protagonists whose actual bodies fail to live up to the psychological, cultural, and mythic standards that are set for them. This trajectory begins with Roth's short story "Novotny's Pain" (1962), which tells of the mysterious lower back pain of a young soldier, and ends with *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), in which

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<sup>9</sup> Labeling Charlie Chaplin and The Marx Brothers as strictly "American" comedians is somewhat reductive, and I do so only because they seem to fit nicely into the American side of Howe's distinction between Jewish and American humor. For both Chaplin and The Marx Brothers are of Jewish descent, and Chaplin was born in England. Thus we can surely find many "Jewish" elements in their work. Nonetheless, they both contributed significantly to American humor as it is known today, and it would of course be impossible to ever discuss American humor without also discussing Jewish humor since the latter has had such a significant impact on the former.

Nathan Zuckerman experiences a similar mysterious pain in his neck and shoulders. In between, Roth varies this theme of inexplicable physical maladies in *Portnoy's Complaint*, *The Breast*, and *My Life as a Man* (1974). It may seem odd to present a narrative of Roth's fiction and end with *The Anatomy Lesson*, which is only about halfway through his career and still years before he begins publishing what most critics consider his best work. Indeed, this is very much a narrative of Roth as a young writer. I acknowledge, however, that Roth certainly does not abandon physical comedy after *The Anatomy Lesson*. One need only think of Moishe Pipik's grotesque penis implant in *Operation Shylock* (1993) to see that, as late as the mid 1990s, Roth still knows how to write transgressive body humor. But, in general, after *The Anatomy Lesson*, Roth's emphasis on the body shifts from psychosomatic pains and slapstick stumbles and begins to focus on the actual pitfalls of the aging body. The shift is first noticeable in *The Counterlife* (1986), in which Roth treats the familiar theme of impotence, but rather than having it originate in psychological dilemmas, the impotence is brought about by a necessary heart medication. In the autobiographical *Patrimony* (1991), Roth writes of both his father's struggle with a terminal brain tumor and of his own open heart surgery. The wickedly funny *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), often considered a throwback to *Portnoy's Complaint*, has many scatological moments, but the body humor is tempered by the protagonist's crippling arthritis and impending death. *Everyman* (2006), uses the body's medical history to tell the life story of an unnamed protagonist who ends up dead on the operating table. And *Exit Ghost* (2007), Roth's most recent work to date, treats in detail the aging Nathan Zuckerman's battle with incontinence that is brought about from



prostate surgery. Thus, physical comedy is by no means absent from these works, but it is not a primary driving force, as it is in the earlier works under discussion here.

The male protagonists of Roth's early fiction rarely suffer from actual bodily illnesses, but they are nonetheless obsessed with their bodies to the extent that they resemble the torture victims Elaine Scarry describes in *The Body in Pain*, whose bodies "become increasingly the object of attention, usurping the place of all other objects, so that finally ... the world may exist only in a circle two feet out from themselves" (32-33). Roth achieves humor in his depiction of this plight because his heroes are not the victims of physical torture; rather, their bodily predicaments stem from interior struggles such as guilt over cultural transgressions or insecurity over their failure to live up to impossible standards of manliness. These characters experience their bodily predicaments in two major ways: either their guilt and fear causes them to manifest outlandish and often psychosomatic bodily symptoms, or, their bodies behave as they should, but they irrationally view every bodily quirk and stumble as evidence of some symbolic meaning or existential crisis. In most cases, the line between these two is blurred, and Roth leaves to his characters (and readers) the job of sorting through physical symptoms and psychic baggage. In all of these works, the body humor, even when it may appear to be merely outrageous slapstick, is driven by a particularly Jewish perception that recognizes the comic disjunction between mental state and physical reality.

Somewhat surprisingly, most studies of Roth pass over the central role that the body plays in his comedy. In fact, the majority of critics cite the influence of stand-up verbal comedy, rather than body humor, on Roth's fiction.<sup>10</sup> A notable exception is

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<sup>10</sup> Irving Howe and Sanford Pinsker were among the earliest critics to note the influence of stand-up comedy on Roth's style. For Howe and Pinsker, however, this influence is pointed out with disdain, as

Sheldon Grebstein, who provides an excellent analysis of the body's comic presence in *Portnoy's Complaint*. In a famous remark, Grebstein notes that "in the simplest sense, Portnoy's complaint is his *schlong*" (160). Grebstein expands on this premise in his close reading of Portnoy's impotence at the close of the novel, noting that Portnoy's sexual exploits "have stricken him in the conscience, which, in turn, descends into his being and becomes localized in his manhood. Since Portnoy's impairment or crippling is psychological and self-induced, we can afford to laugh" (161). In focusing almost exclusively on Portnoy's impotence, Grebstein misses the chance to reflect on numerous other comic moments—particularly the slapstick mishaps of Portnoy's adolescence—where Portnoy's inner struggles affect his bodily life. Furthermore, by discussing *Portnoy's Complaint* in isolation, Grebstein is unable to note the ways that Portnoy's plight intersects with the struggles of Roth's other comic protagonists or how these struggles relate to the larger fields of Jewish and American humor.

While critics generally neglect Roth's physical comedy as such, numerous scholars have noted the primary struggle in his fiction between the mind and the body. Debra Shostak perhaps best articulates this struggle, asserting that Roth "inherits the ontological difficulties posed by the Cartesian split between body and mind, and frequently his work since the 1970s has traced an effort to understand, if rarely to heal, this split" (*Countertexts* 21). For Shostak, the disjunction between the mind and the body profoundly disrupts the attempts of Roth's men to form a coherent version of the self.

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proof of Roth's place in popular culture rather than in the "highbrow" world of literature. Alan Cooper seeks to rescue Roth from such judgments by defining his humor as literary "sit-down comedy" defined as "rationalism being explored minutely while being ignored grossly" (168). More recently, David Brauner sees *Portnoy's Complaint* as a "juxtaposition of comic and psychoanalytic discourses" in which the discourse of stand-up comedians is used to undermine the tenants of psychoanalysis while psychoanalysis interrogates the processes of comedy (75).

She cites *The Breast*, in which David Kepesh stubbornly insists on his masculinity despite the fact that he has transformed into a giant female breast, as the most significant example of this struggle. According to Shostak, “Kepesh’s transformed body literally represents the desire to understand what the self is” (“Return to the Breast” 324). While Kepesh’s predicament is the most explicit, this desire could be seen to apply to nearly all of Roth’s protagonists. Building upon Shostak’s basic premise, I root the mind/body struggles of Roth’s heroes in a Jewish-American context and look closely at how, in his early work, Roth’s physical comedy drives our understanding of these struggles.

### **Roth and the Jewish Body**

At this point, a series of binaries has emerged: Jewish and American, mind and body, highbrow and lowbrow, group and individual. Roth places his characters in the center of these opposing elements, and dramatizes their ongoing struggle between them. Rather than offer an easy reconciliation, however, Roth uses these polarities to inform and interrogate one another. Roth himself acknowledges this often dual aspect of his fiction in an essay on his own work from *Reading Myself and Others*. Here Roth uses Philip Rahv’s view of American literature as a battle between the “paleface” and the “redskin” to define his aesthetic. According to Rahv, paleface writers (Henry James, T.S. Eliot) exist in “higher” intellectual spheres belonging to the upper classes and universities while the redskins (Mark Twain, Walt Whitman) characterize the “lower” life of big cities or the frontier. Roth calls himself a “redface” and views his own career as an ongoing struggle with both traditions: “the redface sympathizes equally with both parties in their disdain for each other, and...reenacts the argument within the body of his own work” (*Reading Myself* 71-73).

For Roth, the body, specifically the male Jewish body, is often the battlefield on which these arguments play themselves out. The material fact of bodily existence is of course a key factor in the struggles between the real and the ideal. And the body is equally important in Roth's construction of Jewish-American identity. Dietary practices, which are psychologically connected to sexual mores, are especially significant in Roth's depiction of his characters' tenuous place between American and Jewish culture: they are continuously drawn away from a culturally sanctioned Jewish cuisine by the lures of American junk food, just as they are drawn away from acceptable Jewish girls by the exotic allure of forbidden *shiksas*.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Roth symbolically uses the male anatomy as a material counterpart of his characters' intangible dilemmas. In Roth's comic landscape, interior struggles between morals and desires are therefore transformed into a literal battle between the head and the genitals. The most blatant example occurs when the young Alex Portnoy ejaculates into his own eye. Explicitly here, and more subtly in other texts, Roth comically literalizes the abstract struggle between the mind and the body.

In many ways this mind/body dichotomy in Roth's humor can be seen as a component of the Jewish/American binary suggested by Howe, with Jewish humor falling on the side of the mind and American comedy on the side of the body. But Roth complicates this comparison, as his "American" body humor intersects with issues that are central to representations of a specifically Jewish body. In *The Jew's Body*, Sander Gilman provides a long history of anti-Semitic thinkers looking at the Jewish body as material evidence of the Jew's "abnormal" nature. In addition to preposterous

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Shechner notes that "food is to Jewish comedy and Jewish neurosis what drink is to the Irish" (*After the Revolution* 211).

constructions of the Jew with cloven feet or horns, the circumcised penis of the male Jew supposedly rendered him feminine, syphilitic, or sexually deviant. The stereotypically long, phallic, “Jewish” nose perpetuated these stereotypes, serving as a readily recognizable reminder of the Jew’s altered genitals. These negative constructions of the Jew’s physicality greatly impacted the relationship that Jews had with their own bodies. Gilman notes that through the nineteenth century, “[t]he Jew’s experience of his or her own body was so deeply impacted by anti-Semitic rhetoric that even when that body met the expectations for perfection in the community in which the Jew lived, the Jew experienced his or her body as flawed, diseased” (179). Roth carries this thinking into twentieth-century America when the adolescent Alex Portnoy rages against his own “Jewish” nose, viewing it as an obstacle that will prevent his entrance into a mythical American culture represented by Hollywood movies and television sitcoms.

Portnoy’s anguish over the disparity between his body and the projected bodies of American popular culture is rooted in a larger struggle between Jewish and Western conceptions of masculinity. As Gilman points out, Western representations often view Jewish men, negatively, as feminized, castrated, or otherwise emasculated. Daniel Boyarin, however, offers a positive reading of the stereotypical “girlish” Jewish man, “who could be so comfortable with his little, fleshly penis that he would not have to grow it into ‘The Phallus’” (xiv). Using examples from rabbinical texts, Boyarin presents a version of Jewish masculinity wherein the scholarly, bookish rabbi holds the same exalted place as the valiant knight does in traditional Western cultures. Unlike the asexual monk in Christianity, the rabbinical “soft man was the central and dominant

cultural ideal, not a marginalized alternative” (23).<sup>12</sup> While Roth does not explicitly acknowledge these competing versions of manliness, they can often be seen working in his fiction. Roth’s men—usually scholars and writers but always bookish—are in a sense modernized, secular examples of the ancient rabbis, and Roth often comically ridicules this scholarly attachment as his characters tend to fetishize texts to the extent that they cannot differentiate between a literary work and their own bodies. Paradoxically these men also embrace the Western ideal of a heroic, powerful, and physically potent manliness. Roth’s fiction also mocks these traditional American constructions of masculinity, reducing the potent phallus and all of its cultural baggage to the level of the uneventful penis. Roth thus pits these versions of masculinity against each other, achieving humor through the havoc that they play on the bodies of Roth’s men.

### **Setting the Stage in “Novotny’s Pain”**

Roth’s comic use of the body begins early in his career. In the rarely discussed short story “Novotny’s Pain” the title character, a young army recruit during the Korean War, develops a mysterious ache in his lower back almost immediately after his arrival for basic training. He attempts to ignore the pain, but it soon becomes unbearable. Novotny seeks medical attention, only to have his complaints dismissed. The medic tells Novotny that “[e]verybody’s back hurts,” and the skeptical doctor says that the pain is “deep inside his head” (267, 270); Novotny’s colonel informs him “that there were men in Korea who had worse” (271). In the Army hospital, Novotny’s fellow patients, men wounded in action “who hobbled on artificial limbs during the day and moaned in their beds at night,” also view him with disdain (269). Novotny receives sympathy only from

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<sup>12</sup> Boyarin also acknowledges the negative side of this ideal, particularly in its exclusion of women from the study of Torah and rabbinic texts.

his mother and his girlfriend, Rose Anne, with whom he manages to continue an erotic relationship despite his affliction. Novotny refuses to fight in his condition, and he eventually receives a dishonorable discharge. However, the pain returns to him, intermittently, throughout the rest of his life, and he never understands its cause.

Novotny, a Polish-Catholic, is one of Roth's few non-Jewish protagonists. Nevertheless, the story follows a comic logic that, like traditional Jewish humor, juxtaposes the real with the ideal. Novotny sees himself as loyal and patriotic, and he wishes to fulfill his military duty and adhere to the American standard of masculinity, in which men unquestioningly offer up their bodies for military combat. But the reader knows that Novotny's true inclination, even though he does not fully realize it himself, is to avoid the dangers of warfare. The narrator continuously expresses Novotny's fear that he would be killed or injured in Korea, and Novotny cannot help but imagine the possibility that he "would leave some part of his body on the battlefield" (266). The most logical (and obvious) reading of Novotny's pain is that it is a psychosomatic symptom of his intense fear of combat. The story's tension, however, derives not from our attempts to correctly diagnose Novotny's pain; rather, it comes from watching Novotny's comic responses to it. While Roth does not grant Novotny the same power to articulate his dilemmas as he later will for Portnoy or Zuckerman, the essential mind/body conflict is nonetheless evident.

As he attempts to understand the source of his pain, Novotny entertains various explanations, ranging from the psychological to the physical and even to the metaphysical. While he is not particularly religious, Novotny speculates that his pain may be a form of divine retribution: "Was he being punished for being so happy with

[Rose Anne]? Were they being punished for all that sex?" (275). In this instance, Novotny views his own bodily plight as the object of God's wrath. The most striking feature of Novotny's diagnosis is the enormous disparity between divinity and back pain. Despite the seeming severity of the pain for Novotny, back pain itself remains an ordinary phenomenon, and as his superiors so often point out, "everybody's back hurts." Thus Novotny's habit, both narcissistic and solipsistic, of assigning metaphysical meaning to something as ubiquitous as back pain, renders his situation comic. This comedy is further emphasized when Novotny's pain is compared with the wounded soldiers with whom he shares a hospital room:

[T]he fellow opposite Novotny had been in a wheelchair for two years with osteomyelitis. Though every few months they shortened his legs, the disease nonetheless continued its slow ascent. The man on Novotny's right had dropped a hand grenade in basic training and blown bits of both his feet off. Down at the end of Novotny's aisle lay a man whom a crate of ammunition had crushed, and the rest of the men in the ward, many of whom were in the hospital to learn to use prosthetic devices, had been in Korea. (268)

These darkly comic descriptions confirm Novotny's primary fear—losing body parts—about the horrors of battle, but more important, they sharply contrast with his own pain. Set beside these men with missing limbs, Novotny's pain, even for himself, seems suddenly comic and insignificant.

Despite the fact that Roth makes Novotny the object of comic ridicule, the story does generate sympathy for his situation. The experience of bodily pain is intensely private, and, as Elaine Scarry points out, impossible to communicate to others. In Novotny's case, the communication problem is exacerbated by the fact that there is no material evidence, such as a visible wound, to support his claims. Novotny's inability to



explain or comprehend the pain that has taken over his life highlights the mysterious relationship that we all share with our bodies. In this story, Roth taps in to Peter Schwenger's point that "one's own body is wholly neither object or subject" (103). Novotny's pain, as the object of his attention, is a text that he studies and interprets, but at the same time, Novotny *is* his pain. In this light, the object of the story's humor is not so much Novotny in particular as it is, if I may be permitted to use such a heavy-handed term, "the human condition."

Even though it is a fairly minor story in Roth's oeuvre, "Novotny's Pain" can be used as a template with which we can approach his body humor in future novels. Roth's later comic works return to all of the major elements that are apparent in "Novotny's Pain": the disjunction between mind and body, the failure to adhere to cultural standards of masculinity, intense guilt over cultural transgressions, and the creation of a comic yet sympathetic protagonist. In the subsequent books, Roth complicates these themes in order to illustrate a more complete version of his comic view of bodily life.

### **Slapstick and Shame in *Portnoy's Complaint***

Generally considered a breakthrough novel for Roth, especially in its use of comedy, *Portnoy's Complaint* is still one of Roth's most well known books and, due to its explicit treatment of male sexuality, probably his most notorious. The narrative line moves back and forth through different moments of Alex Portnoy's life, and the book is structured, loosely, as a series of confessions to Portnoy's psychoanalyst, Dr. Spielvogel, a Freudian caricature. The story itself tells the lifelong sexual exploits of Portnoy as he attempts to successfully overcome the cultural taboos of his Jewish family, mainly by seeking out sexual relationships with gentile women. Beginning with boyhood

masturbation, the novel moves from one sexual misadventure to the next, until Portnoy winds up in Israel, attempting to force himself upon a substitute mother-figure, completely impotent. Throughout the book, Portnoy expresses guilt over his various cultural transgressions, and, like Novotny before him, he often imagines himself as the object of divine retribution. What is unique about *Portnoy's Complaint*, however, is the manner in which Roth gives guilt a bodily life. Roth asserts that the novel only became possible through his recognition of “guilt ... as a comic idea,” and this connection between guilt and comedy is most explicit in Roth’s depictions of Portnoy’s relationship with his body (*Reading Myself* 20).

Even before Portnoy reaches puberty, we can see evidence of his peculiar understanding of his anatomy. At age nine, for instance, one of Portnoy’s testicles “decided it had had enough of life down in the scrotum and began to make its way north” (37). The renegade testicle naturally terrifies him and by assigning it agency (his testicle “decided” not to fully descend), we see how even in pre-adolescence Portnoy recognizes his body as a site of transgression. Using a military metaphor, Portnoy makes his body’s insubordination explicit: “In school we chanted, along with our teacher, *I am the Captain of my fate, I am the Master of my soul*, and meanwhile, within my own body, an anarchic insurrection had been launched by one of my privates—which I was helpless to put down” (38). Portnoy internalizes the mind/body dichotomy and literally sees his body as a battlefield waged between the head and genitals. He designates the top half of his body “I,” and grants it the virtues of intelligence and order, but the lower half has a will of its own and is characterized by anarchy and disrule. Portnoy even goes so far as to imagine his testicle making a downright assault on his higher functions: “Would I one day open

my mouth to speak in class, only to discover my left nut out on the end of my tongue?” (38). That Portnoy grants his testicle the power to disrupt speech, his fundamental tool in expressing himself, evinces the mythic power that his genitals hold over him. This early incident of testicular rebellion establishes the terms with which Portnoy will understand his body throughout the rest of his life.

In puberty, once his sex drive kicks in, Portnoy’s tendency to view his genitals in revolt extends to hyperbolic proportions. For instance, when he finds himself sitting next to a sleeping gentile girl, a forbidden *shikse*, on a long train ride, Portnoy projects his sexual desires onto his penis as though it were a separate entity. The ensuing dialogue between boy and penis is worth quoting at length:

“Jerk me off,” I am told by the silky monster. “*Here? Now?*” “Of course here and now. When would you expect an opportunity like this to present itself a second time? ... Schmuck, this is the real McCoy. A *shikse!* And asleep! Or maybe she’s just faking it is a strong possibility too. Faking it but saying under her breath, ‘C’mon, Big Boy, do all the different dirty things to me you ever wanted to do.’ “Could that be so?” “Darling,” croons my cock, “let me just begin to list the many different dirty things she would like to start off with.” (128)

Although this scene is funny for the simple reason that a talking penis is funny, the situation here is fundamentally different from Portnoy’s nine-year-old nightmare of his testicle falling out of his mouth. Portnoy rhetorically attempts to establish distance between himself and his libidinous desire by once again characterizing his genitals as a site of insurrection. He contrasts his own doe-eyed innocence (“Could that be so?”) with the lascivious worldliness of his penis, “the silky monster.” But this easy dichotomy quickly collapses. Unlike the ascending testicle of Portnoy’s childhood, which really was a bodily phenomenon, the talking penis voices Portnoy’s own urges and is inseparable

from his psyche. The distinction between boy and penis works only as a metaphor for Portnoy's basic struggle between morals and desires: since his mind is driven by primarily sexual thoughts, he is no longer able to successfully separate his so-called higher and lower functions.

Portnoy's conflicted view of his body can be seen most clearly in his relationship with his nose. In adolescence, Portnoy's nose, an obvious phallic substitute, begins to grow "Jewish" features, and Portnoy once again views his body as out of his control. Looking in the mirror, he contemplates his appendage: "At the top it had begun to aim toward the heavens, while simultaneously, where the cartilage ends halfway down the slope, it is beginning to bend backward toward my mouth. A couple of years and I will not even be able to eat, this thing will be directly in the path of the *food!*" (150). Portnoy's fear of his nose invading his mouth bears a remarkable similarity to his fantasy of a testicle ending up on the end of his tongue during class. But unlike his genitals, Portnoy's nose does not have to travel all the way from the lower body to stage an insurrection; rather, the insurrection is complete: Portnoy has a monstrous penis growing on his face! The fact that this nasal obsession occurs at approximately the same time that Portnoy begins compulsively masturbating suggests that his nose also serves as material evidence of the newfound sexuality that has come to dominate his life. Paradoxically, while Portnoy's nose-as-penis implies a victory for his lower bodily functions, it also signifies his Jewish ancestry and serves as a fleshly reminder of the stifling culture from which Portnoy wishes to free himself. Fearing that his "Jewish" nose will impede his attempts to woo Christian girls, Portnoy even goes so far as to imagine that "my own nose bone has taken it upon itself to act as my parents' agent!" (150). Portnoy's entire

struggle then, can be seen through his relationship with his Jewish nose. It represents both head and genitals, continually at war with one another; it signifies his yearning for sexual freedom as well as the Jewish culture from which he wishes to free himself. And the fact that he views his nose with such disgust demonstrates that he has, as in Sander Gilman's formulation, internalized the anti-Semitic views of the larger American culture.

While Portnoy cannot fully separate his mind and body, or his morals and desires, he is also unable to reconcile them. Thus he experiences a perpetual inner conflict which manifests itself in guilty fantasies of retribution. And it is in these fantasies of guilt that Roth delivers some of his most unique instances of Jewish-American body humor. This guilty comedy, like traditional Jewish humor, recognizes the disjunction between fantasy and reality, but like popular American slapstick, it remains firmly rooted in the realm of the scatological. In Portnoy's freshman year, for example, he discovers "on the underside of [his] penis, just where the shaft meets the head, a little discolored dot" (19). Portnoy's initial reaction to the dot, later diagnosed as a freckle, displays his guilt: "Cancer. I had given myself *cancer*. All that pulling and tugging at my own flesh, all that friction, had given me an incurable disease. And not yet fourteen! In bed at night the tears rolled from my eyes. 'No!' I sobbed. 'I don't want to die! Please—no!'" (19). Here Portnoy feels guilt for his compulsive masturbating and projects that guilt back onto his penis, the location of the original transgression. The humor in this scenario is reinforced by the juxtaposition of an actual freckle with an imagined cancerous lesion. Portnoy's ability to transform a freckle into a sign of his imminent death demonstrates the extent of his conflict.

In the above example, the humor, while focused on the body, works only in relation to Portnoy's mind. In other words, the freckle is not funny in and of itself but only via Portnoy's reaction to it. In other moments, Roth uses slapstick, which *is* funny all by itself, in a similar manner, achieving humor from both Portnoy's situation and from his guilty response. One evening, for example, young Portnoy finds himself ice-skating alone on a frozen lake with yet another young *shikse*. Portnoy decides to approach the girl under the pretense of being a fellow gentile. He even goes so far as to create for himself a Christian alter-ego named Alton Peterson. Portnoy reasons that he can pass off his telltale Semitic nose as an injury: "Fell off my horse while playing polo after Church one Sunday morning—too many sausages for breakfast, ha ha ha!" (164). Ironically, while skating after the oblivious girl, Portnoy is so lost in thought about Alton Peterson's imaginary fall from his polo horse, that he himself goes "hurtling forward onto the frostbitten ground, chipping one front tooth and smashing the bony protrusion at the top of [his] tibia" (164). Portnoy's leg winds up in a cast for six weeks, and he walks with a limp for some time after that. His father, reprimanding him for favoring the bad leg, yells "you are going to wind up a cripple for the rest of your days!" (165). So far, this situation follows a comic logic fairly similar to that found in the most conventional American slapstick films in which a bungling protagonist's attempts to win the favor of a pretty girl are thwarted by his overwhelming gracelessness. But Roth caps the slapstick gag with a punchline that ties a simple fall on the ice to Portnoy's neurosis and fear of physical retribution: "For skating after *shiksese*, under an alias," he exclaims to Dr. Spielvogel, "I would be a cripple for the rest of my days" (165). If the comedy were to end with Portnoy's fall on the ice, the situation would adhere to Irving Howe's

description of simplistic American humor, but by connecting this fall to Portnoy's Jewish guilt—a guilt driven by the discord between his mind and body—Roth transforms the plain slapstick into Jewish-American body humor.

Roth repeats this type of gag in a hilarious section detailing Portnoy's first sexual encounter. Here Bubbles Girardi, a local Italian girl, agrees to give Portnoy a "hand job," limiting her services, however, to a mere fifty strokes. When Portnoy is unable to climax in his allotted time, he finishes the job himself but misfires and ejaculates into his own eye (177-180). Usually a slapstick hero requires a prop (a banana peel or a falling flowerpot), to achieve comic pitfalls, but Roth uses Portnoy's own body as the prop. And as in Portnoy's fall on the ice, Roth tops off the slapstick with a serving of Jewish guilt. While rinsing his burning eyes with water, he imagines coming home to his parents, blind and with a seeing-eye-dog. When his mother begs to know how this happened, Portnoy replies, "Mother, how? How else? Consorting with Christian girls" (182). One again, the humor is driven by the disjunction between Portnoy's mental conflict and his bodily reality. Portnoy's physical stumbling and downright bad luck can never be simply that; his Jewish consciousness causes him to interpret every bodily pitfall through a lens of punishment.

It is also important to note that, in this scene, Portnoy's penis becomes the agent of his punishment. By ejaculating into his own eye, Portnoy finally brings to fruition his pre-adolescent fear of the lower body assaulting the upper.<sup>13</sup> The bad luck (if it truly is bad luck and Portnoy does not unconsciously *want* to ejaculate into his own eye) of this

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<sup>13</sup> The fear of blindness works on other levels as well. In this scene Portnoy seems to legitimize the old wives' tale that masturbation causes blindness. Furthermore, Freud, reminding us that Oedipus gouges out his own eyes upon realizing his sexual transgression, draws a connection between a fear of blindness and the fear of castration (*The Uncanny* 139).

event seems to reinforce Portnoy's view of his body, especially his genitals, as monstrous. In the examples we have seen, Portnoy grants his genitals the power to speak and reason, blind him, and inhibit his speech. Furthermore, by appearing on his face in the form of a nose, Portnoy's penis has the additional powers of blocking his mouth and betraying his Jewish origins to the gentile girls whom he would like to woo. While Portnoy's body certainly does seem to get into more trouble than most bodies, it is not in and of itself "monstrous." If anything is monstrous, it is Portnoy's mind, not his body. The monstrosity is only apparent when we view Portnoy's body through the lens of his own mind. I wish to make this distinction clear because in his next exploration of bodily themes, *The Breast*, Roth inverts this equation, presenting us with a truly monstrous body and a clear, rational mind.

### **Laughing at *The Breast***

At one point in *Portnoy's Complaint*, shortly after young Portnoy realizes that one of his testicles has risen into his abdomen, he begins to doubt the stability of his masculinity: "What if breasts began to grow on me too? What if my penis went dry and brittle, and one day while I was urinating, snapped off in my hand? Was I being transformed into a girl?" (39). In the novella *The Breast*, published only three years after *Portnoy*, Alex Portnoy's fantasy becomes David Kepesh's reality. Only things would be much too simple if Kepesh, a literature professor with particular interest in Kafka, were to merely transform into a female; rather, Kepesh mysteriously and inexplicably transforms into a 155-pound female breast.

While Roth does not foreground Kepesh's Jewish identity to the same extent as Portnoy's, the Jewish-American humor is nonetheless evident in *The Breast's* scenario.



For Roth adapts Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*—perhaps the most famous literary work by a Jewish writer—into an American comic context, transforming the surreal insect into an “obscene” body part that is the object of endless sexual scrutiny. Kafka's comic, Jewish nightmare becomes, in a sense, an American locker room joke. Roth often acknowledges the influence of Kafka on his comedy; in an interview about *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth asserts that his comedy was inspired in part by a “a sit-down comic named Franz Kafka and a very funny bit he does called ‘The Metamorphosis’” (*Reading Myself* 18). And later in the same interview, Roth more fully illuminates this comic aesthetic, describing his experience teaching *The Castle*:

My students may have thought I was being strategically blasphemous or simply entertaining them when I began to describe the movie that could be made of *The Castle*, with Groucho Marx as K. and Chico and Harpo as the two ‘assistants.’ But I meant it...Of course! It was all so *funny*, this morbid preoccupation with punishment and guilt...I thought about Groucho walking into the village over which the Castle looms, announcing he was the Land Surveyor; of *course* no one would believe him. *Of course* they would drive him up the wall. They had to—because of that cigar. (19-20)

Roth's description of a Marx Brothers adaptation of *The Castle* reveals his emphasis on the comic aspects of Kafka's fiction as well as his own inclination to juxtapose Jewish and American humor. *The Breast* works in a similar manner, highlighting the comic aspects of Kafka's original story by juxtaposing it with an enormous scatological joke.

But while *The Breast* immediately sets itself up as a prolonged comic scenario, it does not deliver as many laughs as we might expect; at least it achieves nothing close to the unusually high laugh-per-page ratio of *Portnoy's Complaint*. Most critics agree that

*The Breast* is supposed to be funny but that it falls somewhat short of this goal.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, one gets the feeling reading *The Breast* that once the stage has been set (i.e., once it has been established that Kepesh is, in fact, a breast), that it doesn't really know where to go. In a manner reminiscent of "Novotny's Pain," much of the novel is taken up with Kepesh's explanations and speculations for how and why his transformation occurs, but unlike Novotny's uneventful back pain, Kepesh's transformation is actually worthy of scrutiny. Here Roth seems to beat literary critics to the punch as Kepesh's explanations seemingly cover all bases both medical and psychological, from wish-fulfillment to punishment to madness. But no definitive explanation can ever be given: as Roth states, "Not all the ingenuity of all the English teachers in all the English departments in America can put David Kepesh together again" (*Reading Myself* 60). With this in mind, rather than contributing to our understanding of why David Kepesh has turned into a breast, I simply wish to place *The Breast* within Roth's larger body of work and demonstrate its position as a necessary variation on Roth's theme of the comic relationship between the mind and the body. For Kepesh's literal transformation serves as a sharp contrast to Roth's other bodily driven works, in which protagonists struggle with pains that are primarily psychosomatic or imaginary.

Many critics place *The Breast* as the middle book in an odd trilogy with *Our Gang* (a political satire of the Nixon administration) and *The Great American Novel* (an outlandish burlesque of baseball). Readers see Roth in these books attempting to find a place for the comic energy that he discovered while writing *Portnoy's Complaint*. This

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<sup>14</sup>*The Breast* is perhaps one of Roth's least popular books among critics. Sanford Pinsker calls it "a static novel ... severely limited by its controlling gimmick" (*The Comedy that 'Hoits'* 78); Harold Bloom names it Roth's "major aesthetic disaster so far" (*Philip Roth* 3) and even Mark Shechner, who does not wholly dismiss it, admits that *The Breast* does not reach reader expectations: "We want heavy cream and [Roth] gives us the two percent milk" (*Up Society's Ass* 42-43).

impulse makes sense, for these books are perhaps amongst Roth's most anti-realistic and grotesque. I find it odd, however, that so many readers (myself included) choose to see *The Breast* in relation to comedy, while Roth seemingly opts *not* to push the comedic limits of Kepesh's situation. In contrast to Portnoy's excessive, humorous ramblings, Roth gives Kepesh a voice which, even when it is narrating moments of panic, is calm and controlled throughout. In an interview on *The Breast*, Roth comments on this aspect of the story: "I resisted comedy or farce in large part because the possibility was so immediately apparent. Since the joke was there before I even began, perhaps the best thing was to stand it on its head by *refusing* to take it as a joke" (*Reading Myself* 64). This controlled reaction to Kepesh's situation, however, creates its own kind of humor. Like *Portnoy's Complaint* and "Novotny's Pain," the narrative tension and the comedy is still driven by an incongruity between bodily condition and mental reaction. For if we laugh at Novotny for turning his back pain into an existential dilemma, and we laugh at Portnoy for treating a freckle as cancer, then we may also laugh at Kepesh for remaining sane and reasonable when he has turned into a giant breast.

Kepesh's subdued voice, and his ability to remain sane, does not keep him free from any neurosis. In *The Professor of Desire* (1977), a prequel published five years after *The Breast*, Roth goes through great pains to show us that Kepesh has his problems too, and that they are not so different from Portnoy's: both men are the grandchildren of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and both, in their attempts to transcend their Jewish upbringing, are obsessed with the relationship between higher and lower functions. In *The Professor of Desire*, Kepesh frames his attraction to the lower life around a series of "temptations," which manifest themselves in people who actively

embrace carnality and distract Kepesh from his more serious scholarly labors. This struggle immediately foregrounds the competing versions of masculinity to which Kepesh is drawn: the quiet, scholarly man, sensitive to his Jewish roots, and the culturally assimilated sexual adventurer. Appropriately, Kepesh's first temptation takes the form of Catskill comedian Herbie Bratasky, who awes nine-year-old David Kepesh with his lowbrow humor. Kepesh is particularly fascinated by Bratasky's ability to mimic all the sounds of defecation, from the bowel movement itself to the swish of the flushing toilet. Kepesh carries a letter from Bratasky, detailing the progress of his fecal noises, in his back pocket when he goes to school. But even in adolescence, this bathroom humor serves as a counterweight to Kepesh's studies. Kepesh entertains nightmarish fantasies of guilt about his fascination with Bratasky's comedy: "I am terrified that if I should drown while ice skating or break my neck while sledding, the envelope postmarked Brooklyn, NY will be found by one of my schoolmates, and they will all stand around my corpse holding their noses. My mother and father will be shamed forever" (5). Kepesh's peculiar fantasy of imagined shame reads like it could be leftover material from Alex Portnoy's childhood.

Despite these obvious similarities, a fundamental difference exists between Portnoy and Kepesh. Portnoy continually views the two halves of his body at war with each other, or sees his desires in violent conflict with his morals. He yearns to free himself from social constraints and embrace his id, to yell to the world "Up society's ass, Copper!" (274) as he does to Dr. Spielvogel on the book's final page. Kepesh, on the other hand, has no wish to see his carnality win out over his sobriety. Rather, Kepesh intellectualizes his conflict and actively seeks a reconciliation between his warring

impulses, striving to become both the quiet scholar *and* the sexual adventurer. In college, Kepesh adopts as his personal motto Addison's description of Steele: "A rake among scholars, a scholar among rakes" (*Professor* 10). And in his professional life, he seeks to further merge his intellectual and erotic affiliations by organizing a literature course "around the subject of erotic desire" (123). Kepesh even goes so far as to imagine himself divulging the dirty secrets of his own sexual encounters to the group of students in "Desire 341," as he calls it. This fantasy highlights Kepesh's desire to collapse the boundary between his bodily life and his literary life, but at the end of the novel, it seems as if this reconciliation will never be achieved.

This connection between literature and the body takes on an entirely new dimension In *The Breast*. In one of his more interesting theories, Kepesh speculates that his transformation was actually brought about from teaching *The Metamorphosis* and Gogol's "The Nose" for so many years. Kepesh explains that he had somehow

[m]ade the word flesh. Don't you see, I have out-Kafkaed Kafka ... who is the greater artist, he who imagines the marvelous transformation, or he who marvelously transforms himself? Why David Kepesh? Why me, of all people, endowed with such powers? Simple. Why Kafka? Why Gogol? Why Swift? Why anyone? Great art happens to people like anything else. And this is my great work of art! (480)

Kepesh's theory may be Roth's way of deliberately acknowledging Kafka and Gogol as his own influences, but it also evinces Kepesh's peculiar faith in the power of literature. Kepesh's psychiatrist Dr. Klinger objects that "hormones are hormones and art is art," but for Kepesh, the textual and the physical are indistinct. Kepesh's belief in the power of the text to change lives on such a literal and material level once again aligns him with a particularly Jewish version of masculinity. Kepesh emerges as a sort of secular rabbi,

embodying the word of Kafka rather than God. And the fact that Kepesh transforms into a female breast, of all things, makes Kepesh's transformation sexual as well as literary. In this manner, the harmonious coexistence of literature and personal sexuality that Kepesh cultivates in *The Professor of Desire* becomes an outlandish joke in *The Breast*. Kepesh achieves his goal of reconciliation but at the price of his physical identity.

Kepesh's new body also suggests an odd reconciliation in the purely physical realm. While Portnoy views the two halves of his anatomy, head and genitals, as continually at war with one another, Kepesh, as a breast, actually becomes a middle space between the head and the genitals: we would be reading a very different book if Kepesh were to transform into giant vagina. But even as a fleshly middle space, and a simultaneous embodiment of both literature and sexuality, Kepesh is still unable to extricate himself from binary thinking. Kepesh's nipple, for instance, is located at one end of his body, and Kepesh cannot help but think of it as his head or face, despite his doctors' assurances that the nipple is the site of his former penis. Furthermore, Kepesh's voice emanates from a "flap in [his] midsection" (451). The new layout of his body confuses him as he "doggedly continues to associate the higher functions of consciousness with the body's topmost point" (451). This bizarre finished product is like a cosmic joke on Kepesh, for it suggests that the reconciliation of opposites that he has yearned for is impossible. This point is made clear throughout the story as Kepesh, like a true Roth protagonist, repeatedly vacillates, even in his grotesque state, between sobriety and carnality. He at times begs the nurse who washes him to let him penetrate her with his nipple (461), and in other moments he immerses himself in Laurence Olivier's recordings of Shakespeare.

*The Breast*'s comedy is most apparent when we remember that both intercourse and studying Shakespeare are activities not typically available to breasts. Roth suggests in an interview that Kepesh is "the first heroic character [he's] ever been able to portray," and I suspect that Kepesh's heroism has to do with his tenacity in holding on to his former identity (even his former struggles) despite the overwhelming change in his bodily condition (*Reading* 57).<sup>15</sup> Seen in this light, if a reader can manage to avoid thinking about the sheer absurdity of Kepesh's situation, then he or she could easily view nearly everything Kepesh does as heroic: Kepesh *heroically* continues his intellectual pursuits despite his affliction, or Kepesh *heroically* seeks sexual gratification in spite of his condition, and so forth. It is actually not very difficult to read the novel this way, precisely because a novel is read rather than viewed. Readers see the words on the page and hear Kepesh's voice, but other than the moments when Kepesh's anatomy is described, one can easily forget that this is a giant, talking breast we are hearing.

Roth therefore manages to have the comedy of Kepesh's situation lurking beneath the surface, ready to burst into the narrative whenever Kepesh's improbable physicality is confronted directly. One such comic burst occurs when Kepesh receives a visit from his friend and mentor Arthur Schonbrunn, a literature professor and college dean. Schonbrunn's visit is Kepesh's first interaction with the professional world, and he hopes to suggest to Schonbrunn the possibility of receiving a position as a grader for one of his school's large sophomore literature classes, and thus (heroically?) maintain some sort of relationship with the scholarly community. But Kepesh never gets the chance to ask

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<sup>15</sup>Debra Shostak discusses this aspect of *The Breast* at length, explaining that "Kepesh's transformed body literally represents the desire to understand what the self is, a desire that centers on distinguishing the subject from object, the male from the female, by way of the breast as both real object of gratification and signifier" ("Return to the Breast" 324).

Schonbrunn for the position, for immediately after his arrival in Kepesh's room, Schonbrunn, described as an "alarmingly" suave and charming professor, begins to giggle at the giant breast (465); soon his giggling turns into outright laughter, and Schonbrunn leaves the room, never to reappear. Kepesh reacts with disappointment and embarrassment: "Giggling—not because of anything ludicrous I had proposed, but because he saw that it was true, I actually *had* turned into a breast. My graduate-school adviser, my university superior, the most courtly professor I have ever known—and yet, from the sound of it, overcome with giggles *simply at the sight of me*" (466). Schonbrunn's giggles remind us, and Kepesh, that actually *seeing* a giant breast is very different from hearing or reading about one. In this scene, Roth forces us to confront the physicality of Kepesh's condition and highlights the comic aspect of such an unlikely sight.

Schonbrunn's visit, perhaps the funniest scene in the book, is also important when we remember that Schonbrunn, like Kepesh, is a literature professor, a man who teaches and writes about texts for a living, and, from what we are told, has done so successfully. Throughout the book, as we have seen, Kepesh plays the role of literary critic, treating his body as a text, endlessly proposing and dispelling theories; at one point he even throws his hands in the air (not literally, of course), wishing to give up on the critical rigor he must apply to his transformation: "it is the silliness, the triviality, the *meaninglessness* of life that one misses most in a life like this. For quite aside from the monstrous, ludicrous fact of me, there is the intellectual responsibility that I seem to have developed to this preposterous misfortune" (456). Schonbrunn's laughter, however, can be read as a valid critical counterpoint to Kepesh's intellectual rigor. Schonbrunn, who obviously does not



have the personal stake in the issue that Kepesh does, is able to view in Kepesh's condition the very things that Kepesh misses most: silliness, triviality, and meaninglessness. Perhaps because it would be too difficult to publish an essay full of giggles, most critics of *The Breast* have taken their cue from Kepesh's "intellectual responsibility" and written about the meaning or significance of this unlikely transformation. I would, however, like to give Schonbrunn the last word (i.e. last laugh) on *The Breast* and point out that laughing may be the most logical reaction we can have to a man transformed into a giant talking breast. Although *The Breast* may be short on comic scenes or actual jokes, Roth creates a situation that is fundamentally comic, and thus leaves it up to us to laugh. Our laughter, however, does not preclude us from recognizing in *The Breast* Roth's recognition of the ironic distance between the mind and body.

### **Writing Masculinity in *My Life as a Man***

In *Portnoy's Complaint*, as his plane descends upon Israel, Portnoy recalls the Sunday softball games that the men in his neighborhood would play when he was a child. Portnoy's memory of the ritual reads something like a treatise on virile masculinity: "Not boys, you see, but men. Belly! Muscle! Forearms black with hair! Bald domes! And then the voices they have on them—cannons you can hear go off from as far as our front stoop a block away. I imagine vocal cords inside them thick as clotheslines! lungs the size of zeppelins!" (242). The fact that Portnoy is himself a full-grown male when he makes this speech does not detract a bit from the mythic qualities he attributes here to manliness. Later in *The Breast* Kepesh attempts to make a phallus out of his nipple in order to maintain his masculinity. In *My Life as a Man*, Roth takes this obsession with

manhood to the next level, writing a tragicomedy of the male body. The novel makes explicit all of the cultural, psychological, and mythical baggage that has been implicit in his fiction from the start.

*My Life as a Man* also represents a new direction for Roth's fiction in terms of compositional strategy, anticipating the complex metafictional performance of *The Counterlife*. The novel begins with two short stories, "Salad Days" and "Courting Disaster (or, Serious in the Fifties)," grouped together in a section entitled "Useful Fictions." These stories are written by the fictional novelist Peter Tarnapol and feature Tarnapol's alter-ego Nathan Zuckerman, who later becomes Roth's alter-ego in the trilogy *Zuckerman Bound*. Following these stories is Tarnapol's autobiography, labeled "My True Story," which focuses primarily on Tarnapol's botched marriage to Maureen Johnson, who is perhaps the most demonized, emasculating woman Roth has ever created.<sup>16</sup> Through a juxtaposition of these two sections, the book becomes a meditation on the writing process. While the surface narrative line follows Tarnapol's attempt to become "what is described in the literature as *a man*," the underlying struggle is Tarnapol's attempt to transform his life experience into art (302). The two narrative levels become complicated because Tarnapol's ideas about manliness and literature are so intricately bound together that it becomes exceedingly difficult to disentangle the two. In Tarnapol's psyche, the pen and the phallus become blurred, just as his ideas about life and art become indistinguishable.

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<sup>16</sup> Roth's demonic portrayal of Maureen Johnson is most likely due to the fact that Tarnapol and Johnson's marriage bears a remarkable similarity to Roth's own disastrous first marriage as described in *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography*. Here Roth acknowledges many of the similarities between his own life and Tarnapol's.

Patrick O'Donnell correctly points out that for Tarnapol, the phallus, above all else, "signifies his identity" (156). Indeed, Tarnapol is unable to separate his self image from his male sexuality, and like a modern-day Don Quixote, he is unable to separate his concept of masculinity from the high-minded ideals that he finds in "great" literature. But Tarnapol is never able to fully articulate a precise definition of what a man is, and his conception seems to be a muddled conglomeration of chivalry and intellect as he blurs the masculine subjects of classical literature (which are themselves inconsistent) with the scholars and learned men who study and create that literature. While *My Life as a Man* is not as focused on Jewish identity as some of Roth's other works, Tarnapol's struggle between chivalric heroics and intellectual pursuits may once again suggest a split between traditional Jewish and Western conceptions of manhood. And the stifling aura of responsibility generated by 1950s American popular culture contributes further to Tarnapol's manly delusions. His generation of men, Tarnapol asserts in "My True Story," were convinced that marrying women was a serious duty: "If we didn't marry women, who would? Ours, alas, was the only sex available for the job: the draft was on" (170). Tarnapol's desire to fulfill these contradictory demands of masculinity leads him into a relationship with Maureen Johnson, a broken, possibly psychotic woman whom Tarnapol imagines he is rescuing. When Maureen fools Tarnapol into believing that she is pregnant, Tarnapol's manly responsibility kicks in, and he marries her. Everything is downhill from there. The marriage leads to violence, deceit, separation, and alimony, until, some years later, Maureen finally relieves Tarnapol of his responsibility by dying in a car accident.

Much of the novel consists of Tarnapol coming to terms with the fact that he cannot and should not try to live up to the romantic ideals of manliness that he has gleaned from his reading. In this struggle, some familiar Rothian themes become immediately apparent. Once again, we see a protagonist struggling to wrest himself from the restraints of morality and intellect. Interestingly, however, Tarnapol's penis serves as both the source of transgression and repression. On the one hand, Tarnapol's genitals work much like Portnoy's; they are the signifier of his sex drive and lead him into acts of adultery and aggressive masturbation. On the other hand, Tarnapol transforms his penis into a mythic phallus, which signifies his duty towards those things which he considers "serious" or "manly." Tarnapol's conflicting relationship with his manhood manifests itself in odd ways. Tarnapol masturbates at the library, for example, and smears his sperm on the spines of books. Or at home, he uses his semen to seal the envelope of his phone bill. Tarnapol's psychiatrist (also Dr. Spielvogel) explains Tarnapol's peculiar habit as evidence of rage over his doomed marriage, but it seems that it may also be Tarnapol's attempt to reconcile his competing images of the phallus. Books, we know, are respected by Tarnapol above all else and are the source of most of his ideas about masculinity. By smearing library books with his semen, he may be seeking to inscribe his own manhood onto the very fountain from which his conception of manliness springs. Simultaneously, he attempts to degrade the revered books, bringing them down to the level of mere matter. Similarly, paying bills promptly is one of the most quotidian aspects of manly responsibility, and by sealing the envelope of his phone bill with semen, Tarnapol may be attempting to infuse the lackluster task with masculine import.

The body humor of *My Life as a Man* occurs in the ways that Tarnapol's body becomes the site of his struggles, and, perhaps more importantly, how Tarnapol in turn rewrites or exaggerates his own bodily issues in the body of the fictional Nathan Zuckerman. Like David Kepesh, who imagines that literature has turned him into a breast, both Tarnapol and his alter-ego Zuckerman believe that literature has concrete effects upon the body and both, in turn, insist on transforming the lives of their bodies into literature. As a young boy, for instance, Tarnapol becomes so overcome with laughter at his sister's excessive use of the word "noodle" (surely there is some phallic anxiety wrapped up in this laughter) that he wets his pants. Tarnapol blames his accident on his sister, but his father asserts that "it was a human impossibility for one person to pee in another person's pants" (114). Tarnapol, looking back on this incident from adulthood, corrects his father's reasoning: "Little he knew about the power of art" (114). In the story "Courting Disaster, or Serious in the Fifties," Tarnapol writes this connection between artistic power and bodily functions into the life of the young college professor Nathan Zuckerman. Fascinated with the idea of building a personal library, Zuckerman makes regular trips to a used bookstore and invests in his own copies of the "great books." Once his selections are made, however, Zuckerman becomes so excited about his new property that he must run to the bathroom and release his bowels: "I don't believe," Zuckerman states, "that either microbe or laxative has ever affected me so strongly as the discovery that I was all at once the owner of a slightly soiled copy of Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* in the original English edition" (49). The fact that the book is "slightly soiled" strengthens the connection between bodily functions and literature, and the book which Zuckerman chooses as his example adds a layer of irony,

for Zuckerman's excessive zealotry towards and fetishization of the textual object is hardly ambiguous.

That Tarnapol sees a concrete connection between the power of art and his bodily functions causes him, in turn, to view bodily phenomena as worthy of literary scrutiny. In "Courting Disaster," for example, Tarnapol writes Zuckerman into the army and gives him severe, undiagnosable headaches. The ten-page section of "Courting Disaster" devoted to Zuckerman's headaches reads like a detailed revision of "Novotny's Pain." While the name has been changed and the pain has been moved, we see most of the same events that occur in the early story: worthless diagnoses from doctors and psychiatrists, distrusting army officials, the comparison of the mysterious pain with the concrete suffering of those who have been wounded in battle, and the eventual discharge from service. The biggest difference between the two is that while Novotny's back pain seems most likely to be psychosomatic, Zuckerman's headaches remain undiagnosed.

In this story, Zuckerman's introspection greatly exceeds that of Novotny's. Zuckerman, like Tarnapol, is a young writer and student of literature, and he insists on finding a complex, *meaningful*, source for his headaches. In this sense, Zuckerman resembles David Kepesh more than Novotny. But since headaches are not as extraordinary as Kepesh's transformation, Zuckerman remains dissatisfied with any interpretation he comes up with. Dismissing guilt, fear and warring impulses as all too obvious, Zuckerman compares his body to his own work: "No I could not imagine myself *writing* a story so tidy and facile in its psychology, let alone living one" (56). Finally, after being told by doctors that his headaches were, though inexplicable, fairly typical, Zuckerman decides to consider himself "as the neurologist obviously did, to be one

hundred and eighty pounds of living tissue subject to the pathology of the species, rather than a character in a novel whose disease the reader may be encouraged to diagnose by way of moral, psychological, or metaphysical hypotheses” (57). While this conclusion may be useful to Zuckerman, it leaves readers in an interpretive quandary. Contrary to this statement, Zuckerman, of course, *is* a fictional character, and so is Peter Tarnapol, the author who created him. Anything Zuckerman says is therefore inherently unstable, as it must be filtered through other narrative levels.

Without delving too deeply into this tangle of metafictional play, I think it’s safe to say, based on the book’s structure, that Peter Tarnapol is our main concern, and we should limit our interpretations of Zuckerman to what they can tell us about Tarnapol. While Zuckerman’s life in “Courting Disaster” has obvious overlaps with Tarnapol’s, there is no incident in “My True Story” that serves as a clear springboard for Zuckerman’s headaches. The underlying themes of Zuckerman’s dilemma are, however, apparent in Tarnapol’s story, especially in Tarnapol’s understanding of his masculinity. For Zuckerman’s hermeneutical predicament in regards to his headaches is based on a similar relation between mind and body that form Tarnapol’s struggle to grasp manliness. Tarnapol must break free from reading his male sexuality in “moral, psychological, or metaphysical” ways and begin to understand it (as his doctor would) in fleshly terms, as the mere circumstance of his genitals. While Portnoy projected his shame onto his body, Tarnapol’s inability to live up to the moral demands of his (male) body create shame in his mind. In his fiction, however, Tarnapol reverses the issue and reinscribes his shame onto Zuckerman’s body. In *My Life as a Man*, then, Roth not only gives us a comic drama of the male body, but he dramatizes the very act of writing the body, putting on

display the creative processes involved with infusing bodily functions, pains, and parts with symbolic import. At the same time, Roth also undermines his characters' (and his own) impulse to view the body symbolically and deflates our attempts to read the body as anything more than a body.

### **Zuckerman's Cure in *The Anatomy Lesson***

*The Anatomy Lesson*, published in 1983, represents a culmination of Roth's preoccupation with the comic potential of mysterious bodily ailments. From the title page forward, the novel makes explicit its focus on the human body, the body's effects upon the mind, and the mind's impact on the body. The book is the third installment in the trilogy *Zuckerman Bound*, in which Roth provides the biography for his most famous alter-ego, Nathan Zuckerman. The trilogy's first book, *The Ghost Writer*, portrays Zuckerman as a young writer struggling to hold fast to his artistic values despite pressures from his family and the Jewish-American community. In the second volume, *Zuckerman Unbound*, Zuckerman achieves fame and fortune for *Carnovsky*, a ribald novel which is an obvious fictional counterpart to *Portnoy's Complaint*. But the success of *Carnovsky* further undermines Zuckerman's standing in the Jewish community and causes trouble with his family. In the novel's climax, Zuckerman's father curses him from his deathbed, and his brother accuses him of killing their father with his book. In *The Anatomy Lesson*, Roth inscribes this struggle between the artist and the Jewish community onto Zuckerman's body itself.

When *The Anatomy Lesson* opens, Zuckerman's mother has also recently died, and Zuckerman finds himself suffering from a severe, undiagnosable pain in his neck, shoulders, and arms. Unable to write, he holes up in his apartment and allows himself to



be nursed alternately by four women, surrogate mothers who cook, shop and make love to him. Here we see Roth returning to familiar dilemmas: he has created yet another trapped protagonist and explores once again a mysterious bodily manifestation of what is most likely an interior struggle. Thus, in the first half of *The Anatomy Lesson*, the comedy works in a manner similar to his earlier fiction. Indeed, the novel reads like a book-length account of “Novotny’s Pain” or a realist version of *The Breast*, as Zuckerman moves from doctor to doctor, specialist to specialist, unable to locate the cause of his suffering. Roth does extend the pitiful comedy of Zuckerman’s situation, however, by putting his neck in an orthopedic collar and burdening him further with a dangerous dependence on Percodan, vodka, and marijuana, which he mixes precariously in order to achieve the balance that makes his pain bearable. And while he is reluctant to admit it in his debilitated stupor, there is little doubt that Zuckerman’s pain is ultimately psychosomatic. Roth hints strongly towards a psychological or moral explanation in the novel’s epigraph, which comes from the *Textbook of Orthopaedic Medicine*: “The chief obstacle to correct diagnosis in painful conditions is the fact that the symptom is often felt at a distance from its source.” While this might mean something entirely different for orthopedic physicians, for novelists and literary critics, the quotation suggests a symbolic pain.

Deciding exactly what is the symbolic/psychological cause for Zuckerman’s pain is another story. His psychoanalyst and girlfriends all agree on guilt, “penance for the popularity of *Carnovsky*, comeuppance for the financial bonanza” (34); Zuckerman’s friend and colleague Ivan Felt takes another perspective: “buried anger, troves of it ... so much hatred that the heap of flesh can’t contain it” (81-82). These both make sense;

Zuckerman, at this point in his life, has plenty to be guilty and angry about. Aside from being recently orphaned and estranged by his brother, the Jewish intellectual community had lately launched an assault on his work, the charges led by Milton Appel (a fictional incarnation of Irving Howe), who had praised Zuckerman's early stories but, after the publication of *Carnovsky*, "reconsidered" Zuckerman's talent and dismissed his work as "a species of sub-literature for the newly 'liberated' middle class" (69). Appel's attack stings doubly since, in his youth, Zuckerman had read Appel's own essays and looked to him as an intellectual father figure.<sup>17</sup> Thus twice disowned, Zuckerman finds himself without family or community, and, unable to write, his imaginative power seems to have abandoned him as well. The physical pain, it seems, *must* be a reaction to all of this emotional trauma.

At this point Roth presents us with his most complex exploration of the relationship between the mind and the body. He makes explicit the effect that physical suffering has on the mind, where "every thought and feeling [is] ensnared by the selfness of pain" (10), and he creates a character whose level of guilt and anger seems almost worthy of a painful bodily manifestation. But while Zuckerman's situation may be more complex, the first half of *The Anatomy Lesson* still reads like a rehashing of old material. In the second half, however, Roth takes readers for a loop and sends Zuckerman on a comic, bitter, antisocial journey worthy of Roth's more infamous bad boys Alex Portnoy and Mickey Sabbath. Mark Shechner reads the *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy as a musical composition, and, for him, *The Anatomy Lesson* is "the book of detonations, the one where the canons go off" (*Up Society's Ass* 94). And they do.

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<sup>17</sup> *The Anatomy Lesson* is by no means an autobiographical novel, but Zuckerman's complex relationship with Milton Appel is virtually identical to Roth's critical history with Irving Howe. For a detailed discussion of Roth and Howe, see Mark Shechner, *Up Society's Ass, Copper*.

The first canon comes when Zuckerman decides that he is fed up with being a writer and will go to medical school to become the good Jewish doctor that his parents always wanted. Zuckerman reasons that the medical field will help him forge a connection with an aspect of life that writing closed off for him: “Twenty years up here in the literary spheres is enough—now for the fun of the flowing gutter. The bilge, the ooze, the gooey drip. The stuff. No words, just stuff. Everything the word’s in place of. The lowest of genres—life itself” (103). While the prospect of Zuckerman (age forty with no scientific training) entering medical school is preposterous from the start, he nonetheless hops on a plane to Chicago to convince his college friend and anesthesiologist Bobbie Freytag to help him get into the University of Chicago’s medical school program. On the plane to Chicago, with Zuckerman loaded up on Percodan, pot, and vodka, the next canon goes off. Zuckerman introduces himself to the man in the seat next to him as Milton Appel and claims to be a famous pornographer and club owner. He even invents a text for Appel, the smut magazine *Lickety Split*.

Zuckerman enjoys playing Appel the pornographer so much, that he continues his performance in Chicago, endlessly pontificating to Ricky, his young female limo driver about the trials and tribulations of a porn mogul. Zuckerman’s speeches as Appel contain some of Roth’s best antisocial rants. Zuckerman, for example, argues his case for the rights of pornography with the linguistic skill of novelist:

I can tell people a thousand times that I am a serious person, but it’s hard for them to take at face value when the prosecution holds up *Lickety Split* and on the cover is a white girl sucking a big black cock and simultaneously fucking a broom. It’s an unforgiving world we live in, Ricky. Those who transgress are truly hated as scum. Well, that’s fine with me. But don’t tell me scum has no right to exist along with everybody who’s nice. Nobody should tell me that *ever*. Because scum is human too. (194)

It may be that Zuckerman's vehement defense of pornography is more about the heated reception of *Carnovsky* than it is about the fictitious magazine, especially when we remember that Zuckerman is using the name of his chief detractor for his porn-king alter-ego, but this performance is also interesting in that it is Zuckerman's first conscious attempt to create a fiction since his neck pain cut him off from writing (I say his first *conscious* attempt because Zuckerman's delusion that he would actually become a doctor is equally fictional). Between his medical school fantasy and his pornographer's persona, Zuckerman rewrites his identity twice. As Hana Wirth-Nesher points out, Zuckerman suspends himself "between the two extreme identities that his community and family have forced upon him all along: the good doctor and the evil pornographer"(28). In this sense, Zuckerman is simply acting out the familiar struggle between high (traditional Jewish) and low (popular American) culture that all of Roth's protagonists confront. By violently swinging between the two extremes, Zuckerman places his inner struggle on the surface ("wears it on his sleeve," as Portnoy would say) and makes explicit the walking contradiction that is Zuckerman.

But, oddly enough, in Zuckerman's imagination, the good Jewish doctor and the evil pornographer may not be as contradictory as they seem at first. Both of the fictional personas that Zuckerman dons are inextricably tied to the body, and, at least in his mind, they both have the ability to tap into aspects of reality which he fears have been unavailable to him as a writer. Before Zuckerman begins to play pornographer, he calls being a doctor "the fun of the flowing gutter" and "the lowest of genres—life itself" (103), descriptive phrases which could just as easily, probably *more* easily, be applied to pornography as to the medical profession. Zuckerman further conflates medicine and

pornography when, as Milton Appel, he invents absurd medical statistics: “over the last decade semen production is up in America by at least two hundred percent. Only you’re not going to find that out reading *Business Week*” (182). In these comic outbursts and delusional fantasies, it is important to remember that Zuckerman is heavily self-medicated and still suffering from his chronic neck pain. In rewriting himself as doctor and/or pornographer, Zuckerman seeks out an identity with which he can master the human body and win back control over the physical pain which has prevented him from living a “normal” life.

In the second half of *The Anatomy Lesson*, therefore, we see a shift of emphasis. In the early chapters we are free to plumb the depths of Zuckerman’s psyche, treat his pain as a text, and hypothesize, along with Zuckerman, about the origins of his mysterious suffering. Once Zuckerman leaves for medical school, however, locating a source for the neck pain becomes secondary to Zuckerman’s performances, and we are no longer his interpretive allies but are simply his audience. At this point, the pain, rather than being theorized about, is simply taken for granted as a reality, and the subject becomes how Zuckerman will choose to handle (or mishandle) his predicament. That he handles his affliction so recklessly testifies to the severity of his pain, the fragility of his emotional state, and the fact that the two have been feeding off of each other and escalating in intensity.

Readers suspect from the moment Zuckerman begins these theatrics that they will not end peacefully for him. Roth finally puts a stop to Zuckerman’s performance with a nice bit of slapstick: Zuckerman attacks his friend’s father (a stand-in for his own) in a Jewish cemetery and falls face forward on a tombstone. He takes “the impact on the

point of [his] chin” and awakens in the hospital, a patient rather than a doctor, his jaw fractured in two places. Zuckerman’s fall and subsequent hospitalization significantly impact his situation. He must undergo jaw surgery, and after the anesthetic wears off, he experiences an intense agony which dwarfs his neck pain. After surgery, he compares himself, like Novotny twenty-one years earlier, to the hospital’s less fortunate patients, whose pain is “ruthlessly and inescapably real, crying and suffering truly worthy of all a man’s defiance” (290). Both of these events serve the similar purpose of placing Zuckerman’s neck pain into proper perspective. For readers, this perspective reinforces the fact that Zuckerman’s dilemma, while serious for him, is ultimately comic; for Zuckerman, this begins to draw him out of the solipsism into which his pain had led him. Finally, Zuckerman’s fractured jaw temporarily silences him. Unable to move his mouth, Zuckerman must cease his endless rant and communicate with his doctors through his previous medium of choice: writing. And while he does not recognize it as such, it is clear to readers that Zuckerman’s return to his craft is imminent when he jots down on his pad the opening sentence of *The Anatomy Lesson*: “WHEN HE IS SICK EVERY MAN NEEDS A MOTHER,” signifying that his recent experiences will eventually become fodder for fiction (270).

Despite the implication that Zuckerman will eventually return to writing, Roth does not allow his narrative to end with an easy vision of recovery. Before Zuckerman can really return to fiction, he must first come to terms with his body and his pain. Zuckerman still believes that to do this, he must find a means to access that material aspect of reality from which he feels that literature has cut him off and that the alternate identities of doctor and pornographer provide. Roaming the halls of the hospital,

Zuckerman makes a genuine, though somewhat unsettling, attempt to do so by plunging his arms into the large canvas bins which contain the hospital's soiled bedsheets. With his arms deep in the damp and dirty "sheets of the healing, the ailing, and the dying," Zuckerman concludes, "*This is life. With real teeth in it*" (290). This action, while certainly sporadic and irrational, shows Zuckerman's longing to literally immerse himself into the bodily world, to merge his own body with others. But it also reveals Zuckerman's inability (like Peter Tarnapol) to view the body as other than symbolic. To an actual doctor, the bin of dirty linens would be seen as little more than a health hazard, but for Zuckerman, student of literature that he is, the body can never be just that, and, in this case, the body for Zuckerman is a means to obtaining a life "with real teeth in it."

After this incident, oddly enough, Zuckerman decides all over again that he will become a doctor and begins to follow the interns around the hospital. "What a job!" Zuckerman thinks, "The paternal bond with those in duress, the urgent, immediate human exchange!" (291). But in the novel's final words, the narrator steps in and undermines Zuckerman's stubborn, delusional insistence that his future is medicine, providing a more objective view of Zuckerman's situation: "For nearly as long as he remained a patient, Zuckerman roamed the busy corridors of the university hospital, patrolling and planning on his own by day, then out on the quiet floor with the interns by night, as though he still believed that he could unchain himself from a future as a man apart and escape the corpus that was his" (291). With this conclusion, Zuckerman's return to writing becomes not so much a recovery as a return to imprisonment. All of Zuckerman's attempts to immerse himself in the bodily world are ultimately futile; the only body for Zuckerman is his own "corpus."

The realization that Zuckerman will never escape from the pitfalls of his own body also furthers our understanding of Zuckerman's predecessors and of Roth's Jewish-American body humor in general. Zuckerman's failure makes explicit a similar inability for Novotny, Portnoy, Kepesh, and Tarnapol to extricate themselves from their own bodily plights. This highlights the further impossibility of Roth's protagonists to ever reconcile the competing series of binaries (Jewish/American, highbrow/lowbrow) that give rise to their bodily conflicts. These men are trapped within these struggles just as they are alone in their own bodies. The predicament suggests a darkly comic commentary on the place of the body in the contemporary world. In Mikhail Bakhtin's classic formulation, presentations of the medieval body were open and fluid, emphasizing bodily openings (mouth, nostrils, genitals) through which the individual body merges with the world and ceases to be individual. The modern body, in contrast, is presented as closed, finished and complete, with orifices deemphasized or hidden. Novotny, Portnoy, Kepesh, and Tarnapol, despite their often ribald hijinks, all accept this modern vision. Their bodies are complete worlds to them, able to generate transformations and respond to moral and metaphysical cues. All of their afflictions, they reason, come from within themselves. Zuckerman begins in this position, but in his doomed effort to cure himself, he seeks ways in which to de-individualize and thus de-modernize his body. Roth critiques modern conceptions of the individual body through Zuckerman, but Zuckerman's failure to integrate his body with the world (and the fact that his failure is presented with such comic gusto) highlights the futility of such a critique. Zuckerman succeeding in this attempted escape from his individual body would, for Roth, be more



absurd than Kepesh turning into a breast. We are alone with our bodies: this is a simple, sad, and funny fact for Roth, and it is the bitter joke behind much of his comedy.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Jocoserious Pynchon: Body Humor in *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*

“It wasn't that he was tired or even notably uncoordinated. Only something that, being a schlemihl, he'd known for years: inanimate objects and he could not live in peace” (37).

—Thomas Pynchon, from *V.*

Comic depictions of the body often drive Thomas Pynchon's humor. Like Philip Roth, Pynchon's physical comedy presents the human body in all of its weakness and instability. But while Roth's comedy is most often psychological, playing off of the disjunctions between mind and body or morality and desire, Pynchon's body humor is cinematic, utilizing familiar images from Hollywood slapstick films but rarely providing in-depth psychological investigation. In *Gravity's Rainbow* this theatrical comedy is on full display, as characters fall on banana peels, get into pie fights, and shoot each other with seltzer bottles. Despite its playful surface, Pynchon's physical comedy nearly always has a dark element, tying his humor to his most somber motifs. For instance, in the Banana Breakfast scene that occurs early in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Teddy Bloat “slips on a banana peel and falls on his ass” (8). The moment of physical comedy is amusing, and the banana peel blatantly alludes to silent slapstick films. But in the context of the novel, this apparently simple accident has darker connotations. The banana is, among other things, a comic symbol of the terrifying V-2 rocket, which itself is referred to as a “steel banana” (8). Bloat's fall, brought about by a rocket substitute, is therefore tied symbolically to the falling V-2. This moment of apparent play thus foreshadows bloodshed and devastation. While the instance is funny, the humor offers the reader no escape from the shadow of the looming rocket.

Pynchon's blending of comic and terrifying elements has often been characterized as “black humor,” and is often used to describe Pynchon as well as contemporaries like

Ken Kesey, Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, and John Barth.<sup>18</sup> Elaine B. Safer asserts that the black humorist strives to “disorient readers” by moving “quickly between darkness and laughter, horror and farce” (20). Max Schulz sees black humor as an offshoot of existential writing, with the distinction that the isolating tendencies of the modern world do “not leave the Black Humorist despairing” (7). Schulz implies that it is the ability to laugh in the face of tragic fact that distinguishes the writer of black humor.<sup>19</sup> Richard Hawk, in *A Cheerful Nihilism*, asserts that the American black humorist “plays risky games along the line between the terrible and the hilarious and calls them games without flinching” (13). Discussions of black humor have been useful in illuminating Pynchon’s unique brand of comedy. However, definitions of the term often rely on binaries like the terrible and the hilarious, and Pynchon’s comedy ultimately refuses to recognize that these dichotomies exist. Unlike Philip Roth, whose fiction is driven by the struggle between a series of irreconcilable opposites, Pynchon seeks to erase the line between supposed opposites altogether. Thus, I find the less common term “jocoserious” to be more useful in defining Pynchon’s humor. Typically identified with James Joyce, the jocoserious mode is, as the word suggests, simultaneously funny and serious. Robert H. Bell applies the concept to Joyce in terms that also have relevance for Pynchon studies. Bell asserts that “Joyce rectifies the ordinary imbalance between such common dichotomies as the ridiculous and the sublime, the profane and the sacred, and the jocose and the serious, empowering the underprivileged term and often implying that apparent

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the origin of the term *black humor*, see pages five and six of the introduction.

<sup>19</sup> Curiously, Schulz’s book *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* has little to do with humor. Schulz states that he has “shied away from the ‘humor’ in Black Humor. Most efforts to come to terms with the comic over the past two thousand years have drifted into the shallows of laughter and foundered on the submerged rocks of psychology’s attempts to explain why we chuckle” (x).

opposites must be seen simultaneously” (3). While the black humorist may shift quickly between comic and tragic modes, the jocoserious writer presents his themes in both a comic and a serious manner simultaneously, collapsing preconceived boundaries between the comic and the tragic. Throughout Pynchon’s novels, comic moments, when seen in context, resonate with tragic moments and vice-versa. The banana—both comic prop and harbinger of destruction—illustrates this point nicely. At his jocoserious best, Pynchon highlights the fearful within the playful and the comic within the tragic.

This jocoserious approach is especially useful when considering Pynchon’s body humor. Pynchon’s attitude towards the body, and bodily life in general, is particularly ambivalent. On the one hand, Pynchon recognizes the terrifying and unstable aspects of bodily life. As systems, bodies are subject to entropic decline: they feel pain, they die, and they rot. Additionally, bodily desires for food and sex dictate human behavior and undermine conceptions of personal freedom. But on the other hand, Pynchon knows that bodies are the source of life and pleasure. While Pynchon’s work often seems to deplore the mindless pleasures of hedonism, at other times he rejoices over bodily life, suggesting that food, sex, and drugs may be all there is to turn to in his worlds of faceless conspiracies and mass destruction. Furthermore, Pynchon often utilizes regenerative imagery in order to suggest that the life-and-death cycle, in which rotting bodies are absorbed back into the earth, may be a way of overcoming the apparent instability of bodily life. In his work, Pynchon blends these distinct views of the body, creating a jocoserious body humor that at once celebrates the body and acknowledges its weaknesses. Slapstick humor is particularly useful to this end. For when a slapstick hero falls or stumbles, s/he exposes the audience to both his or her humanity and weakness.

More often than not, Pynchon's protagonists (particularly Benny Profane in *V.* and Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow*) are grounded in materiality and driven by sensual pleasures. Their love for food and sex highlight their closeness with the world and the regenerative process, but their repeated slapstick mishaps suggest a violent and inescapable discord with a modern, technology-driven society.

Pynchon's body humor also makes clear his political sympathies. His physical comedy serves as a constant reminder that it is the marginalized human body that is most often at stake in instances of subjection. As David Cowart notes, Pynchon "leaves his readers in no doubt about his attitude toward racism, oppressive economic practices, genocidal violence, skullduggery in high places, and police-state repression. He expresses, in numerous ways, a profound empathy with what he calls the preterite, the left out, the passed over in every form of election" (4). Pynchon's physical comedy is entrenched in his allegiance to the struggling preterite. He uses body humor to undermine the illusions of power projected by the oppressive elect, or, alternatively, his slapstick serves as a literal reminder of the always unstable position of the passed over. Nearly every instance of slapstick comedy in *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* is explicitly connected to Pynchon's condemnation of colonialism, corporate interest, or unchecked technological advancement.

For Pynchon, colonialism and technology are always connected to the mythic, powerful phallus. Throughout his work, Pynchon presents masculinity in comically exaggerated forms. His men copulate readily and often, and his seductive women often seem constructed specifically for the penetrating male gaze. This is most blatant in *Gravity's Rainbow*, in which an entire society is obsessed with the V-2 rocket and its

fleshly counterpart, Slothrop's penis. Wes Chapman describes this phenomenon as "masculine gigantism," in order to underscore Pynchon's ambivalent portrayal of masculinity:

*Gravity's Rainbow* often reads like a male fantasy gone out of control: the phalli are a little too large, the female characters too eager to bed down with Slothrop, the victims of sadists far too eager about their own pain. And because the narrative doesn't offer final readings, it is never quite clear how much really is mockery or disruption and how much is the residue of real assumptions about gender. These exaggerations self-consciously invite a feminist critique...But the novel itself does not supply that critique. (par. 18)

While it may be impossible to pinpoint a precise reading of Pynchon's gender depictions, the feminist critique Chapman is looking for can perhaps be found in Pynchon's physical comedy. Through repeated moments of slapstick, Pynchon makes it clear that the bodies of his men are inherently unstable and out of step with the world. Nearly every male victory, whether it be sexual or militaristic, is tempered by a comic moment that highlights male insecurity or impotence. Pynchon's depictions of masculinity are often exaggerated or gigantic, but the comic manner in which he makes his men fall is equally hyperbolic.

Most critics, however, tend to see Pynchon's humor as relief from his serious themes, rather than as a significant contribution to them. Roger B. Henkle, in his 1983 essay "The Morning and the Evening Funnies: Comedy in *Gravity's Rainbow*," provides what is still the most extensive and influential analysis of Pynchon's humor. For Henkle, Pynchon's comedy consists primarily of "the metaphorical reduction of the fearful into the playful. Control of the ominous by converting it imaginatively into a subject for ludicrous parody of all its elements [*sic*]" (274). Henkle thus argues that Pynchon's

humor acknowledges his fiction's larger, and darker, themes but diffuses their impact by presenting them in a playful manner. Most other critics who have written about Pynchon's comedy agree with Henkle's assessment (even if they do not cite him directly) and tend to restate his essential argument in different terms. David Seed argues that "Pynchon's comedy offers escape, temporary relief from the intellectual weight of the novel's materials, without ever breaking the...thematic links with those materials" (203). Joseph Slade, however, asserts that "What saves [Pynchon's] characters from what would otherwise be the weight of cynicism is the author's humanity, usually conveyed through comedy" (192). Elaine B. Safer posits the most significant alternative to the consensus that Pynchon's humor is decidedly positive. Safer sees Pynchon's comedy as "absurdist" and argues that rather than advancing from disorder to order, as we see in traditional comedy, Pynchon's comedy "mocks man's quest for order and for the reasonable, concluding that firm reality is a deceptive fiction" (23). Safer thus sees Pynchon's comedy as a cynical commentary on the absurdities of modern life rather than as a positive force that relieves readers from Pynchon's otherwise bleak material.<sup>20</sup>

I offer a reading here of Pynchon's first two "big" novels, *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, that seeks to consolidate the two sides of this conversation. The jocoserious mode, with its emphasis on collapsing the dichotomy between comedy and tragedy, can encapsulate both the playful, positive aspects of Pynchon's comedy and their cynical undertones. Both views are necessary in order to gain a full picture of Pynchon's humor. In focusing on Pynchon's body humor, I demonstrate his method of using comic material to construct his most serious themes. Pynchon's body humor, most often manifested as

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<sup>20</sup> Other critics seem to be simply puzzled by Pynchon's comedy. John W. Hunt, for instance, notes that in Pynchon's work "what is *seen* is deliberately obscured rather than illuminated by the comic elements" (32).

slapstick comedy, is inextricably connected to his scientific metaphors and his explorations of individual freedom. Illuminating these connections reveals the complex and often ambivalent attitudes lurking behind Pynchon's comedy. In Pynchon's world the fearful and the playful occur simultaneously; each contains the seed of the other. Thus even the most terrifying images, such as those of decay and destruction, have a comic element, and even the simplest instances of humor, like a pie in the face, are potentially frightening.

Despite Pynchon's frequent and varied uses of physical comedy, body humor is the least explored of all the comic aspects discernible in his fiction. Critics often point out Pynchon's use of slapstick humor, but they usually do so only in passing. Charles Clerc mentions that the numerous chase scenes in *Gravity's Rainbow* "all smack of modernized Keystone Cops routines" (144). Similarly, Safer notes that Slothrop's balloon escape "becomes sheer slapstick as Slothrop hurls pies at the approaching plane" (101). Christy L. Burns, writing primarily about *The Crying of Lot 49*, provides a slightly more extensive analysis of Pynchon's body humor, arguing that Pynchon's "mixture of slapstick effects with grotesque and absurd perspectives on the body crucially de-romanticizes sex in [*Lot 49*]... and later in *Gravity's Rainbow*" (152). The longest discussion of Pynchon's body humor comes from Speer Morgan, but his assessment is unfavorable. For Morgan, Pynchon's bawdy comedy is like that of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, with the exception that Pynchon's is "not funny." Morgan goes on to state that

[i]t is odd, with so much commotion in [Pynchon's] anecdotes, operettas, slapstick extravaganzas, songs, custard-pie fights, drug trips, etc., to discover so little humor. It is the stuff of imitation Beatles movies—edgy, speeding, often hysterical vignettes. The



fault may be theoretically explicable: while mental slapstick like Tristram's is viable on the page, successful physical slapstick (albeit sententious) of the sort in popular theatre and film is harder to effect. Although Pynchon's allusions to serious movies and the borrowed techniques of cutting and framing are successful, his fictional rendering of physical slapstick is not. The great bulk of these episodes are noisy, demanding events, characters being jerked around like puppets by a nervous, angry puppeteer. (95)

What one finds funny is often subjective, and Morgan is probably not alone in his feelings that Pynchon's slapstick often falls flat. But his theoretical explanation of this perceived failure is worthy of further attention. As Morgan points out, Pynchon uses a linguistic medium for a type of comedy that is most often achieved through visuals. In the previous chapter, we saw that while Philip Roth occasionally depends on visualizations, particularly in *Portnoy's Complaint*, he most often creates a psychological body humor where comic affects are achieved by dramatizing the mind's relationship with the body. It is perhaps this type of "mental slapstick" that Morgan finds so successful in Sterne. Pynchon, on the other hand, writes cinematically. His slapstick remains in the world of bodies, and he rarely enters his characters' thoughts as they stumble and fall. There are literary precursors for this type of humor, and I think that Morgan would be on firmer ground if he were to compare Pynchon with Cervantes or Rabelais than Sterne.<sup>21</sup> But the most important influence on Pynchon's physical comedy is undoubtedly film. Morgan argues that Pynchon's cinematic devices are only successful when he alludes to serious movies, but this view is unnecessarily reductive. In using the devices of cinema to help structure his novels, Pynchon is essentially exploring the narrative possibilities of infusing a linguistic medium with material from a visual one.

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<sup>21</sup> There are also a number of contemporary American writers whose use of body humor is similar to, although less developed, than Pynchon's. For instance John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, John Kennedy Toole, and Tom Robbins all present comic perspectives on bodily life. Pynchon, however, is the most explicit in linking his body humor to cinematic sources.

Slapstick cinema is one of the most, if not *the* most, visually driven of all film genres, and for Pynchon to only include cinematic material from serious movies would be a significant omission. While the success of Pynchon's body humor may remain a matter of personal taste, his inclusion of cinematic slapstick is consistent with *Gravity's Rainbow's* overall use of film genres.

Morgan's negative view of Pynchon's physical comedy is consistent with prevailing attitudes towards body humor. Even if they do find slapstick to be funny, many intelligent readers are quick to pass over instances of physical comedy because they view such humor as "low" and therefore not worthy of academic investigation. A major part of Pynchon's work, however, is the reorganization and destabilization of such categories as "high" and "low." We see this in Pynchon's preoccupation with regenerative imagery, his commitment to exposing lost or forgotten moments of history, and his overall romantic attachment to the world's preterite. Given this dedication to revising hierarchies, it only makes sense that Pynchon's use of body humor, considered the lowest form of comedy, would hold meaning in his work beyond that of simple comic relief. But this meaning is not static. By using body humor in various ways and connecting it to multiple themes, Pynchon displays his jocoserious vision towards nearly every aspect of his fiction.

### **Slapstick as Entropy in *V.***

In his first novel *V.*, for instance, Pynchon uses slapstick and grotesque humor to complicate the dichotomy between the animate and the inanimate world and create a jocoserious view of entropic decline. It is impossible to read Pynchon's first novel without immediately noticing this binary. Edward Mendelson asserts that Pynchon

develops his theme to a fault, calling the novel “an overgrown elaboration of a simple idea...the decline of the animate into the inanimate” (6). Tony Tanner expands on the concept, explaining that while the decline into the inanimate (towards death) is the “oldest of truths,” *V.* suggests that “twentieth-century man seems to be dedicating himself to the annihilation of all animateness on a quite unprecedented scale, and with quite unanticipated inventiveness” (22). This decline can be found in characters’ inhuman attraction towards inanimate objects (as in Rachel Owlglass’s love for her car), in the death-making efficiencies of modern warfare, and in the characters’ tendencies to make their own bodies increasingly less human. This last aspect is seen most explicitly in the mysterious woman V., who repeatedly incorporates objects into her body throughout the novel, only to be disassembled at the end. This movement towards death or disassembly is consistent with the second law of thermodynamics, also known as entropy, in which all ordered systems eventually tend toward disorder. Pynchon’s preoccupation with the concept has been evident since his early short story “Entropy,” and numerous critics have commented upon his use of entropic decline as a metaphor for the moral and/or spiritual decline of modern society.<sup>22</sup> This bleak theme plays itself out in both comic and tragic scenarios in *V.*, indicating Pynchon’s complex treatment of the subject. Nonetheless, critics have yet to explore the unique relationship between entropy and comedy. While Mendelson does note in passing that the decline into the animate “applies to [*V.*’s] comic

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<sup>22</sup> Despite his frequent thematic use of entropy, Pynchon claims to have only a rudimentary understanding of the concept. In the introduction to his collection of short stories *Slow Learner*, Pynchon writes that “Because [“Entropy”] has been anthologized a couple-three times, people think I know more about the subject of entropy than I really do” (12). Others, however, have suggested that Pynchon’s introduction to *Slow Learner* should be taken ironically. See, for instance, Terry Reilly’s “A Couple-Three Bonzos: ‘Introduction,’ *Slow Learner*, and 1984.”

details as well as to its most solemn ones,” he does not investigate the significance of this duality (6).

Pynchon’s jocoserious treatment of entropy posits *V.* as a comic jeremiad in which he laments the military and technological powers of annihilation that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century and chastises contemporary (early 1960s) audiences for their continued complicity with these forces.<sup>23</sup> Pynchon’s physical comedy often highlights this complicity. Throughout the text, Pynchon demonstrates that entropic decline contains many of the same elements as a slapstick gag. Thus our laughter at an apparently simple slapstick mishap becomes tinged with menace, as Pynchon suggests that we are also laughing at our own movement towards death. Through *V.*’s use of slapstick, Pynchon also presents a specifically American version of entropic decline. Slapstick is a primarily American film genre, and its basic elements are ingrained in the national consciousness. The images created by Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton have shaped the cultural understanding of the comic predicament of bodies in the material world. In linking these images to those of decay and destruction brought about through technology and world war, Pynchon suggests a connection between American popular culture and a disturbing fascination with death.

This connection is most apparent in *V.*’s unique structure. The novel’s most blatant comedy occurs in episodes dealing with the luckless Benny Profane and his often bawdy adventures in the novel’s present (1955-56). Pynchon alternates these chapters

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<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the jeremiad as a trope in American literature see Sacvan Bercovitch’s *The American Jeremiad*. Bercovitch traces the jeremiad, or political sermon, from the early puritans to the contemporary period, arguing that American writers and thinkers use this form to simultaneously chastise American audiences and affirm American exceptionalism. For Bercovitch, the work of Pynchon ultimately falls into the category of the anti-jeremiad: “the denunciation of all ideals, sacred and secular, on the grounds that America is a lie” (191).

with a series of historical episodes, ranging from 1899 to 1945, which provide a history of the first half of the twentieth century through its loose biography of the mysterious woman V., whom, based on a cryptic sentence in his father's diary, Herbert Stencil has devoted his life to searching for. The two narrative lines converge at various moments but are held together thematically by Pynchon's treatment of the animate/inanimate opposition. One of the earliest instances of this dichotomy occurs in Chapter One, when the narrator describes one of Benny Profane's slapstick mishaps. The section is worth quoting at length because it demonstrates the extent to which Pynchon details Profane's pratfalls during a typical morning:

[Profane] made his way to the washroom of Our Home, tripping over two empty mattresses on route. Cut himself shaving, had trouble extracting the blade and gashed a finger. He took a shower to get rid of the blood. The handles wouldn't turn. When he finally found a shower that worked, the water came out hot and cold in random patterns. He danced around, yowling and shivering, slipped on a bar of soap and nearly broke his neck. Drying off, he ripped a frayed towel in half, rendering it useless. He put on his skivvy shirt backwards, took ten minutes getting his fly zipped and another fifteen repairing a shoelace which had broken as he was tying it. All the rest of his morning songs were silent cusswords. It wasn't that he was tired or even notably uncoordinated. Only something that, being a schlemihl, he'd known for years: inanimate objects and he could not live in peace. (37)

The narrator's explanation of Profane's bad luck bears a remarkable similarity to filmmaker Frank Capra's definition of slapstick comedy as "the intransigence of inanimate objects" (Dale 10). Here Pynchon takes this basic tenet of slapstick and uses it to establish his theme of the entropic decline into the inanimate. As with entropy, Profane's morning preparations increase in disorder. In this scene, Profane becomes a spectacle for readers to laugh at, but his inability to live with the physical world also

marks him as human, and his pratfalls humorously highlight the fact that all humans must live alongside an inanimate world that often seems hostile. Profane's bumbblings are certainly funny, and the cynical undertones of his inability to live at peace with the inanimate world are balanced by the light and irreverent style. I would not, however, call this a moment of comic relief, and I am also disinclined to read the scene, as Henkle might, as a "metaphorical reduction" of an otherwise frightening topic. Rather, it is important to note that this episode comes very early in the novel and is one of the first moments where Pynchon treats entropy in detail. Thus, Pynchon uses slapstick to set up his theme early, and later, more serious moments, are actually elaborations on this already established motif. The comedy is not a reduction at all; rather it is a sort of scaffolding on which Pynchon develops entropic decline.

Profane's comic accidents play an important role in *V*. While the chapters devoted to his adventures in the present are the novel's lightest, his basic dilemma with the inanimate world directs our understanding of many of the characters that show up later in the historical chapters. It is Profane's predicament that we should think of, for instance, when the British spy Porpentine "started down the stairs...[and] tripped and fell; proceeded whirling and bouncing, followed by sounds of breaking glass and a spray of Chablis punch" (69), or when Evan Godolphin "lost his balance and fell halfway over the back of the carriage" (158). Unlike the seemingly apolitical Profane chapters, these comic moments are immediately grounded in political turmoil: Porpentine's fall occurs in Egypt during the 1898 Fashoda incident, in which a disagreement over French and English colonial interests in Africa nearly resulted in war; and Godolphin's stumble also has political resonances, occurring amidst riots at the Venezuelan consulate in 1899

Florence. In these chapters, Pynchon painstakingly recreates, in historical and geographical detail, obscure global conflicts that foreshadow the world wars to come. As the nineteenth century comes to a close, Pynchon seems to suggest, entropy increases, and the world begins descending into disorder. In this way, Pynchon provides a literal reminder of this entropic decline in his physical comedy.

Slapstick also highlights the tenuous place of the individual in these global crises. Like Profane, both Porpentine and Evan Godolphin are sympathetic characters, and Pynchon's use of physical comedy contrasts their humanity with the cold and inanimate worlds in which they find themselves embroiled. However, Porpentine's and Godolphin's mishaps are significantly darker than Profane's because both Porpentine and Godolphin are ultimately destroyed by the inanimate world in which they fail to get along. Porpentine is murdered by the cyborg Bongo-Shaftsbury, a self-fashioned "clockwork" man with electric switches incorporated into his flesh. Bongo-Shaftsbury makes entropy his personal motto, asserting that "[h]umanity is something to destroy" (80-81). Evan Godolphin meets an even more tragic end. After receiving severe facial injuries in World War I, he is given experimental plastic surgery in which various "inert" materials (silver, ivory, paraffin, and celluloid) are inserted into his face. Unlike Bongo-Shaftsbury, whose incorporation of the inanimate into his body highlights his inhumanity, Godolphin's all-too-human body rejects these inanimate objects, and his face eventually falls apart, turning him into a grotesque: "the upper part of the nose seemed to have slid down, giving an exaggerated saddle-and-hump; the chin cut off at midpoint to slope concave back up the other side, pulling part of the lip in a scarred half smile. Just under the eye socket on the same side winked a roughly circular expanse of silver" (475). Evan

Godolphin's bodily rejection of inert material basically restates Profane's inability to live in peace with the inanimate world. Viewed together, Godolphin's and Profane's predicaments are a perfect example of Pynchon's jocoserious treatment of entropic decline. By treating an identical theme in alternating comic and tragic modes, Pynchon undermines our understanding of the very terms "comic" and "tragic."

This ambivalence is especially apparent in moments when Pynchon's dark humor simultaneously takes on elements of both comedy and tragedy. In the middle of a Profane chapter, for instance, the narrator suddenly begins to describe the "dog days" in which "[t]he world started to run more and more afoul of the inanimate." The narrator provides a mock-epic catalogue of physical disasters:

Fifteen were killed in a train wreck near Oaxaca, Mexico, on 1 July. The next day fifteen people died when an apartment house collapsed in Madrid. July 4 a bus fell into a river near Karachi and thirty-one passengers drowned. Thirty-nine more were drowned two days later in a tropical storm in the central Philippines. 9 July the Aegean Islands were hit by an earthquake and tidal waves, which killed forty-three. 14 July a MATS plane crashed after takeoff from McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey, killing forty-five. An earthquake at Anjar, India, 21 July, killed 117. From 22 to 24 July floods rampaged in central and southern Iran, killing three hundred. (290)

The narrator finally ends—after another half-page of misfortunes—with a challenge to readers to see for themselves and "[l]ook in any yearly Almanac, under 'Disasters'—which is where the figures above come from. The business is transacted month after month after month" (290-291). This list of deadly catastrophes reinforces Pynchon's suggestion that the twentieth century is headed for destruction at an alarming rate, but even here Pynchon treats the subject with humor. These descriptions come in the middle of an otherwise comic Profane chapter, establishing the style as playful and irreverent.



The excessive length lends a hyperbolic quality to the deaths described, and the detailed attention to dates and the numbers of victims killed adds a slightly unreal dimension to these disasters. In presenting these deaths as statistics, and referring to them as “business,” Pynchon parodies the impersonal rhetoric of bureaucracies and undermines their individual meaning. And the narrator’s offhand challenge to readers to look for themselves in an almanac lends a flippancy to the tone and further displaces any sense of tragedy that the scene elicits. But the “comedy” of these tragedies is most apparent when viewed in conjunction with Profane’s earlier slapstick mishaps, for the disasters extend his discord with the inanimate world to enormous proportions. Profane’s bumbblings underscore the comic aspects of mass destruction while the catalogue of disasters highlights the darker implications of his stumbles. In both instances the human body is revealed as fragile, helpless, and continuously under the threat of annihilation. In treating this fact in opposing modes, Pynchon highlights his jocoserious depiction of bodily life.

*V.* is full of other instances where humorous perspectives on the body are symbolically juxtaposed with bleak testaments of humanity’s path towards destruction. The explicit chapter entitled “In which Esther gets a nosejob” turns the process of plastic surgery into a musical comedy when the surgeon Dr. Schoenmaker sings as he operates on Esther’s nose:

Have I told you fella  
 She’s got the sweetest columella  
 And a septum that’s swept ‘em all on their ass;  
 Each casual chondrectomy  
 Meant only a big fat check to me  
 Till I sawed this osteoclastible lass. (110)

The song’s rhyming use of technical terms mixes musical and medical discourses and lends a humorous quality to the surgery, which is earlier described in grim detail. The

scene also provides a comic counterpoint to Evan Godolphin's botched facial reconstruction as well as to V. herself, whose body is altered to the extent that her status as a human can be called into question. We can also find comic allusions to V.'s inanimate body in Profane's imagined conversations with SHOCK and SHROUD, mannequins used for testing the effects of physical trauma and radiation, respectively. Profane immediately relates to the crash-test dummy SHOCK, whom he identifies as the "first inanimate schlemihl he'd ever encountered" (285). His conversation with SHROUD, however, is much darker as the dummy announces to Profane the inevitable fate of the human race: "Me and SHOCK are what you and everybody will be someday" (286). Pynchon again blends a comic scenario with a bleak perspective. Profane discussing the fate of the human race with an inanimate dummy is comic, but SHROUD's entropic message, which is really Profane's message for himself, is ultimately somber. SHOCK the schlemiel and SHROUD the prophet of doom each represent an opposing end of the jocoserious spectrum. Profane's conversations with the dummies thus consolidate these views into a single jocoserious moment. One of the most striking features of *V.* then, is the explicit connection between entropy and physical comedy. Pynchon establishes his preoccupation with entropic decline initially through light body humor, but then expands on it throughout the text, revealing the theme's darker implications. By the end of the novel, slapstick and the inevitable movement towards death are nearly synonymous.

### **The Comedy of the Rocket**

*Gravity's Rainbow* returns to many of the themes that preoccupy Pynchon in *V.* In *Gravity's Rainbow*, however, they are treated with more complexity. Entropy is still a

major concern, but in the later work Pynchon uses statistical analysis and basic forms of chaos theory in order to investigate the ways that order and disorder intersect. He also includes a rich web of regenerative imagery in order to suggest a more positive, counter-narrative to his cynical stories of entropic decline. The body-as-machine symbol also plays a major role in *Gravity's Rainbow*, but rather than simply writing bodies with inert or mechanical objects woven into the flesh, Pynchon uses Pavlovian psychology to suggest that the body, epitomized by Slothrop's penis, can become machine-like through conditioning. Pynchon then ties this phenomenon to larger discourses about freedom and control. As in *V.*, Pynchon complicates these themes with his body humor. In fact, it is the most famous slapstick prop of all, the banana, that symbolically holds Pynchon's multiple themes together. As we have seen, the banana serves as a comic version of the rocket, and while it may temporarily relieve characters (and readers) from the destructive threat from above, its seemingly innocuous peel can bring its own type of destruction from below. The banana is also notably phallic, a point made clear when "Osbie Feel stands in the minstrels' gallery, holding one of the biggest of Pirate's bananas so that it protrudes out the fly of his striped pajama bottoms—stroking with his other hand the great jaundiced curve" (8). Thus the comic image of the banana is symbolically connected to the two key images of *Gravity's Rainbow*: the falling rocket and Slothrop's penis. The mysterious connection between these two drives Slothrop's quest in the Zone and much of the novel's plot, but Pynchon connects them through the banana before readers are introduced to Slothrop or are provided any key information about the rocket. Thus, as in *V.*, physical comedy is used early in order to establish themes that are elaborated more fully as the narrative moves forward. And also like *V.*, *Gravity's*

*Rainbow*'s blending of slapstick with the novel's other themes presents an ambivalent view of bodily existence and contributes to Pynchon's larger jocoserious vision.

According to film critic Alan Dale, slapstick is "a rupture in the expected link between physical effort and result" (4). A man expects to walk safely across the street, but he unexpectedly trips and falls. The implication is that our bodies interact with the material world in unpredictable ways. This definition closely resembles Christy L. Burns' assessment of Pynchon's worlds as "the postmodern space where agents are severed from their intentions" (150). Viewed broadly, both descriptions adhere to N. Katherine Hayles' account of a contemporary scientific worldview. In her discussion of "chaotics," her term for chaos theory, Hayles explains how the classic Newtonian "clockwork" worldview has given way to a more complex framework:

The Newtonian paradigm emphasizes predictability. Such a mindset is exemplified by Laplace's famous boast that, given the initial conditions and an intelligence large enough to perform the calculations, he could predict the state of the universe at any future moment. By contrast, chaotics celebrates unpredictability, seeing it as a source of information. Whereas Newtonian mechanics envisions the universe through inertial reference frames that extend infinitely far in space and time, chaotics concentrates on complex irregular forms and conceptualizes them...through fractional dimensions that defeat tiny predictions and exact symmetries. (7)

All three writers (slapstick critic, Pynchon scholar, and chaos theorist) see in their respective fields an emphasis on unpredictability. This section consolidates these perspectives and offers a reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* that demonstrates a link between Pynchon's comedy, his use of science, and his construction of an unstable postmodern fictional landscape.

Since its publication, critics have commented at length on *Gravity's Rainbow*'s use of science and technology. Alan J. Friedman, in one of the earliest studies of the

novel's science, reads *Gravity's Rainbow* as a struggle between "the old and the new attitudes of science." Friedman explains that "Pointsman, the Pavlovian, is the inheritor of the Newtonian view of a clockwork mechanical universe ... [and] Roger Mexico is one of a rival assortment that figuratively as well as literally express the image today's scientists have ... taken, that God, if he exists at all, is a statistician, not a clockmaker" (70). Similarly, Susan Strehle sees a significant connection between contemporary science and the unstable worlds created in much contemporary fiction, noting that "Pynchon stands out as the most obvious example of an artist influenced by the new physics" (23). While these critics, and many others, have done quite a bit to clarify Pynchon's scientific metaphors, these metaphors have yet to be fully connected to Pynchon's comedy. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon's body humor is related to the science of unpredictability and statistics in a manner similar to the connection between slapstick and entropy established in *V*. *Gravity's Rainbow*, however, is at once more complex and more subtle in its uses of physical comedy. Without easily recognizable, and often repeatable words like "animate" and "inanimate" to fuel his metaphors, Pynchon relies on more understated connections between his science and his comedy.

A useful way to approach *Gravity's Rainbow's* body humor may be to look closely at a key comic scene in *The Crying of Lot 49*, a novella published between *V* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. While *Lot 49* is not driven by physical comedy to the same extent as the two longer works, Pynchon provides a moment that, through slapstick, intertextually foreshadows many of the key images that dominate the later novel. In the scene, the protagonist Oedipa Maas, in order to win a game of "Strip Botticelli" with the lawyer

Metzger, puts on every article of clothing she owns. Looking at herself in the mirror,  
Oedipa

laughed so violently she fell over, taking a can of hair spray on the sink with her. The can hit the floor, something broke, and with a great outsurge of pressure the stuff commenced atomizing, propelling the can swiftly about the bathroom. Metzger rushed in to find Oedipa rolling around, trying to get back on her feet, amid a great sticky miasma of fragrant lacquer...She was scared but nowhere near sober. The can knew where it was going, she sensed, or something fast enough, God or a digital machine, might have computed in advance the complex web of its travel; but she wasn't fast enough, and knew only that it might hit them at any moment, at whatever clip it was doing, a hundred miles an hour. (36-37)

The hairspray can continues its unpredictable path for some time, breaking the bathroom mirror, bouncing off the toilet, and infusing the situation with a general sense of madness.

Oedipa's feeling that the hairspray can "knew where it was going" and her inability to foresee its path, places her in a similar position to contemporary scientists working to find order in complex, unpredictable systems. Her feeling that "God or a digital machine" may be able to accurately predict the can's flight emerges as an ironic nostalgia for Laplace's vision of a clockwork world. For as Peter Cooper asserts, "[m]ost contemporary scientists would argue on Heisenbergian grounds that human beings will never attain the predictive power envisioned by Laplace and Oedipa" (123). Oedipa's belief that order exists behind the can's flight, however, serves as a microcosmic example of her dilemma in the novel. Like many of Pynchon's protagonists, especially Herbert Stencil and Slothrop, Oedipa constantly searches for evidence of order lurking behind the seeming disorder she is presented with. In this case, it is the disorder of a slapstick

mishap in the physical world that instigates Oedipa's contemplation of a higher intelligence. As Safer and others have pointed out, Pynchon often undermines or mocks his questing characters' search for order. This instance is no different, for by using madcap comedy to frame Oedipa's search for order, Pynchon highlights the absurdity of her quest.

The most significant aspect of this scene is that it thematically foreshadows the major dilemmas of *Gravity's Rainbow*. In the later novel, the comic flight of the hairspray can transforms into the terrifying image of the rocket. Like Oedipa, the characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* seek order behind the seeming randomness of the falling V-2 rockets. While Oedipa suspects that God might know (or even guide) the hairspray can's path, Slothrop fears that the rockets may be divinely driven. For Slothrop, the rocket becomes a modern-day manifestation of the hand of God emerging from the clouds to single him out: an image that plagued his puritan ancestor Constant Slothrop (27). Like Oedipa, Slothrop's impulse to seek out a divine order behind the falling rockets establishes him as a comic figure, seeking order where no evidence of it exists. In this case the comedy is significantly darker, especially when we learn, as the novel progresses, that Slothrop really *is* connected to the V-2 in disturbing ways. Pavlovian psychologist Ned Pointsman, on the other hand, would prefer to see the falling rockets predicted by the orderly intelligence of Oedipa's imagined digital machine. "Can't you . . . tell," the frustrated Pointsman asks Roger Mexico, "which places would be safest to go into, safest from attack?" (55, original ellipsis). But of course Mexico cannot tell; no such digital machine exists. The pattern of the falling rockets is as unpredictable as a slapstick fall. By reading *Gravity's Rainbow* in conjunction with the hairspray-can

hijinks of *Lot 49*, the jocoserious foundation for Pynchon's project becomes apparent. In its randomness and unpredictability, the rocket adheres to the most basic tenet of physical comedy. But Pynchon extends his comedy to hyperbolic proportions, transforming the playful into the menacing.

The lack of certainty about when and where the next rocket will fall creates an environment of fear and paranoia in the early chapters of *Gravity's Rainbow*. In his depiction of London during the last months of World War II, Pynchon creates a world steeped in physical instability; in essence, this world is governed by the principles of physical comedy. The constant threat of death darkens the humor of this slapstick world, but even in the novel's most terrifying moments, Pynchon never severs the rocket's ties to comedy. In fact, the more readers learn about the V-2, the clearer the connection to the novel's body humor becomes. This is especially evident when considering Brennschluss. Brennschluss is the German term for the moment in the rocket's flight when all fuel is burned. After Brennschluss, the "Rocket was on its own" (301): manmade technology has no more control, and it will land wherever gravity, air friction, and many other incalculable factors may direct it. These infinite variables make it impossible (for both the Germans firing the rocket and the English receiving it) to predict the rocket's destination. Thus Brennschluss is the moment in the rocket's flight when order must give way to chance. Enzian, one of the novel's various rocket enthusiasts, asserts that "the Rocket was an entire system *won*, away from the feminine darkness, held against the entropies of lovable but scatterbrained Mother Nature" (324, original emphasis). Given what we know of Brennschluss and the fact that each Rocket's destination is essentially unknowable, Enzian's romantic view of the V-2 becomes comic



disillusionment. “Scatterbrained Mother Nature” wins in the end. Pynchon makes this point fairly early in the novel when a rocket falls at sea due to “premature Brennschluss” (8). The term obviously suggests premature ejaculation and is one of an endless array of symbolic connections between the rocket and the penis. In this case, however, both the rocket and the penis are rendered comic. The prematurely ejaculating penis is defused of its power to be the ominous, patriarchal, colonizing phallus. The unexpected shift from erection to flaccidness turns the mythic phallic symbol into weak, unstable matter. Likewise, the rocket that falls at sea is no longer menacing. The “system won” suddenly loses, and the masculinist pinnacle of modern science, embodied in the rocket, is rendered comic through mechanical failure.

While the rocket siege creates an aura of fear and uncertainty throughout London, the rocket’s instability is also evident when considered from the German point of view. In a flashback concerning Katje’s service to Captain Blicero, we learn that “nearly every day a rocket misfires. Late in October...one fell back and exploded, killing 12 of the ground crew” (96). As in premature Brennschluss, the misfiring rockets subvert the order they seemingly represent and mock the characters’ tendencies to view them with religious reverence. Similarly, in a long section devoted to Franz Pökler, Pynchon provides a glimpse of the development of the rocket from its earliest stages. The struggle to bring even a tenuous order to the seemingly endless components of the rocket is often fraught with disaster and uncertainty. For instance, when a “Dr. Wahmke decided to mix peroxide and alcohol together *before* injection into the thrust chamber, to see what would happen,” the experiment explodes, killing him and two others (403, original emphasis). Once they begin testing the rocket, uncertainty itself becomes the closest thing to

stability. Since “chances are astronomically against a perfect hit,” the scientists infer that the safest place from which to observe the incoming rocket is from the “center of the target area” (425). While this reasoning may be statistically sound, the image of trained scientists deliberately sitting at the rocket’s target is absurdly comic. For despite its probable safety, the rocket’s bull’s eye has an undeniable symbolic value. Even Pökler himself, “though trusting as much as any scientist in uncertainty, is not feeling too secure here. It is after all his own personal ass whose quivering sphincter is centered right on Ground Zero” (425). Pökler’s fear is darkly ironic: “trusting in uncertainty” is a contradiction in terms, and the paradox forces him to rely on uncertainty as if it were certain. In such conditions absolute security is impossible. In his depiction of the rocket scientists playing the odds and literally gambling with their lives, Pynchon turns statistical probability into grim comedy.

Perhaps the most unsettling and destabilizing aspect of the rocket is that it travels faster than sound and thus explodes *before* one can hear it approaching. The phenomenon is scientifically explicable, but the reversal of expected cause and effect undermines the manner in which characters understand the physical world. The rocket thus becomes a symbol of death without warning. If you can hear it coming in, then you know you have survived, but if it kills you, then it does so silently. This inversion represents an example of technology progressing faster than human consciousness can adapt. While the rocket does not break any laws of physics, it subverts day-to-day comprehension of physical behavior. In other words, it turns the world upside down. The rocket’s descent then becomes a monstrous literalization of Alan Dale’s definition of slapstick comedy as a “rupture in the expected link between physical effort and result”

(4). While the rocket, especially in this sense, serves as a particularly frightening symbol of death, the narrator seems to intuit the comic implications of the physical reversal. Presumably taking on the consciousness of all of London during the siege, the narrator considers the V-2 attacks: “Each firebloom, followed by blast, then by sound of arrival, is a mockery (how can it not be deliberate?) of the reversible process” (139). In its apparent ability to invert the laws of cause and effect, the rocket, and those who fire it, become cosmic jesters, mocking its victims’ attempts to live in a world that makes sense.

The V-2 rocket is in many ways the ultimate jocoserious prop. Pynchon recognizes the rocket’s terrifying aspects and his treatment of its destructive force emerges as a strong moral condemnation of the societies that built it and embrace it. But for all of its horrifying power, the rocket is also comic, and the text draws direct links between it and other comic props, such as the banana and the hairspray can. This comedy contributes to Pynchon’s critique of his technocratic society by undermining the literal, psychological, and symbolic power of the rocket. While the V-2 has the power to destroy, Pynchon’s physical comedy also highlights its fallibility. The novel’s slapstick underscores the fact that the rocket is not, as its creators would like to believe, a perfectly efficient killing machine. It is subject to the laws of chance and probability just like its victims. But even this comedy is itself unstable, and *Gravity’s Rainbow* rarely offers a joke or comic scene that is not tinged with menace.

### **Slothrop’s Penis (And Other Rocket Bodies)**

While the image of the rocket looms over the entire novel, its thematic impact can be seen most significantly in its relationship to individual human bodies. As a phallic symbol, the rocket represents the most terrifying aspects of patriarchal ambition and

portrays what Pynchon sees as a twentieth-century death fetish. But the rocket is tied to the literal penis as well as to the symbolic phallus. Slothrop's penis, in particular, is a major element in the novel, and Pynchon connects it to *Gravity's Rainbow's* larger themes of freedom and control. At the same time, however, the penis (unlike the mythic phallus) is often seen as a comic organ. In Chapter One of this study, we saw Philip Roth demonstrate how obsessive attitudes towards male genitalia can create outrageous comedy. Pynchon uses the penis in similar ways but places the obsession on a much larger scale. While in *Portnoy's Complaint* Roth creates humor by showing one man's peculiar obsession with his organ, Pynchon imagines a world in which the penis becomes the object of fascination for an entire network of interests, ranging from military organizations to international cartels. This obsession with Slothrop's penis often drives the novel's bawdy comedy as well as its frightening imagery.

The fascination with Slothrop's genitals stems from their peculiar relationship with the V-2 rocket. Slothrop's private map of sexual conquests throughout London coincides with the map of V-2 rocket hits. At the same time, oddly enough, Slothrop gets an erection any time he is in the vicinity of a rocket explosion, or even when he is exposed to various rocket hardware or diagrams. This all has something to do with experiments that were performed on Slothrop as a child under the direction of the scientist Laszlo Jamf. Using the Pavlovian equation of stimulus-response, Jamf conditioned the young Slothrop (codenamed IT for Infant Tyrone) to get an erection while in the presence of the plastic Imipolex G, later used as an insulation device on the V-2. The problem for those interested in Slothrop's case, and particularly for Pointsman, the novel's traditional cause-and-effect man, is that Slothrop's sexual encounters occur

days, and often weeks, before the rockets actually hit. Thus Slothrop apparently responds in advance of the stimulus. This reversal of stimulus and response mirrors the incoming V-2's apparent inversion of cause and effect. The difference, however, is that the rocket's reversal of cause and effect is scientifically explicable; Slothrop's is not, and the precise reason for Slothrop's connection to the rocket blasts is never made clear.

The attempt to explain Slothrop's unique relationship with the rocket is presented as a bizarre comedy in which the activity of one man's penis becomes the text on which multiple disciplines focus their attention. In setting the various discourses against each other, Pynchon displays the inability of each one to fully account for Slothrop's peculiar behavior. Statistician Roger Mexico argues that the correlation is a "statistical oddity," but admits that it goes "deeper than oddity ought to drive" (85). Other figures guess precognition or mind control. Ned Pointsman, on the other hand, explains the phenomenon in terms that show his unwillingness to depart from his mechanistic, clockwork view of the universe. Pointsman asserts that Slothrop "can *feel them coming*, days in advance. But it's a reflex. A reflex to something that's in the air *right now*" (49, original emphasis). Pointsman later continues this line of reasoning in a chilling moment: "if it's in the air right here, right now, then the rockets follow from it, 100% of the time. No exceptions. When we find it, we'll have shown again the stone determinacy of everything, of every soul. There will be precious little room for any hope at all. You can see how important a discovery like that would be" (86). Pointsman's excitement at the prospect of discovering a world with "little room for any hope" displays the moral implications of his mechanistic worldview. As the cause-and-effect man, Pointsman wants to live in a Newtonian world where all physical movement is

predictable. Pavlovian psychology, with its emphasis on stimulus and response, transfers this clockwork world to individual behavior, and posits a view of humanity in which people will behave as machines. Alan J. Friedman sums up this Pavlovian outlook: “If humans are just complex assemblies of masses, biochemicals, and their thoughts are just fleeting electric currents in the brain, then human behavior too is predictable” (76).

The implications of this mechanistic view of human behavior are central to *Gravity's Rainbow*. Throughout the book, Pynchon plays with the idea of humans as machines, using Slothrop as the prime example. Like many of his other themes, Pynchon presents the clockwork view of human behavior in a manner that is simultaneously frightening and comic. Humans behaving as machines is a concept, due to Henri Bergson, that is often tied to comic theory. According to Bergson, nearly all humor is derived from humans acting like machines, what he calls “mechanical inelasticity” in human behavior (67). For Bergson, this mechanical comedy applies to situational humor as well as physical comedy. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon uses mechanistic humor but gives it a terrifying edge by suggesting that machine-like bodies are actually bodies without freedom. This is driven home in Slothrop's codename Infant Tyrone, for the initials IT suggest that, at least in the eyes of his persecutors, Slothrop is more object than human being. That the focus on Slothrop's body is centered on his penis also reinforces this mechanistic view. Dr. Jamf, we are told, chooses erections because they are easily observable: “a hardon, that's either there, or it isn't. Binary, elegant. The job of observing it can even be done by a *student*” (84, original emphasis). This view transforms Slothrop's body into a machine where his penis becomes a sort of on/off button. In another moment, after Slothrop “escapes” into the post-war Zone, the narrator

describes one of Slothrop's involuntary erections in terms that highlight the mechanical imagery: "His erection hums from a certain distance, like an instrument installed, wired by Them into his body as a colonial outpost" (285). In this moment, Pynchon blends the comic and the terrifying; the buzzing, involuntary penis irreverently emerges as a sort of science-fiction grotesque. And in comparing Slothrop's penis to a "colonial outpost," the text establishes a connection between Slothrop and the novel's other dehumanized victims of Western imperialism, particularly the African Hereros. The image establishes Slothrop's helplessness: even lost in the Zone, Slothrop's own body becomes an agent for an ominous, omniscient Them.

Perhaps the most comic treatment of Slothrop's organ occurs in the song "The Penis He Thought Was His Own." Presented by the narrator as a musical-comedy interlude, one of many in the novel, the song presents Slothrop's predicament in a surprisingly cheerful manner. I cite only the second verse:

(inner voices): But They came through the hole in the night,  
 (bass): And They sweet-talked it clear out of sight—  
 (inner voices): Out of sight . . .  
 (tenor): Now he sighs all alone,  
 With a heartbroken moan,  
 For the pe-nis, he thought-was, his, owwwwn!  
 (inner voices): Was, his own! (217)

Once again, Pynchon presents the ominous and the ridiculous simultaneously. The effect of this song, and of many of the other songs in *Gravity's Rainbow*, is ultimately ambivalent. The cheery style of the transcribed music is undermined by the frightening content of the lyrics, which focus on a malicious "They." In turn, the frightening quality of the conspiracy is transformed into comedy by being presented as an upbeat song. This instance serves as a perfect example of Pynchon's jocoserious style. While the song is

funny, it is not, as some critics might argue, comic relief. Rather than relieve readers from the novel's "serious" themes, it presents those themes in a comic manner, forcing the reader to consider them in a new light. Nor is the song a metaphorical reduction. The literal facts of Slothrop's predicament are not metaphorically transformed; the song simply uses a different type of discourse to present its material.

The comic treatment of Slothrop's mysterious penis, and the imagery of Slothrop's body as a machine, contributes substantially to the novel's discourses about freedom, control, and sexuality. The song "The Penis He Thought Was His Own," for instance, most likely alludes to a line in Norman O. Brown's *Love's Body*. Brown argues that in male sexuality, the child identifies his entire body with his father's penis, for both occupy the space of the mother's womb: "[i]n genital organization, we identify with the penis; but the penis we are is not our own, but daddy's; or at least in it, we and the father are one" (57). Based on his reading of Freud, Brown sees this genital organization as an "unnatural tyranny" in which the entire body is made subservient to the genitals (*Life Against Death* 27). Lawrence Wolfley applies Brown's argument to *Gravity's Rainbow*, asserting that Slothrop "carries the full curse of genital organization. His epic genital capacity derives directly from his mysterious link with the charismatic, phallic rocket" (114). In other words, Slothrop, due to his conditioning, identifies with the rocket in much the same way that the child, according to Brown, identifies with the father's penis. In "The Penis He Thought Was His Own," Pynchon comically literalizes Brown's metaphor. While Brown says that the child's penis is really "daddy's," Pynchon creates a scenario in which Slothrop's father actually sold his penis to a chemical cartel in exchange for Slothrop's education. The implication of Slothrop's penis not being his



own, then, is that his entire life is not his own but rather one that has been predetermined by various interests. Slothrop's involuntary penis serves as a metaphor for his entire life.

In a psychoanalytic sense, Slothrop's predicament can be seen as an allegory for the common predicament of all humans. His conditioning serves as an extreme example of the psycho-sexual conditioning that is inflicted on everyone as a result of living within a particular society. As James Earl asserts, the "conditioned and uncontrollable sexual response and the guilt it generates are an important tool society uses to control the behavior of its members" (230). In the case of Slothrop's penis, this control is both literal and personal. But Pynchon provides other examples that suggest conditioning and control also occur at the socio-cultural level. We are told, for instance, that "[I]ike every young man growing up in England [Pirate Prentice] was conditioned to get a hardon in the presence of certain fetishes, and then conditioned to feel shame about his new reflexes." While Prentice's conditioning is cultural, and thus not directed solely at him, it is still used by those in power as an agent of control, and it is even suggested that everything about Prentice, including his culturally determined sexual urges, is stored in a dossier by the all-knowing "They" (72). Pynchon also touches on specifically American conditioning in a moment of slapstick as the double agent Katje Borgesius mysteriously produces, like a Looney Tunes character, a seltzer bottle with which to squirt Slothrop in the face. The paranoid Slothrop instantly sees the classic slapstick weapon as an ominous sign: "*The Seltzer Bottle?* What shit is this, now? What other interesting props have They thought to plant, and what other American reflexes are They after?" (197, original emphasis). Here Pynchon deliberately ties Slothrop's conditioning to cinematic slapstick, going so far as to suggest that Hollywood slapstick films have actually created

predictable reflexes in Slothrop's behavior. The moment wonderfully illuminates a key facet of Pynchon's physical comedy. The use of slapstick (a type of comedy that relies on the discord between humans and inanimate objects) highlights Slothrop's involuntary cultural conditioning. That conditioning in turn suggests that Slothrop himself is merely a complex inanimate object. Thus Katje's squirting of Slothrop in the face with a seltzer bottle may feel like a simple moment of comic relief, but after closer examination, this physical comedy thematically contributes to our understanding of Slothrop's objectification at the hands of omnipotent conspirators.

Pynchon returns to this theme of cinematic conditioning later in the same section when Slothrop's clothes are stolen from his hotel room by an unknown culprit. Slothrop, while naked, chases the man out a window and up a tree, but the thief unexpectedly climbs *down* the tree instead. Slothrop again understands the event through cultural conditioning: "They knew Slothrop would choose up, not down—they were counting on *that* damned American reflex all right, bad guy in a chase always heads up" (199, original emphasis). As in the scene described above, Slothrop's behavior is determined by extensive exposure to American movies. Here it is the action-adventure genre, rather than comedy, that provides the stimulus for Slothrop's reflex. But despite the generic switch in cinematic discourses, the scene is still firmly rooted in slapstick. Moments after Slothrop realizes that he has climbed the tree in the wrong direction, he learns that "They" have sawed through the trunk, and then "down topples Slothrop, bouncing from limb to limb" (200). As in the previous example, Pynchon explicitly connects Slothrop's conditioning to a moment of physical comedy. The slapstick not only underscores Slothrop's inability to live with the physical world, as it does for Benny Profane in *V.*, it

also reinforces our understanding of Slothrop's conditioning and undermines his individual freedom.

In these examples, both Slothrop and Pirate Prentice sense that their cultural background has determined the ways that their bodies inhabit the world. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry explores this sort of involuntary cultural embodiment, asserting that through accents, posture, and hunger for particular foods, "nation-states reside in personhood" (109). Scarry argues that this "presence of learned culture in the body" is what is at stake in a war (109). A declaration of war, for Scarry, is the attempt of one nation to force its own cultural reflexes onto another (137). Pynchon adapts this idea to his own world where nationalistic concerns are secondary to technological interests. In this world, cultural embodiment, rather than being at stake, is used as a tool whereby the strong maintain power over the weak. The narrator makes this point clearly enough stating that

this War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted ... secretly, it was being dictated by the needs of technology ... by a conspiracy between human beings and techniques, by something that needed the energy-burst of war, crying, "Money be damned, the very life of [insert name of Nation] is at stake." (521, original emphasis and ellipses)

The narrator's cynical view of nationalism informs our understanding of Slothrop's, Pirate Prentice's, and numerous other characters' cultural conditioning. Just as nationalist political values are merely "theatre" used to distract people from the real business of war, the involuntary reflexes of cultural embodiment are used as controls to predict and determine behavior. While Pynchon often treats this issue comically, as in the moments of slapstick described above, the implications of such cultural control bleakly suggest a world in which all citizens are merely culturally driven machines.

Slothrop's penis is the primary symbol through which Pynchon suggests that people are simple mechanisms, but Slothrop's involuntary erections in the presence of the V-2 anticipate numerous other correlations between individual bodies and the rocket. Through imagery that either literally or symbolically treats the melding of human and machine, Pynchon presents a series of rocket bodies in which characters either become rockets themselves or are inextricably linked to the rocket on the material level. These joinings of rocket and body further Pynchon's exploration of personal freedom by suggesting that, like the V-2 and Slothrop's penis, all of the novel's characters are actually products of corporate interest manufactured to serve the cause of brutal power. At the same time, Pynchon's comic depiction of rocket bodies continues his dark version of Bergsonian humor. While Bergson uses the image of the automaton as a metaphor to understand the comic predicaments of living beings, Pynchon presents bodies that have literal connections to machinery and uses them as the basis for his critique of a world suffering from an unhealthy fascination with technological progress. This critique does not abandon comedy, a point that is made clear by Pynchon's frequent juxtapositions of rocket bodies with classic slapstick humor.

An early and subtle example of a rocket body belongs to Tchitcherine, a Russian agent who, like Slothrop, searches for the rocket throughout the Zone. Tchitcherine "is more metal than anything else. Steel teeth wink as he talks. Under the pompadour is a silver plate. Gold wirework threads in three-dimensional tattoo among the fine wreckage of cartilage and bone inside his right knee joint" (337). Tchitcherine's cyborg-like description is reminiscent of the various mechanical and inanimate bodies found throughout *V*. Yet in this context, Tchitcherine's body alludes to both the rocket that he

searches for and to Slothrop, who is a more literal example of a rocket body. Aside from the mysterious connection between his penis and the rocket, Slothrop at one point on his adventures through the Zone, actually dons a cape and helmet and becomes Rocketman, a parodic version of a comic-book superhero. Pynchon slyly subverts the amazing feats of these costumed heroes by giving Slothrop/Rocketman the mission of procuring a hidden stash of hashish for the smuggler Seaman Bodine. Slothrop's metamorphosis into Rocketman, one of several transformations that he undergoes throughout the novel, seems to serve primarily as a comic literalization of the relationship that Slothrop has had with the V-2 all along. As a man conditioned to become erect in the vicinity of the rocket, and as one whose quest throughout the narrative is to search for a specific rocket, Slothrop *is* very much a Rocket-Man. During his tenure as the costumed hero, however, Slothrop's sexual activity undergoes a shift. As Rocketman, Slothrop meets the German film actress Margherita Erdmann, who drives Slothrop into a sadomasochistic relationship in which he is coerced into reenacting scenes from Erdmann's various pornographic horror films, with Slothrop playing the part of cruel torturer to Erdmann's whimpering victim. It is no coincidence that Slothrop's sexual encounters take on a sadistic edge after he dons the Rocketman costume. As a literal embodiment of the V-2, itself a violent phallic symbol, it is appropriate that Slothrop's sexuality becomes infused with violence. Pynchon highlights the connection between the violence of the rocket and the violent sexuality of Rocketman when, while tied to a rack just before intercourse, Erdmann reminds Slothrop to "Put your [Rocketman] helmet on" (396).

While Tchitcherine's metal body and Slothrop's adventures as Rocketman are both humorous, the issue of rocket bodies reaches its comic climax during Slothrop's trip

through the Mittlewerke, where he encounters a group of American soldiers who have taken rocket obsession to another level. The soldiers have turned the factory into a sort of rocket theme-park, complete with souvenirs and guided tours. Slothrop comes upon a group of drunken soldiers, singing a series of bawdy “Rocket Limericks” which tell, often in graphic detail, of bizarre sexual unions between men and rockets. For example:

There was a young fellow named Hector,  
Who was fond of a launcher-erector,  
But the squishes and pops  
Of acute pressure drops  
Wrecked Hector’s hydraulic connector. (306)

Like many of the songs in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the rocket limericks comically treat issues that are dealt with in a more serious manner at other places in the text. The limericks are also important in their demonstration that the fetishization of the V-2 has taken hold of the entire culture of the Zone. The soldiers singing the limericks were not sexually conditioned like Slothrop, yet they still recognize a violent and erotic power in the weapon.

The Americans, led by the racist Major Marvy, soon mistake Slothrop for an ally of the Schwarzkommando, a troop of African-Germans, and a chase scene ensues, with the drunken soldiers chanting their limericks the entire time. Slothrop escapes, but in the next scene, the Fury-like American soldiers catch up with him, and Slothrop is forced to escape in a hot air balloon while the Americans chase him in fighter planes. What follows is perhaps the most comic scene in the novel, as Slothrop and his new friend Professor Schnorp fend off the attackers by throwing custard pies at the approaching planes. Pynchon’s description of the aerial battle is driven by cinematic images, and the

moment's comic chaos is increased by the continued singing of the American soldiers, whose limericks have become increasingly vulgar and violent:

There once was a fellow named Ritter,  
Who slept with a guidance transmitter.  
It shriveled his cock,  
Which fell off in his sock,  
And made him exceedingly bitter. (334)

Here Pynchon blends cinematic slapstick imagery (after the banana peel, the cream pie is perhaps the most famous slapstick prop) with descriptions of sexually violent encounters between bodies and rockets. The scene, more than any other in his body of work, encompasses Pynchon's unique body humor. The blatant allusion to Hollywood slapstick provides a base of playful precariousness and establishes a comic imbalance between humans and inanimate objects. While humans are performing the action, it is the props (hot air balloon, pies, planes) that drive the scene. The cheerfully singing American soldiers add to the episode's playful, cinematic quality, but the often violent limericks darken the comedy with disturbing imagery even while their content of the union between man and machine contributes thematically to the instability of human bodies. The scene is entrenched in comedy, but it refuses to abandon the novel's major themes. Even when Pynchon is at his most playful, he retains an element of darkness.

These comic rocket bodies foreshadow the end of the novel when Captain Blicero puts Gottfried, his submissive sexual partner, into the rocket and fires it. The ritualistic scene is steeped in filmic imagery, but like all of the episodes focused on German characters, it is short on comedy. This lack of humor in Gottfried's sacrifice is more than Pynchon turning serious; it contributes to *Gravity's Rainbow's* cinematic allusions.

While the episodes detailing Slothrop's adventures rely on American cinematic discourses, such as the Hollywood musical or the slapstick comedy, those dealing with Germans are often dependent on the style of German Expressionist films made famous by Fritz Lang and F.W. Murnau.<sup>24</sup> One familiar with the genre can easily see its influence on Pynchon's description of Gottfried's view from inside the V-2: "He's been given a window of artificial sapphire... a touch of cobalt added to give it a greenish tint—very heat resistant, transparent to most visual frequencies—it warps the images of sky and clouds outside" (751). Gottfried's window becomes a sort of movie screen through which he can watch the world as he is shot into the sky, but the world, like the mind of Blicero who has engineered this sacrifice, is "warped." As with the images portrayed in German Expressionist film, the visual images of reality are made to fit the mind of its suffering characters.

Despite this turn away from comic discourse, Gottfried's sacrifice resonates with many comic details throughout the novel, especially with the bawdy rocket limericks. This connection is highlighted when Gottfried first enters the "womb" of the rocket: "Stuff him in. Not a Procrustean bed, but modified to take him. The two, boy and Rocket, concurrently designed. Its steel hindquarters bent so beautifully ... he fits well. They are mated to each other" (751, original ellipses). The description of Gottfried "mated" to the V-2 suggests a sexual coupling akin to the sort described comically in the soldiers' limericks. Likewise, Gottfried's union with the rocket is foreshadowed

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<sup>24</sup> These films rely visually on sharp contrasts between light and dark imagery and often seek to find a visual means of portraying the human mind. Thus German Expressionist films often have bizarre or surrealistic sets. Robert Wiene's 1920 film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is perhaps the best example of the German Expressionist movement's depiction of the interior of the human mind. Much of the film takes place at an amusement park, and the carnivalesque set design is notably surreal. At the end of the film, however, it is revealed that the entire story is actually the fantasy of a madman in an insane asylum. Thus the film's bizarre sets are a literal projection of the madman's mind.



throughout the novel by Slothrop's penis and its erotic connection to the V-2. Like the lady V.'s eventual disassembly in Malta, Gottfried's coupling with the V-2 is the culmination of many of the novel's themes. As in *V.*, Pynchon initially uses comedy to establish his motifs before building up to a bleak climax. Gottfried's coupling with the rocket resonates with the bawdy rocket limericks and cements the rocket body as a jocoserious image.

### **Conclusion: Pynchon's Comedy of Regeneration**

Based on the reading I have provided, *Gravity's Rainbow* emerges at first as a notably pessimistic novel. Even the most comic elements are thematically tied to entropic images of death and the loss of freedom. Throughout the novel, however, Pynchon provides another, counter-entropic motif that gestures towards the ancient, ritualistic comedies of renewal and completes Pynchon's jocoserious vision. In his seminal work *The Origins of Attic Comedy*, F.M. Cornford traces ancient Aristophanic comedies back to the Greek rituals and festivals which celebrate the end of winter and the commencement of spring, or in Cornford's words "the expulsion of death and the induction of life" (9). Mikhail Bakhtin sees a similar impulse towards regeneration in medieval carnival, which he roots in the sort of pagan rituals described by Cornford. Bakhtin asserts that parodic medieval folk humor "denies, but it revives and renews at the same time" (11). While *Gravity's Rainbow's* preoccupation with death and disorder is often in direct opposition to this sort of emphasis on renewal, Pynchon makes it clear that entropy does not always end in stasis; often disorder and destruction can lead to new types of order and life.

Numerous critics have noted Pynchon's frequent use of regenerative imagery, but Alan J. Friedman and Manfred Puetz perhaps say it best, as they directly link Pynchon's narratives of renewal to his use of entropy. Friedman and Puetz explain that "order can only be produced with a compensating amount of disorder, the same widespread chaos that always puzzles Pynchon's characters. Death and decay are the disorder that makes possible the endless variety and renewal of life" (70). The earliest and clearest example of this type of renewal brings us back to the Banana Breakfast scene when the narrator provides the rich history of the topsoil used to grow Pirate Prentice's giant bananas:

Corydon Throsp...liked to cultivate pharmaceutical plants up on the roof...a few of them hardy enough to survive fogs and frosts, but most returning, as fragments of various alkaloids, to rooftop earth, along with manure from a trio of prize Wessex Saddleback sows quartered there by Throsp's successor, and dead leaves off many decorative trees transplanted to the roof by later tenants, and the odd un stomachable meal thrown or vomited there by this or that sensitive epicurean—all got scumbled together, eventually, by the knives of the seasons, to an impasto, feet thick, of unbelievable black topsoil in which anything could grow, not the least being bananas. (5)

This description is significant for multiple reasons. On the most literal level, it describes the natural process of organized life emerging from disorder and death: dead leaves, vomit, and manure all contribute to the formation of the banana. Also, a chaotic and circuitous series of narrative events (plots) performed over many years, all serve to form an organized narrative order where the British soldiers eat their breakfast. The ironic twist to this scenario is that the organized product of all of this disorder is the banana, the slapstick prop that will bring about its own disorder in time. This dual face of the banana is mirrored in the fact that it is a symbolic counterpart to both the potentially life-giving penis and the death-delivering rocket.

As in his other uses of comedy, the chronology of the bananas' topsoil establishes an important motif that Pynchon returns to throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*. The same principle of renewal is evident at a séance in which Walter Rathenau, from beyond the grave, describes the need of "dead black" coal-tar, located in the depths of the earth, in order to produce steel: "Earth's excrement, purged out for the ennoblement of shining steel" (166). And there is also a dream of regeneration in the Argentine anarchist Squalidozzi's vision of an idyllic, post-war Germany: "this War—this incredible War—just for the moment has wiped out the proliferation of little states that's prevailed in Germany for a thousand years. Wiped it clean. *Opened it*" (265, original emphasis). Like the bananas growing fervently out of the chaos of topsoil, Squalidozzi foresees an open, free Germany emerging out of the chaos of war. Pynchon even presents an odd variation on the ancient spring festivals when, in a German village, Slothrop helps local children reenact a mythical battle between Plechazunga, a pig-hero sent down by Thor, and invading Vikings, with Slothrop playing the pig-hero (567-568). The scene is a parodic reimagining of the battle between spring and winter that is celebrated in ancient dramatic comedies. And even in the final sections of the novel, as the narrative seems to descend into disorder, Slothrop's disassembly and scattering about the Zone gives birth to the Counterforce, the novel's primary symbol of resistance to oppressive power.

These examples contribute significantly to Pynchon's view of bodily life and to his jocoserious mode of writing in general. The numerous images of regeneration suggest an ancient view of the body, in which the material self is conceived as part of an endless cycle of death and renewal. This view roots the novel in classical comedy, of the sort described by Cornford. Pynchon writes this ancient view alongside postmodern

conceptions of disorder and decline and presents a worldview in which preconceived binaries exist simultaneously. Pynchon thus collapses dichotomies such as birth and death, ancient and postmodern, comic and tragic and presents a jocoserious worldview in which each side of the binary is inextricable from the other.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Giant Bananas: Woody Allen's Postmodern Slapstick

"Human beings are divided into mind and body. The mind embraces all the nobler aspirations like poetry and philosophy, but the body has all the fun."

—From *Love and Death*

While critics and audiences widely acknowledge writer and filmmaker Woody Allen's verbal wit, they rarely see him as a physical comedian. The majority of Allen's films tend to focus on the private lives of upper-middle-class intellectuals, their comedy stemming from a series of one-liners and non-sequiturs delivered at a frantic pace by Allen's neurotic persona. But the emphasis on verbal comedy in Allen's films often obscures the fact that Allen's body drives much of his humor, and he has perhaps made more comic use of his physicality than any film comedian since the silent era. His physical appearance stands in sharp contrast to the American ideal of powerful masculinity: short, thin, and balding, with his trademark black glasses, Allen embodies the stereotypical traits of a weak and insecure nerd. This fragility adds a physical dimension to Allen's nervous and self-deprecating verbal humor. For instance, when Alvy Singer, Allen's fictional alter-ego in *Annie Hall*, quips that he is one of the few males to suffer from penis envy, the joke, pretty funny on its own, becomes funnier when heard in conjunction with Allen's frailty. His weak physical appearance reinforces the emasculating nature of the joke.

Bodily insecurity informs nearly all of Allen's works, where physical instability and the weakness of the human body continually disrupt his characters' lives. In the recent drama *Match Point* (2005), a humorous levity is infused into an otherwise tense scene when the Machiavellian Chris Wilton drops his bullets and fumbles to load his gun in the middle of a double homicide. In the more quintessential Allen film *Hannah and*

*Her Sisters* (1986), Allen's character Mickey Sachs is a frantic hypochondriac, whose fear of physical illness repeatedly haunts his imagination. His neurotic obsession with his body is the butt of numerous jokes, one of the most memorable being his mistaking a spot on his shirt for skin cancer. And in *Annie Hall*, Alvy Singer blames his unstable inner life on the physical conditions of his childhood, explaining that "my analyst says I exaggerate my childhood memories, but I swear, I was brought up underneath the roller coaster in the Coney Island section of Brooklyn. Maybe that accounts for my personality, which is a little nervous I think." Allen juxtaposes this anecdote with the comic image of Alvy as a young boy struggling to eat a bowl of soup as his house shakes from the roller coaster roaring by overhead. These examples indicate the tenuous relationship that Allen's heroes have with their bodies and with the physical world in general. They also suggest the effects that the chaos of the physical world can have on our inner selves. In this respect, Allen's physical comedy bears a resemblance to Philip Roth's. Like Roth, Allen often details the comic effects that bodily existence has on the life of the mind, and also like Roth, Allen usually places these issues in a Jewish-American context.<sup>25</sup>

This comparison, however, dismisses an aspect of Allen's physical comedy that is vastly different from Roth's psychologically driven body humor. In *Take the Money and Run*, *Bananas*, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex\* (But Were Afraid to Ask)*, *Sleeper*, and *Love and Death*, Allen focuses his comedy on the material world, giving the exterior struggles of bodies primacy over inner turmoil. These films use

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<sup>25</sup> A handful of critics already tend to see Allen as a sort of cinematic version of Roth. See for instance J.P. Steed's "The Subversion of the Jews: Post World War II Anxiety, Humor, and Identity in Woody Allen and Philip Roth" and Sam B. Girgus's "Philip Roth and Woody Allen: Freud and the Humor of the Repressed." As their titles indicate, both essays deal primarily with mental life and psychoanalysis. Also of interest is Alex Abramovich's article in the online newspaper *Slate* titled "The Estranged Twins: Woody Allen and Philip Roth: Separated at Birth?" This short essay details some obvious overlaps in Allen's and Roth's biographies and discusses each artist's method of using biographical material in his work.

slapstick comedy, with its roots in vaudeville and silent-era Hollywood, as a means to critique the precarious life of the body in the contemporary world. Allen juxtaposes his own weak and clumsy persona with examples of strong, virile men who seemingly embody traditional depictions of the American hero. While Allen usually makes himself the comic subject of his slapstick routines, the gags themselves clearly critique the violent ideals of heroic American masculinity. Critics have done little to explore the significance of this subversive physical comedy. In fact, the majority of book-length studies about Allen's work begin these analyses with the 1977 critical and commercial success *Annie Hall*, and either briefly gloss over or omit his earliest films all together.<sup>26</sup> Instead critics tend to focus on the moral and psychological quandaries of tragicomedies like *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) and *Hannah and Her Sisters*, or they explore the overt postmodern games in metafilms such as *Stardust Memories* (1980), *Zelig* (1983), and *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985). Those who do discuss Allen's early comedies usually agree with Sanford Pinsker that they are "mere parody" that Allen must "move beyond" before he can create his more mature efforts (*Schlemiel as Metaphor* 173). Annette Wernblad makes a similar argument, describing the heavily slapstick-driven *Sleeper* (1973) as a failure and asserting that "slapstick happens not to be his natural domain.

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<sup>26</sup> This is particularly true of recent studies of Allen's films. Mary P. Nichols' 1998 book *Reconstructing Woody* begins with an analysis of *Play it Again, Sam* (1972), a romantic comedy written but not directed by Allen, and then skips over his first five comedies to begin discussing *Annie Hall*. Peter J. Bailey's *The Reluctant Film Art of Woody Allen* (2002) also jumps from *Play it Again, Sam* to *Annie Hall*. Sam Girgus's *The Films of Woody Allen* (2002), mentions the earlier comedies in passing but provides an extended analysis of only *Annie Hall* and the later films. In *Eighteen Woody Allen Films Analyzed* (2002), Sander H. Lee groups all of Allen's early comedies together in a fairly reductive introductory chapter and then also begins detailed analysis with *Annie Hall*. A survey of scholarly articles about Allen's films also reveals *Annie Hall* to be a critical turning point in his career. The key exception to this critical drought of Allen's first comedies is Maurice Yacowar's early book of criticism *Loser Take All: The Comic Art of Woody Allen*. Here Yacowar provides in depth and invaluable close readings of Allen's work beginning with his early night club acts and ending with 1979's *Manhattan*. While Yacowar does not make slapstick his focus, he actively acknowledges the significance that physical comedy has in the composition of Allen's films.

Woody Allen's talent is his verbal, not his physical agility" (52). Both statements exemplify the common viewpoint that Allen's body humor, and his early films in general, are either atypical or the result of a juvenile mindset.

I agree with Pinsker that Allen's early comedies are usually driven by parody, but I take exception to his modifier "mere." Allen's parody, as I will demonstrate, is quite sophisticated and worthy of discussion. While I also concur with Wernblad that as a *performer* Allen's talent tends towards the verbal, I contend that as a *filmmaker* he recognizes that physical comedy is an indispensable tool for achieving certain comic effects. I would also point out that "physical agility" is by no means a necessary component for physical comedy. Allen recognizes his lack of physical prowess and uses *it*, rather than agility, as the catalyst for his body humor. Rather than impressing audiences with his stunts, Allen uses his weak, fragile body as a symbol for the individual's place in an incomprehensible world. This chapter then seeks to restore the early films to Allen's canon, demonstrating that his comedy is both technically innovative and capable of sophisticated social criticism before the advent of his more widely discussed formal experiments and morality tales.

Allen approaches body humor from a postmodern standpoint, reworking familiar comic material and integrating it in ways that parody a wide variety of well-known genres, ranging from science-fiction to Russian literature. His physical comedy resembles the concept of "complicity and critique" articulated by Linda Hutcheon in her assessment of postmodern parody. Hutcheon argues that "postmodernist contradictory texts are...parodic in their intertextual relation to the traditions and conventions of the genres involved...Parody is a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it



paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies” (11). Allen similarly “incorporates and challenges” material from diverse genres in his early comedies. His parody incorporates familiar uses of physical comedy but challenges general notions about when and how slapstick is used. In *Sleeper*, for instance, Allen infuses the science fiction genre with slapstick routines adapted from the silent era. In mixing these two dissimilar genres, Allen forces his viewers to reevaluate the possibilities of each.

To fully understand Allen’s unique use of physical comedy, it is necessary to recontextualize his early films, showing his relationships to both his cinematic precursors and his literary contemporaries. Allen’s early comedies take on enormous topics such as war, the movement of history, and the study of human sexuality. In these films, he inserts his neurotic persona into highly charged political and social conditions, such as a futuristic Orwellian police state or the Napoleonic Wars; he then infuses that situation with outrageous sight gags and an abundance of physical comedy. Allen’s weak, clumsy persona emerges as a sort of Everyman, demonstrating the challenges faced by a regular human being attempting to survive in often inhuman environments. The most obvious cinematic influences for these films are those of Charlie Chaplin and the Marx Brothers. Though critics often briefly mention Allen’s debt to these slapstick pioneers, no one has fully recognized the extent to which Allen’s work is both an homage to and an adaptation of their material.<sup>27</sup> As this chapter illustrates, Allen revises his predecessors and brings classic cinematic slapstick into the postmodern era through his parodic representations.

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<sup>27</sup> Gerald Mast notes how Allen’s creation of an instantly recognizable comic persona places him in a tradition with Chaplin and the Marx Brothers as well as with Buster Keaton, W.C. Fields and Jerry Lewis (125-126). Similarly, Foster Hirsch compares Allen’s face to the clown masks of Charlie Chaplin and

Allen's comedies, like Chaplin's silent films, display the precarious position of the body in the modern world. But while Allen and Chaplin share a certain liberal humanism that indicates their dislike of power structures and distrust of technology, Allen's films resist the sentimentality that Chaplin's inevitably slip into. Chaplin films have plenty of physical comedy, but they are usually driven by a storyline in which Chaplin's persona, The Little Tramp, displays his humanity by caring for those less fortunate than himself, such as an orphan in *The Kid* (1921) or a blind girl in *City Lights* (1931). This structure also shows Chaplin's reliance on standard gender roles. Despite his often effeminate mannerisms and physical instability, the Tramp still manages to "be the man" in his relationships, as he willingly cares for women and children. Allen's characters, on the other hand, are primarily driven by selfish desires and are thus denied the melodramatic saintliness that Chaplin often assigns to his Tramp. When Allen takes on the duties of traditional masculinity, he does so with fear and reluctance and usually performs his tasks badly.

Allen additionally keeps a greater distance from his characters and storylines, never allowing his audience to forget that his characters are not real and that his films are essentially absurd. Allen's physical comedy, though certainly not realistic, also presents a more blatant view of human ineptitude than Chaplin's does. Chaplin is essentially a physical performer, and his uncanny athletic ability is always on full display during his routines, even when his characters are supposed to be clumsy fools. When The Little Tramp falls down the stairs, there is always a certain amount of awe mixed with our laughter because of the overwhelming grace with which Chaplin takes the fall. Allen, on

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Buster Keaton (2). Annette Wernblad is one of numerous critics who see Groucho Marx as a direct influence on Allen's verbal humor (50).

the other hand, appears to have little or no physical grace; his body movements are jerky and nervous, and when his characters fall, audiences laugh but are not impressed. His stumbling only serves to reinforce our suspicion that Allen himself is completely inept. By highlighting his clumsiness rather than his grace, Allen's version of physical comedy is ultimately more pessimistic than Chaplin's.

Allen's early films more closely resemble the Marx Brothers' movies in which the storyline often takes a back seat to one-liners and sight gags. In particular, *Duck Soup* (1933) seems to have had a significant influence on Allen's comedy.<sup>28</sup> Here Groucho Marx plays Rufus T. Firefly, the president of Freedonia, who somewhat arbitrarily declares war on neighboring Sylvania. The film mocks all political systems and wars, but the satire is most forcefully directed at the fascist powers then emerging in Europe. Allen's second directorial effort, *Bananas* (1971), follows a similar formula by depicting the fickle and fluid political situation of the fictional South American country, San Marcos. The most obvious comic target seems to be Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolution, but Allen's comedy differs from the Marx Brothers' more straightforward attack on the abuses of power. His political satire hits closer to home than *Duck Soup* does because the United States government is implicated in Allen's chaos.

A more significant distinction between Allen and the Marx Brothers is that Allen's comedy expresses (albeit in an unrealistic manner) the helplessness of the individual subject attempting to live a secure life inside a world of political chaos. In a

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<sup>28</sup> In *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Allen gives particular significance to *Duck Soup*. Here the Allen persona Mickey Sachs, depressed about his mortality, discovers a reason for living in the joy he feels watching *Duck Soup*. Throughout his films, Allen alludes to the Marx Brothers, suggesting they are one of his main influences. In the musical *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996), for instance, Allen's character Joe Berlin attends a Marx Brothers themed party in which all of the guests wear a Groucho nose, mustache, and glasses. In this scene, a chorus line of Groucho Marx impersonators sing the titular song.

Marx Brothers film, the brothers always have the upper hand. One step ahead of the rest of the world, Groucho diffuses every authority figure with a witticism, and Harpo's lecherous grin seems to render him invincible to harm. Allen, on the other hand, puts his persona's frailty on display at every step, and when he does achieve a victory, it is usually by accident. His humor is successful at diffusing power only for the audience; in the world of the film it is clear that Allen is ultimately powerless to subvert the absurdities around him.

This powerlessness in the face of adversity suggests Allen's relationship to another important comic tradition, that of the schlemiel figure from Yiddish and Jewish-American folklore. While definitions of the schlemiel often vary, this figure is commonly the sanest man in an otherwise insane world. His weakness and cowardice emerge as reasonable responses to the hypocrisies of the political and social systems around him. Ruth Wisse explains the schlemiel in terms that have particular resonance with Allen's early films:

Outrageous and absurd as his innocence may be by the normal guidelines of political reality, the Jew is simply rational within the context of ideal humanism. He is a fool, seriously—maybe even fatally—out of step with the actual march of events. Yet the impulse... of schlemiel literature in general, is to use this comical stance as a stage from which to challenge the political and philosophic status quo. (3)

While Allen does not explicitly foreground his Jewish identity in his early films, the influence of this tradition is nonetheless apparent. Similar to his parodic adaptation of his cinematic precursors, Allen's depiction of the schlemiel is in many respects a hyperbolized version of Wisse's description. In her definition, the schlemiel has a worldview fundamentally different from his/her society, but Allen literalizes Wisse's

explanation of the schlemiel as existing outside of the “march of events.” His characters, in the most blatant sense, do not belong in their environments. In *Take the Money and Run* (1969), Allen plays an inept weakling trying to succeed in a world of street smart toughs; in *Bananas*, he is a New Yorker in South America; in *Sleeper* he plays a late 20<sup>th</sup> century man who wakes up two hundred years in the future, and in *Love and Death* (1975) countless anachronisms reveal his character to be a 20<sup>th</sup> century New York Jew somehow born into 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia. The literal disjunction between the characters’ worldviews and the societies in which they find themselves provides fodder for much of Allen’s comedy, as he manages to make fun of both his nebbish characters and the worlds in which they are forced to live. While in the schlemiel tradition, the humor is most often verbal or situational, Allen’s preferred means of highlighting cultural disjunctions in his early films is through slapstick and body humor. In films driven mainly by visuals, the body’s conflict with the physical world becomes the primary medium through which to express a human’s discord with the larger social spectrum. Through body humor, Allen finds an innovative method for bringing the schlemiel tradition into contemporary cinema.

Allen’s use of the schlemiel figure, his references to popular culture, and his parodic use of low comedy may place him most convincingly beside his literary contemporaries. Allen’s persona in these early films resembles Pynchon’s Slothrop or Joseph Heller’s Yossarian, men who wish to live peaceful lives but find themselves increasingly thwarted due to the mind-boggling political and technological systems that continually overwhelm them. While Heller achieves his humor mainly through the exposure of circular bureaucratic rhetoric, Allen (like Pynchon) uses his characters’

ambivalent relationship with the physical world as a means of driving his comedy and expressing his discomfort with modern life. Allen and Pynchon also share a deep knowledge of popular culture, and both integrate easily recognizable slapstick into diverse discourses, using physical comedy as a means to provide commentary on contemporary life. Both artists can also be seen as responding to the turmoil created by the sixties' civil-rights movements and the Vietnam War, even when their works ostensibly deal with other eras. Considering that the Allen films under discussion are contemporaneous with the release of *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1973, it is useful to see them emerging from a similar cultural moment in which both generic parody and lowbrow humor became useful mediums for subversive art.

Allen's early films then emerge from multiple literary and cinematic traditions, and it is perhaps in this light that Allen's comedy is most innovative. While body humor, and especially slapstick, usually needs little context in order to achieve comic effects (which is part of the reason why slapstick is so appealing to children), Allen immerses his physical comedy in a wide array of unexpected contexts and thus paradoxically manages to disorient audiences through the use of familiar material. Allen's body humor therefore works on two different levels. On the first, Allen achieves humor through the most basic uses of physical comedy, and it is on this level that his films can be engaging for everyone.<sup>29</sup> But the deeper level requires a certain cultural awareness from the audience, for it juxtaposes these basic slapstick gags with other discourses (e.g., popular cinema in *Sleeper*, Russian literature in *Love and Death*, Freudian psychology in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*) and achieves humor not through the slapstick gag

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<sup>29</sup> Allen notes that in *Sleeper* he wanted to make a film that appealed to both children and adults, stating that "It bothers me that I would be confined to intellectual humor" (Yacowar 152).

itself but through its parodic integration into other contexts. Allen's use of physical comedy in such varied discourses allows him to critique the life of the body across a wide social and historical spectrum. In a series of films that deal with drastically different times and political situations, Allen's weak and clumsy persona is the constant. Viewed together, the films suggest a nearly universal physical instability. Allen implies that, regardless of time or place, there will always be a suffering schlemiel there to highlight the era's absurdities.

### **The One-Acts**

Allen's one-act plays provide some early examples of his postmodern, parodic body humor. *Death Knocks*, published in Allen's first collection of writing, *Getting Even* (1971), opens with a classic black-robed, white-faced Death (an image made famous by Allen's hero Ingmar Bergman in *The Seventh Seal*), climbing through a window in order to claim the soul of Nat Ackerman.<sup>30</sup> But this powerful and potentially terrifying image of Death personified is immediately undermined when the stage directions tell us that Death "*huffs audibly and then trips over the windowsill and falls into the room.*" The physical comedy is solidified by Death's first line: "Jesus Christ. I nearly broke my neck" (31). As the play progresses, we learn that this Death is not only clumsy but also completely inept. In a game of gin rummy, he loses his claim on Nat Ackerman's soul *and* twenty-eight dollars. Humiliated and defeated, Death leaves Nat Ackerman at peace, but true to his nature, he trips and tumbles down the stairs on his way out. The scenario of Death transformed into a hapless fool conforms to a common comic formula in which the exalted or powerful is pulled down to the plane of regular material existence. While

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<sup>30</sup> Allen humorously uses this Bergmanesque Death figure in a number of works throughout his career. See for instance *Love and Death*, *Deconstructing Harry* (1997), and *Scoop* (2006).

much comedy, and nearly all slapstick, adheres to this formula in some manner, what is unique about Allen's use of it here is both the enormous scale of the rather simple joke and the parodic appropriation of familiar material.

Artists like Bergman work to personify Death in order to find an aesthetic means of grappling with the mystery of our material end, but Allen carries this personification through to its logical conclusion. If Death is to be a person, Allen suggests, then he must also suffer the calamities of personhood, the most basic being the fragility and instability of human bodies. Allen's comic effect relies upon our recognition of the Bergmanesque image of Death and our basic understanding of the workings of physical comedy; he playfully juxtaposes these two familiar forms to create an unexpected, parodic humor. The implication of his treatment is that not only are our bodies fragile and unstable, but so are the workings of the cosmos. Death falling down the stairs extends slapstick from the physical to the metaphysical, from the particular to the universal.

Allen repeats this type of joke in the play-within-a-play *God* (1972), a parody of Greek drama. Here the heavy-handed closure of *deus ex machina* is subverted when the character God is accidentally strangled by the ropes and pulleys with which He is to be lowered onto the stage. The characters look on in stunned disbelief, until one finally concludes that "God is dead" (*Without Feathers* 175). In this play, Allen incorporates Greek drama and physical comedy, but through literalizing the cliché "God is dead," Allen also parodies existential philosophy, or at least the platitudes of existentialism that have trickled down to mass culture. Mark Shechner has commented that Allen's bleak worldview can often be summed up as "high-school existentialism," and I agree that one would certainly not consider his early work to provide thoughtful philosophic discussion



(“Woody Allen” 232). His comedy, however, is sophisticated in its use of various discourses. In *God*, Allen applies modern philosophy to Greek drama and then uses a moment of physical comedy to deflate them both. As in *Death Knocks*, the physical comedy also works on a metaphysical level; a simple malfunction in the physical world becomes the signifier of a cosmic discord. In his films, Allen applies this formula to politics and social situations, creating a chaotic, slapstick view of human existence.

### **Criminal Comedy**

*Take the Money and Run*, the first film that Allen wrote, directed, and starred in, is a mock-documentary about the life of failed criminal Virgil Starkwell (played by Allen). While it does not use body humor to the same extent as his next four projects, it nonetheless establishes many significant themes that will preoccupy Allen throughout his early films. *Take the Money and Run* is narrated by a baritone commentator whose voice suggests the documentary-style opening of Welles’ *Citizen Kane*, and the action mainly consists of Virgil’s bumbling criminal exploits. Parodying both the gangster genre and the documentary, *Take the Money and Run* immediately reveals Allen’s ambitious use of diverse genres. And in incorporating slapstick into these generic forms, the film also foregrounds the unstable view of the human body that Allen further develops in his early comedies. In particular, *Take the Money and Run* presents an early version of Allen’s comic critique of powerful masculinity—as characterized by the streetwise toughs whom Virgil emulates—and establishes the fundamental conflict with the physical world that will plague nearly all of Allen’s protagonists.

In a series of comic episodes, Allen presents Virgil’s humorous mishaps with various phallic-shaped weapons, establishing Virgil’s inability to adhere to powerful

standards of manliness and exposing his discord with the physical world. In one instance, Virgil attempts to participate in a *West Side Story* style switchblade fight. One by one, the gang members open their switchblades and menacingly brandish them. When Virgil opens his own, however, the blade flies away, leaving him with only an unthreatening knife handle. The knife in this scene serves as a substitute phallus, and Virgil's uncontrollably shooting blade suggests premature ejaculation and instantly renders Virgil impotent. In a similar moment, Virgil attempts to escape from prison using John Dillinger's infamous trick of carving a fake gun out of soap and blackening it with shoe polish. At first the plan works flawlessly, and Virgil makes it out of the prison doors with two guards as his hostages. But it is raining outside, and the water transforms Virgil's "gun" into a handful of bubbles. As in the malfunctioning switchblade, Virgil's attempt to assert power through a phallic weapon only renders him more helpless. In both instances, Virgil attempts to master his environment through violent force, but the slapstick mishaps undermine him. Virgil does not control the physical world; the physical world controls him.

The most significant difference between *Take the Money and Run* and Allen's subsequent films is the relationship the protagonist has with violent masculinity. Starting with *Bananas* Allen's characters deliberately distance themselves from violence or force, overtly critiquing the image of the powerful male through their refusal to acknowledge its validity. The comedy is directed as much at the cultures in which these protagonists find themselves trapped as it is at Allen's heroes themselves. In *Take the Money and Run*, however, Virgil tries—in an admittedly antisocial manner—to live up to the example of manly strength which he has gleaned from popular culture. The film certainly critiques,

or at least comically undermines, this masculinist worldview, but it posits no significant alternative to it. But beginning with *Bananas*, Allen suggests that his weak, clownish schlemiels may be the most viable masculine hero that his worlds have to offer.

### **A World Gone Bananas**

In Allen's second film *Bananas*, it is evident from the very title that Allen is using the elements of cinematic slapstick as a means to explore a number of contemporary issues and political movements. As Maurice Yacowar points out, the title *Bananas* refers simultaneously to "a lunatic world...gone bananas," "the noble tradition of banana-peel slapstick comedy," and the fact that San Marcos, the fictional South American country on which the film focuses, is a banana republic susceptible to "exploitative politics" from both within and without (132). I would add to this list that the title also suggests that the banana—as we saw in *Gravity's Rainbow*—is a comic phallic symbol. The film's multi-layered title anticipates Allen's juxtaposition of physical comedy with political and social commentary. For Allen repeatedly uses slapstick as a means of destabilizing traditional depictions of heroic masculinity and exposing this "lunatic world" in which small countries and individuals are at the mercy of the blindly irrational forces of government and economics.

Allen plays Fielding Mellish, a products tester living in New York who unwittingly becomes embroiled in the politics of San Marcos after trying to romance Nancy, a left-wing, pseudo-revolutionary played by Louise Lasser. We first find Mellish at work testing The Execuciser, an office desk enhanced by various pieces of exercise equipment so that a corporate executive can stay in shape without leaving his or her desk. As a salesman details the various benefits of The Execuciser, the on-screen image shows

Mellish throttled back and forth by his office chair and pummeled by flying basketballs intended to develop his reflexes. The comic scene establishes the chaotic world in which Mellish lives as the image on screen subverts the salesman's dialogue. Furthermore, this gag roots the film in the slapstick tradition by calling to mind a very similar scene in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), in which Chaplin's Little Tramp demonstrates a machine that will increase efficiency by feeding factory workers while on the job. The Tramp is even less successful than Mellish, as the feeding machine tortures him with a spinning corn-on-the-cob and forces metal bolts into his mouth. Allen's Execuciser scene serves as both an homage to and an extension of Chaplin's original sketch. In *Modern Times*, the feeding machine satirizes the corporate impulse to exploit its labor force to the fullest possible means by finding ways to keep workers at their tasks even during meals. Allen adds an ironic twist to this scenario, for The Execuciser is designed for the powerful corporate executive whose body runs the risk of becoming atrophied from lack of exercise. Viewing the two scenes together, we see a backwards world in which the lower classes are exploited, their bodies laboring endlessly without even a break for lunch, while the upper classes are so stagnant that they need a machine just to help them move their legs.

But the real comic elements of these sketches are not the machines but their operators. Both The Tramp and Mellish represent the lowest rung of the labor force, inept around machines but required to operate them before they even work correctly. The discord between humans and objects is the most basic element of slapstick; we should recall Frank Capra's assertion that slapstick occurs from the "intransigence of inanimate objects" (Dale 10). Allen embodies this definition in the next scene when he laments his

position as a products tester, exclaiming, “Machines hate me!” Mellish’s first spoken line in the film introduces the basic plight of the protagonist. Like Benny Profane in Pynchon’s *V.*, much of Mellish’s life is determined by the seeming hostility of the physical world.

The viewer is given another telling example of Mellish’s relationship with the mechanical world after he reluctantly joins the San Marcos rebels. In a training montage, Mellish attempts to learn the basic skills of military combat. At one point, he pulls the pin out of a grenade and then throws the pin: a moment later the grenade explodes in his hand. In the next scene, Mellish appears with a bandaged hand, holding yet another grenade. This time he correctly throws the grenade, but then the pin explodes in his hand. The first joke highlights Mellish’s incompetence in dealing with physical objects, but the second one assigns a malevolent agency to the inanimate world, suggesting that objects will subvert their own laws simply to hurt him: the impossibly exploding pin echoes Mellish’s opening statement that machines hate him. This gag also recalls Virgil Starkwell’s trouble with phallic weapons in *Take the Money and Run*. While a grenade is not as explicitly phallic as a gun or knife, the comic subversion of violent force is very similar. Here, however, Mellish’s reluctance to actually participate in the rebels’ military endeavors renders him sympathetic. The comic discord he experiences with violent weaponry marks his humanity as much it highlights his ineptitude.

Despite this often sympathetic treatment, Mellish is not, like Wisse’s schlemiel figure, a total innocent. Allen displays an ambivalence towards his protagonist, providing numerous examples to show that Mellish too is complicit in this world of

physical instability. In one moment, as he walks down the road in New York City, he sees a car attempting to parallel park. Mellish steps in to help the driver, directing him to continue backing up, but the driver backs up too far and hits the car behind him. Mellish nonchalantly moves on. His lack of concern that he has contributed to an accident demonstrates that he is not only the victim of this slapstick world; he is also part of its cause. This fact is driven home in another scene when Mellish complains to one of his friends in a locker room. "Life is so cruel!" Mellish exclaims, carelessly slamming the door of his locker onto his friend's fingers. "See what I mean?" Mellish says as his friend doubles over in pain. Such incidents demonstrate not only Mellish's clumsiness but also his dubious morality. While in many instances Mellish's pragmatic approach to life seems to raise him above the violent politics and bureaucratic nonsense around him, at other moments his indifference to the rest of the world suggests he is an unwavering solipsist. In directing his cynicism even at the film's hero, Allen further distances himself from his predecessors, for unlike Chaplin, Allen does not allow his protagonists the strong sense of morality necessary to rise above his conditions.

The topsy-turvy worldview suggested by these countless gags and routines is mirrored by the actual storyline of *Bananas*, which reveals politics and personal relationships to be equally precarious. Although Allen himself avers that the plot of *Bananas* is merely "a thin story to hang the comedy sequences on," he nevertheless achieves a unique sort of symmetry between his subject matter and the comic mode of expression (Yacowar 129). *Bananas* indicates the arbitrary and fickle nature of political systems, and during the course of the film, San Marcos undergoes four major changes in government. The first occurs in the opening scene, in which ABC's *Wide World of*

*Sports* presents the assassination of the San Marcos' president live on American television. The scene, in which Howard Cosell plays himself, parodies the concept of a government coup and satirizes the sensationalist tendencies of the American media. The San Marcos president is replaced by the dictator Vargas, who oppresses the peasant community. Vargas is in turn deposed by Esposito, the leader of the rebels waging a guerilla war from the mountains. Upon taking control of San Marcos, however, Esposito instantly goes "mad with power," declares the new national language Swedish and requires all citizens to wear their underwear on the outside. Shocked by Esposito's transformation, the rebels choose the reluctant Mellish to step in as president. But the ultimate fate of San Marcos is left unknown, for soon after Mellish becomes President, the U.S. government arrests him for treason, and his trial in America completely eclipses the politics of San Marcos. This array of political activity presents a nation continually in flux, in which each government system will eventually crumble. The ideological systems of San Marcos are, like Mellish's body, comically unstable.

San Marcos is not alone in this chaos. The U.S. government, while certainly more powerful, is revealed to be nearly as fickle and indecisive as San Marcos. For instance, in a brief scene showing a troop of U.S. soldiers flying to San Marcos as reinforcements, one soldier asks whether they will be fighting for or against the government. Another soldier explains that "the CIA isn't taking any chances this time. Some of us are for, and some of us are gonna be against it." And the American legal system does not seem to be any more stable than its military convictions: during Mellish's trial, Mellish is literally bound and gagged, the jury smokes marijuana and drinks from a fishbowl, and J. Edgar Hoover testifies, but the role is played by an African-American woman. At the end of the

trial, Mellish is found guilty of subversive acts, but his sentence is suspended as long as he agrees to never move into the judge's neighborhood. These examples all reinforce the fact that the world of politics and government systems is as unstable as the physical world in which Mellish continually comes to harm. Released during the Vietnam War, *Bananas'* slapstick view of the U.S government mirrors the country's lack of faith in the governments' ability and a lack of trust in its motives.

In this unstable world, interpersonal relationships do not fair much better.

Mellish's initial motivation for going to San Marcos is to impress Nancy, his left-wing love interest. The fact that Mellish is willing to embrace radical politics (which he would normally avoid) just to win a girl shows his personal belief system to be nearly as fluid as San Marcos'. Mellish's political activity eventually does impress Nancy enough for her to marry him, but Allen does not allow this union to provide the film with a traditional happy ending. The film closes, just as it opened, with a broadcast of ABC's *Wide World of Sports*, but this time the subject is the consummation of Mellish and Nancy's marriage. Their intercourse is set up like a boxing match, with the two participants emerging from their respective corners. Howard Cosell stands at the bedside giving a play-by-play as Mellish and Nancy writhe under the covers. After the sexual bout, there is even a post game wrap-up, where Nancy expresses her disappointment at Mellish's performance, and he contends that he "had her in real trouble with his right hand up early." The boxing analogy casts male/female relationships as a competition, and the sports coverage turns private life into a public spectacle. Thus while Mellish ostensibly gets the girl, any sense of romantic closure is undermined by the chaos used to depict their wedding night. Just as Allen comically undermines the ideal of masculine heroism on the battlefield, he also



mocks conceptions of wedding night bliss which typically occur at the end of romantic comedies.

*Bananas* thus uses the shaky foundation of slapstick and physical comedy in order to posit a world in which every facet of life is inherently unstable. The individual body, in this world, is driven by base desires and is continuously threatened by malevolent forces, including inanimate objects. In his first scene, Mellish the products tester asserts that machines hate him, and by the end of the film we see that this is true in the broadest sense. The machinery of politics and romance, as well as that of the physical world, are ultimately hostile to Mellish. This recalls once again Chaplin's *Modern Times*: in perhaps the most famous scene in the film, The Tramp falls into the bowels of a giant machine; the gears twist and contort his body, but the machine ultimately spits him out. Allen places this scenario on an enormous scale, as Mellish, like the schlemiel he is, is ultimately rejected by the very machinery of the world that torments him.

### **Sex Education**

The final scene of *Bananas*, in which Mellish and Nancy's sex life is put on display for the whole world to see, serves as a fitting introduction to Allen's next film *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Sex\* (But Were Afraid to Ask)* (1972). Nominally based on the book of the same name by Dr. David Reuben, *Everything* treats modern views of sexuality with the same irreverence as *Bananas* did politics. Reuben's book is divided into a series of (supposedly) common questions about sex, and Reuben provides an expert's opinion on the answers. For the film, Allen borrows Reuben's questions but provides his own answers through a series of comic vignettes. Allen's parodic sketches do not really attempt to answer the questions posed; rather, they mock

the very notion of sexuality as something that can be easily classified or understood. As Maurice Yacowar aptly notes, the film “is not an adaptation of the book but an ironic reaction against it—and against sex manuals in general” (137). As answer to the question “What is Sodomy?,” for example, Allen provides a sketch in which Gene Wilder plays Dr. Ross, an M.D. whose career and home life are ultimately destroyed due to his romantic love for an Armenian sheep named Daisy. The closing scene of the sketch shows a destitute and unloved Dr. Ross hunkered on a street corner, madly drinking from a bottle of Woolite. The sketch not only conflates sodomy and bestiality; it ignores the question posed all together. Instead, the episode parodies the domestic romance drama by infusing it with a non-normative sexuality.

*Everything* is, in some ways, quite different from the other films discussed in this chapter. Allen does use physical comedy, and in many of the episodes, Allen’s schlemiel persona takes center stage. However other episodes, such as “What is Sodomy,” do not use slapstick at all, but achieve their humor through formal parody and a dramatization of the ways that private sexuality intersects with public space. While these episodes are not as explicit in their use of body humor, their treatment of sexuality contributes significantly to Allen’s comic depictions of bodily life. For in all of Allen’s early comedies, he displays the precarious position of the individual body in contemporary society, and in *Everything*, Allen shows that this instability extends even into our private lives. In “What is Sodomy?” the joke would fall flat after about a minute if it were simply about a man’s private relationship with a sheep, but the fact that this relationship makes it into the public sphere and ruins the social life of an otherwise successful man creates comic tension as the private world of the bedroom rubs up against that of the

marketplace. The world of bodies and bodily desire comes crashing down on the world of civilization. For Freud, this tension between social codes and private desires is the main purpose of obscene humor. Freud writes that sexual jokes “make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way” (*Jokes* 101). The obstacle for Freud is usually that of social regulations which prohibit or inhibit our sexuality, and the technique of the joke serves as a means to bypass these codes and bring sexual preoccupations into the open. Allen similarly circumvents social norms by parodying the forms of popular discourse found in film and television. Allen’s mocking stance towards cultural narratives allows his obscenity to be humorous rather than simply pornographic.

We see this comic interplay between the individual and society in the film’s fifth sketch, which purports to answer the question “What are Sex Perverts?”. The episode takes the form of a game-show called *What’s My Perversion?* in which a panel of celebrities ask questions in order to guess the deviancy of a contestant. Appropriately, the contestant is a man who likes to expose himself on subways. The man’s fetish of self-exposure mirrors the show’s premise of exposing sexual perversion on national television. In this sketch, Allen conflates an individual “perversion” with a collective fetish and makes wry commentary on America’s media-driven culture, in which audiences continuously absorb docu-dramas and “personal interest” stories that claim to reveal the private lives of individuals. At the same time, Allen suggests that the media may also serve as a method for bringing personal perversions to life. This is made clear in the closing of the sketch as a Rabbi is granted the fulfillment of a sexual/dietary

fantasy in which he is tied-up and whipped by a model while his wife sits at his feet eating pork.

At first glance, this episode seems to imagine a world driven solely by the pleasure principle, in which the audience can happily watch the perversions of others from the safety of their own home while actual “perverts” find release of their urges by broadcasting them on national television. But this sketch also satirizes the modern impulse to classify and control sexual deviancy through a never-ending discourse on sexuality. As Foucault asserts, “abnormal” sexuality, in the modern era, is “a thing not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all” (24). Allen transforms the network of discourses which serve to manage and regulate sexuality into a literal television network. Allen recognizes that the media—especially television—is the ultimate regulatory discourse in contemporary America. The surest way to control American attitudes towards sexuality, Allen suggests, is to transform sexual urges into asexual “entertainment.”

The majority of *Everything*'s episodes, however, are governed primarily by the reality principle, as private sexuality is nearly always in conflict with social behavioral codes. A sketch answering “Why Do Some Women Have Trouble Reaching Orgasm?” parodies 1960s’ Italian art films and tells of a woman who can only achieve climax when intercourse is performed in a public place; the fear of being caught-in-the-act serves as the woman’s primary stimulus. As in “What are Sex Perverts?” the fetish of self-exposure brings together private and public space. Another sketch, replying to “Are All Transvestites Homosexuals?” serves as a sort of companion piece to “What is Sodomy?” and tells of a heterosexual, middle-aged transvestite who is caught dressing as a woman

after his purse is snatched on a public street. And in the opening sketch “Do Aphrodisiacs Really Work?” Allen plays a medieval court jester who attempts to use a magic potion to seduce the queen. The jester, a typical Allen schlemiel, ultimately gets his hand stuck in the queen’s chastity belt; his crime is soon exposed, and the king has him beheaded. Allen presents these narratives comically through his parodies of various cinematic genres. The humor disorients audiences by using taboo sexual issues to destabilize familiar popular discourses.

The most atypical episode of the film deals less with the exposure of sexual urges than with our methods of understanding sexual life. The question posed is “Are the Findings of Doctors and Clinics Who Do Sexual Research Accurate?”, and Allen’s answer seems to be a vehement no. Parodying horror films, the sketch posits Dr. Bernardo as a mad scientist researching sexuality in his isolated gothic home. Visiting Dr. Bernardo is another sexual researcher Victor Shakopoplous (played by Allen), and Victor is accompanied by Helen, a pretty young reporter. Early in the sketch, Allen renders ridiculous the very concept of sexual research as Dr. Bernardo boasts of a series of outrageous scientific accomplishments such as discovering “how to make a man impotent by hiding his hat” and arguing that the “clitoral orgasm should not be only for women.” As the sketch progresses, Dr. Bernardo’s true madness is revealed, and he attempts to trap Victor and Helen in his laboratory in order to perform sexual experiments on them. They escape, exploding Dr. Bernardo’s laboratory in the process.

Here the sketch shifts to that of the monster movie, as a giant breast escapes from Dr. Bernardo’s lab and terrorizes the countryside, killing numerous victims by drowning them in milk. Through an odd coincidence, *Everything* was released in 1972, the same

year that saw Philip Roth's novella *The Breast*, but unlike Roth, who actively resists obvious comic gags, Allen exploits nearly every conceivable joke that a giant mammary can elicit. While the breast is a literal monster claiming innocent lives, the suggestion of this scenario is that such a creature could have only been produced by a culture obsessed with female breasts in the first place. The monster's first victims, for instance, are a young couple necking in an open convertible; as the young man fondles the girl's breast, he looks up and sees a giant nipple looming in the rearview mirror. The joke transforms male sexual desire into a nightmare, as the object of his veneration becomes the agent of his destruction. Media-driven sexuality is parodied as well: roaming the countryside, the breast eclipses a billboard showing a young woman in a bikini: the caption reads "Everybody needs milk." This gag satirizes the culture's objectification of the female anatomy; the huge, scantily clad woman on the billboard is merely a media-produced version of the gigantic breast itself, suggesting that this monster has been a cultural fantasy all along. This message is driven home when Victor sets out to capture the breast using a giant bra. Helen begs Victor to be careful, and he replies with his gaze focused directly on Helen's own chest: "Don't worry. I know how to handle tits." Victor's meaningful leer at Helen's breasts highlights that even though Victor recognizes the giant breast as a threat, it holds a certain fascination in his mind.

This episode seems to have the clearest authorial message in its open attack on the scientific study of sexual behavior. Dr. Bernardo's strange experiments and malevolent intentions suggest that sex researchers are themselves sexually "abnormal," seeking ways to legitimate their fetishes as scientific findings. By the end of the sketch, even Victor seems to be rethinking his career as a sex-researcher. After escaping the clutches of Dr.

Bernardo and then capturing his giant breast, he asserts to Helen that “when it comes to sex, there are certain things that should be always left unknown, and with my luck they probably will be.” This self-deprecating joke ties the episode back to the theme of the rest of the film, suggesting that sexuality should remain in the private realm and not be subjected to the amoral rigor of scientific inquiry.

The film’s next sketch returns to the concept of privacy by taking as its subject the interior of the human body. In the film’s final episode, Allen answers the question “What Happens During Ejaculation?”. Allen’s response gives us a glimpse inside the male body leading up to and during sexual intercourse. The set resembles a spaceship from a low-budget science fiction film, and actors personify all of the bodily functions, including brain activity, digestive processes, and semen flow. The highlight of the sketch is Allen himself as Sperm #1, a sperm cell reluctant to fulfill his duty to “fertilize an ovum or die trying.” Allen and the other sperm are dressed as paratroopers with little white tails, lined up single file waiting to take the plunge. Allen brings his nebbish persona to the role of a sperm fraught with anxiety. He tells of rumors he has heard of hard rubber barriers that kill sperm on contact; he fears that he may be part of a homosexual encounter, or that the man may be masturbating and he will “end up on the ceiling.” Allen’s portrayal of the sperm contributes significantly to his chaotic, slapstick view of existence. Maurice Yacowar makes this point nicely: “As a sperm cell, Allen represents the basic unit of human life. That essence of humanity is already fraught with fears” (149). Additionally, Allen’s nervous sperm roots the sexual process in anxiety and

confusion. This confusion is in turn mirrored by the troubles occurring in the brain during sexual intercourse.<sup>31</sup>

Keeping with the science-fiction theme, the brain resembles a high-tech control room, and in it various technicians must work through the man's psychological troubles in order to successfully complete the sexual act. Tony Randall plays The Operator in charge of higher brain functions and sending messages to the rest of the body. Once sexual intercourse becomes imminent, The Operator's main goal is in maintaining the man's erection throughout the act. The scene shifts back and forth between the brain and the penis, where dozens of workers turn heavy gears in an attempt to achieve an erection. When they fail, an argument breaks out between those in the brain and those in the penis, each blaming the other for the inability to perform. The root of the problem turns out to be a priest in the "conscience room," deliberately sabotaging the act through guilt. This chaotic view of the male body during intercourse extends Allen's comic treatment of romantic sexuality in the closing of *Bananas*. Rather than as a well-organized machine, Allen presents the male body as an inefficient bureaucracy that is essentially unaware of itself. In placing this scenario in a science-fiction setting, Allen draws an explicit connection between male sexuality and technological advancement. The comic instability suggests a pessimistic view of both.

Taken as a whole, the seven vignettes in *Everything* suggest that human sexuality is a decidedly messy affair. By focusing the majority of his episodes on supposed sexual abnormalities, and then placing these abnormalities in various social settings, Allen highlights the conflict between civilization and individual desire. While the film's

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<sup>31</sup> This scenario is also reminiscent of the John Barth story "Night-Sea Journey" from *Lost in the Funhouse*, in which the narrator is an eternally swimming sperm cell.



structure deviates from most of Allen's early comedy, *Everything* makes a significant contribution to Allen's comic view of bodily life. The boundary between individual bodies and the environment, Allen suggests, is blurred, and with the rise of the media as a social determinant, the private life of the body has become increasingly more public. In the final episode, Allen takes this idea to its logical conclusion, suggesting that our bodies themselves are entrenched in an absurd bureaucracy.

### **Sci-Fi Slapstick**

Taking a cue from the last vignette of *Everything*, Allen's next film *Sleeper* (1973) is a full-length science-fiction comedy. The most striking element of *Sleeper* is Allen's sophisticated use of slapstick. The cat-and-mouse plot line and the futuristic environment provide Allen with the fodder to create a new sort of physical comedy that embodies Hutcheon's notion of complicity and critique in postmodern parody. Allen harkens back to the earliest days of cinematic slapstick, but his body humor also provides real insight into the dystopia that he imagines as our possible future. Allen plays Miles Monroe, a late twentieth-century clarinet player and health-food store owner who wakes up in the year 2173 to find himself on the run in a futuristic police-state. Allen's future resembles both the hedonism of Huxley's *Brave New World* and the bureaucratic doublespeak of Orwell's *1984*, but the real target of Allen's satire is the present. He makes numerous allusions to contemporary politics and popular culture: the self-indulgent society of *Sleeper*, for instance, bears a remarkable similarity to Allen's presentation of Los Angeles' shallow "New Age" culture in *Annie Hall*.

In many ways, *Sleeper*'s plot resembles that of *Bananas*. Once again Allen plays a schlemiel completely out of his natural environment who reluctantly joins a rebellion

against a cruel and corrupt government. But Allen's physical comedy in *Sleeper* surpasses that of *Bananas*. Rather than depending on an endless stream of brief jokes that punctuate the storyline, *Sleeper* extends the slapstick gags into long sequences that make the physical comedy essential to the overall structure of the film. These long, comic sections are accompanied by an upbeat Dixieland score that accentuates the discord between Miles' comic mishaps and the sterile world into which he has awakened. For an Allen film, *Sleeper* has remarkably little dialogue; indeed during large sections, *Sleeper* actually feels like a silent film. The deliberate use of physical action and music to drive the film highlights Allen's skill as a filmmaker rather than just a comic performer. There are a few instances in which Allen includes a scene that highlights his verbal wit, but for the most part, *Sleeper* eschews verbal comedy.

Throughout *Sleeper*, Allen uses specific aspects of classic slapstick films and adapts them to the futuristic environment, and the slapstick chase is one of the most prominent of these classic cinematic elements. James Agee sees the slapstick chase as "a majestic trajectory of pure anarchic motion that bathing girls, cops, comics, dogs, cats, babies, automobiles, locomotives, innocent bystanders, sometimes what seemed like a whole city, an entire civilization, were hauled along head over heels in the wake of that energy like dry leaves following an express train" (398). While Allen's chases do not contain quite this extensive a catalogue, he does include in *Sleeper* two long chase scenes that both allude to the silent era and take advantage of the futuristic environment. In both chases, Miles is on the run from the "Security Police," who wish to reprogram his brain in order to make him functional in the future society. In the first of these scenes, Miles attempts to escape by flying away in a futuristic helicopter backpack. Given his usual

incompetence with machinery, Miles can only hover a few feet off the ground. Ironically Miles' bad luck with machines becomes his saving grace: the blades of the helicopter get stuck in a tree branch, and Miles spins only a few feet above the oblivious police. In the second chase, Miles must escape with his love interest Luna, played by Diane Keaton. Here Miles finds himself in a "hydrovac" suit, which is intended for space travel. The suit inflates to hyperbolic proportions, inhibiting Miles' movements and causing him to look like a giant balloon. Yet once again the futuristic equipment that at first seems to impede Miles' progress actually rescues him. As the inflated Miles, with Luna on his back, awkwardly attempts to dog-paddle across a river by using the cumbersome hydrovac suit as a sort of raft, a policeman shoots a hole in the suit: the escaping air propels Miles and Luna down the river, and the suit carries them to safety.

The most blatant example of Allen's adaptation of familiar slapstick material to the futuristic landscape occurs when Miles goes looking for food for himself and Luna. Emerging from the woods, he comes upon a garden growing gigantic fruits and vegetables. The celery, for instance, is a good two feet taller than Miles. While Miles is unpeeling a giant banana, a farmer notices his theft and attempts to apprehend him. Miles tries to run away, and the farmer tries to run after him, but both men slip and fall repeatedly on the giant banana peel. The image of a man slipping on a banana peel, like that of a cream pie in the face, is one of the most famous jokes of the slapstick era, and it immediately calls to mind the silent comedies. Allen uses this joke to display his influences and actively acknowledge his reliance on the old slapsticks as a source for his comedy. At the same time, he changes the joke significantly enough to show that *Sleeper* is distinct from the silent classics. The joke is not only a throwback to familiar forms; it

suggests a critique of technology. Giant fruits and vegetables should imply an abundance of food and thus be a positive aspect of this culture, but here Allen highlights not their potential for nourishment but rather their ability to cause harm. And the context in which this produce is presented does not necessarily imply a greater abundance of foods. On the contrary, Miles finds only one giant banana that is presumably quite valuable due to the rigor with which it is guarded. The need to scientifically engineer foods that naturally grow in abundance suggests a depletion of resources and the need to technologically correct past errors. Taking into account the political dimension of Allen's joke, this scene becomes a perfect example of Allen's postmodern parody. Using a familiar gag that is already silly, Allen hyperbolizes it, extending the joke to outrageous proportions and inserts his own social critique. Allen also manages to both celebrate and subvert the classic comedy from which he draws, and hence the joke is at once familiar and different.

Allen's critique of technology is more prominent in Miles' other encounters with this new environment. On the run from the government, Miles disguises himself as a robot servant and is assigned to be the butler and cook in Luna's home. Miles' disguise, consisting of a tuxedo and white face makeup, is a comic inversion of minstrel-show blackface that again suggests a parodic revision. While Miles' costume is actually a fair approximation of the actual robot servants, his thick black glasses immediately differentiate him. When Luna first sees Miles and thinks he is a robot, she complains to the technician that she will eventually have his head replaced for something more fashionable. Here Allen self-deprecatingly mocks his own physical appearance, but he also highlights Miles' inability to fully blend in to the futuristic landscape.

Miles' attempt to pass himself off as a robot does not necessarily recall any particular slapstick routines, but it does show Allen playing with a classic comic formula. Humans behaving like machines, according to Henri Bergson, is the root of nearly all humor. For example, Bergson provides the situation of a man stumbling over a stone while walking down the street, explaining that the man's comic mishap occurs through "a certain *mechanical inelasticity*" rather than the "wideawake pliability of a human being" (67). It is this unexpected "mechanical inelasticity" that elicits laughter in audiences. In *Sleeper*, Allen literalizes this formula by putting Miles in a situation where he must act like a machine, but then he turns Bergson's thesis on its head by highlighting Miles' status as a human being and generating comedy through his inability to perform successfully as a robot. Miles mimics the shuffling walk of the robots fairly well, and his impersonation achieves some superficial humor, but Allen's comedy gains momentum when Miles must begin performing his domestic duties. His first task is to prepare enough food to feed all the guests at a party Luna is throwing. Unfamiliar with the workings of the futuristic kitchen, Miles mixes together some instant pudding. Within moments the pudding grows to monstrous proportions and seems to take on a life of its own, wiggling across the floor of the kitchen. In a very funny shot, we see Luna making her guests comfortable in the foreground while in the background we see Miles beating back the blob-like pudding with a broomstick. Miles' inability to master the machinery of the kitchen echoes Fielding Mellish's assertion that machines hate him, but here the joke is given an extra dimension because Miles himself is supposed to be performing with the objective efficiency of a robot. Thus Allen, in a manner similar to Pynchon,

updates Bergson's assertion about humans and machines by bringing it into an era in which the line between the two literally becomes blurred.

Miles' impersonation of a machine serves not to demonstrate his "mechanical inelasticity" but rather to highlight his humanity. We see this inversion of Bergson's formula again in a hilarious scene during Luna's party when she and her guests pass around the orb, a round silver ball that creates a euphoric high simply by being touched. As the robot butler, Miles' job is to pass the orb from one guest to the next, each person handling it for only a few seconds. After successfully passing it on a few times, Miles himself becomes giddy from the effects of handling the orb; first he refuses to pass it, rubbing the orb himself, and then, as the effects kick in, he begins to grope and fondle Luna's female guests. Once again, Allen inverts Bergson's thesis, deriving humor not from Miles' resemblance to a machine but from the human weaknesses that prevent him from successfully completing his job as a robot. Fortunately for Miles, at this point in the party the guests are all too stoned themselves to notice that his behavior is more human than mechanical.

Despite his clumsiness and ineptitude, Miles' human fallibilities are ultimately a positive force in the film. His inability to properly perform as a machine separates him from this futuristic culture in which the line between machines and humans seems to be particularly thin. Not only are domestic servants mechanized, but so is sex, through a machine called the Orgasmitron, which can be used alone or in pairs. Even the pets are mechanical: midway through the film, Miles is given a robot dog named Rex, who says, "Bow wow, bow wow, my name is Rex." These mechanizations suggest a society in

which meaningful connections between people are rare. Miles' clumsiness thus serves as a vital source of life in contrast to the austerity of the future culture.

This society is indeed so mechanized that it builds machines for tasks that do not require them, suggesting a desire for high-tech advancement even at the price of straightforward simplicity. Miles, for instance, takes a break to shave at an abandoned house. In place of a regular glass mirror, however, the bathroom is equipped with a television screen. As Miles shaves, his "reflection" in the screen is out of sync with his actual movements. He plays with the controllers on the bottom of the screen, and sees a woman brushing her teeth. "Get off this channel," she yells. Miles plays with the controls again and sees the same woman, but this time her face is covered in shaving cream, and she is shaving in sync with Miles' own actions. This superfluous device mocks the society's servile dependence on technology in every aspect of daily life. Looking in the mirror, as Lacan tells us, is a key activity in forming a sense of self. The fact that in this society one can look into the mirror and literally see anyone blurs the line between self and other, highlighting the conformist nature of the populace.

This futuristic society, despite being so mechanized, is itself susceptible to slapstick pitfalls. In this respect, Allen seems to suggest that increased technology cannot rescue us, and that it might even intensify our discord with the physical world. This is most evident in Allen's representations of the security police. Blatant throwbacks to the bumbling Keystone Cops of the silent-era, the Security Police are as inept with machinery as Miles himself. In both of the film's chase scenes, the police attempt to shoot Miles with a rocket launcher, but their efforts inevitably end in disaster: in one scene, they fire their weapon backwards, exploding their own van, and in another, the

detonator explodes instead of the rocket. These gags recall the comic mishaps with phallic weaponry that Allen's protagonists suffered in *Take the Money and Run* and *Bananas*. But in *Sleeper*, the slapstick is directed not only at Allen's schlemiel protagonist but also at those in positions of power; thus Allen more directly satirizes a masculinist and oppressive culture. By making both Miles and the wider culture the subject of his physical comedy, the film achieves a sort of leveling effect, as both the oppressor and object of oppression are shown to be at the mercy of the physical world.

At the end of the film, Allen extends this physical instability of the powerful to enormous proportions, as he and Luna go on a mission to steal and destroy the disembodied nose of the Big-Brother-like Leader before an entire new body can be cloned to go along with it. By having the fate of an entire police state rest on the fate of a single nose, Allen highlights the frail physicality of the supposedly all powerful leader.<sup>32</sup> That the nose is The Leader's only remaining organ is suggestive as well. As Yacowar points out, "the joke about the cloning of the leader quite literally posits a society that is led by the nose" (153). And beyond this literalized metaphor, the nose (as we saw when considering Roth) is inextricably and symbolically tied to the penis. The Leader's disembodied, powerless nose suggests a ruling system in which the supposedly omnipotent government is in fact impotent. Allen thus uses his body humor to collapse traditional notions of masculine power. And in the case of *Sleeper*, this impotent government mirrors the futuristic society itself in which, as Luna explains to Miles, "everybody is frigid." The link between the impotence of the state and that of the populace is a comic echo of Freud's connection between collective and individual

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<sup>32</sup> Given Allen's fondness for Russian literature, discussed in more detail in the next section, this scenario may be an allusion to Gogol's short story "The Nose."



repression. As Norman O. Brown puts it, “the varieties of culture can be correlated with the varieties of neurosis” (*Life Against Death* 11). In positing a neurotic, frigid culture, Allen thus degrades the power of the government. This comic debasement is cemented when, in a cartoonish moment, the much coveted nose is run over by steamroller, flattened like a pancake and thus rendered useless. The death of the nose suggests the end of the fascist state, and once again, a series of comic mishaps establish Miles as a schlemiel hero.

### **Existential Comedy**

Allen’s next film, *Love and Death* (1975), is the last in this series of outrageous, thinly plotted slapsticks. After this film, his cinema begins to rely primarily on verbal comedy, and even in *Love and Death* we see Allen employing more verbal humor than he did in either *Bananas* or *Sleeper*. However, the majority of his spoken jokes in *Love and Death* are still rooted in physicality. In the film’s final scene, Allen’s persona Boris Grushenko makes a speech to the audience from beyond the grave, explaining the irreconcilable split between mind and body: “The mind embraces all the nobler aspirations like poetry and philosophy, but the body has all the fun.” This joke sums up one of the film’s key themes, for throughout *Love and Death*, characters continually struggle, albeit in a humorous manner, between lofty, noble pursuits and base, sensual pleasures. What emerges is a comic exploration into the meaning of life, an existential comedy in which the ethereal and the material are two opposing modes of defining existence. Appropriately, Allen explores these issues by parodying nineteenth century Russian literature and film. *Love and Death* particularly spoofs the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and their weighty philosophical ruminations. He infuses the existential

dilemmas of Russian literature with slapstick comedy and improbable sight gags such as those found in *Bananas* and *Sleeper*. This parodic juxtaposition of philosophical inquiry and slapstick comedy not only continues Allen's method of postmodern parody; it also mirrors the key theme of the film: the inescapable split between the mind and the body.

Allen's decision to place this film in a Russian literary context is unsurprising. Throughout his career, Allen makes numerous allusions to Russian literature, particularly the novels of Dostoevsky. His tragicomedy *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, for instance, subtly alludes to *Crime and Punishment* in its title, and the film's theme, like Dostoevsky's novel, takes up the issue of moral imperatives in a seemingly chaotic world. The recent film *Match Point* also centers around this theme, this time making the allusion directly by showing the murderer Chris Wilton reading not only a copy of *Crime and Punishment* but also *The Cambridge Companion to Dostoevsky*. The most useful work in contextualizing *Love and Death*, however, is a short prose piece entitled "Notes From the Overfed" that Allen claims to have written "After reading Dostoevski [sic] and the new 'Weight Watchers' magazine on the same plane trip" (*Getting Even* 62). The story takes the form of a prolonged inquiry into the subject of fatness, and the narrator begins by contemplating his own grotesque body: "I am fat. I am disgustingly fat. I am the fattest human I know. I have nothing but excess poundage all over my body. My fingers are fat. My wrists are fat. My eyes are fat. (Can you imagine fat eyes?) I am hundreds of pounds overweight" (62). Like the Underground Man in *Notes from the Underground*, the fat narrator's ruminations about himself and his condition eventually lead to his own story. We learn that the narrator has a philosophical explanation for his massive girth. After suffering through an existential dilemma, the narrator concludes that

God is everywhere. Following this conclusion to its end, he reasons that if God is everywhere, then He must also be in food and in human fat. Thus the narrator concludes that “the more I ate the godlier I would become” (66). Here Allen uses a humorous revision of Dostoevsky in much the same way that he will use similar material in *Love and Death*. The narrator ostensibly uses the rhetoric of theology and philosophy to glorify his own grotesque body, and through this parody Allen comically deflates existential dilemmas. In other words, Allen pulls the ethereal down to the level of the material. Allen makes this type of joke numerous times in *Love and Death* suggesting that no matter how noble or brilliant our pursuits are, we will never fully rise above the fact of our material existence.

The film’s plot is similar to *Bananas* and *Sleeper*. Allen plays Boris Grushenko, a weak schlemiel in early nineteenth-century Russia who is coerced by his family and community into fighting against the French in the Napoleonic wars. True to the schlemiel tradition, Boris sees the war as ludicrous and pointless, and his cowardice emerges as a type of heroism. Allen provides another series of comic mishaps with phallic weapons, foregrounding Boris’ distance from the Russian standards of violent masculinity. In a training montage reminiscent of *Bananas*, Boris’ rifle falls apart as he loads it, and when engaged in battle, his sword bends like a noodle when he attempts to slash at an enemy soldier. However, in this film, Boris’ antipathy towards violence posits a more viable alternative masculinity. For Boris takes a firmer stance against the war than his predecessors do in *Bananas* and *Sleeper*. He refers to himself as a “militant coward,” and throughout the film, he argues against the war and actively criticizes both Napoleon and the Russian Tsar. Allen himself also condemns the violence more explicitly; at one point,

we see a battle from “a general’s point of view,” and the on-screen image shows two herds of sheep running towards each other on the battlefield, and in another moment, the camera actually scans a broad shot of hundreds of dead bodies after a battle. These instances, although rare, lend a darker edge to the body humor and allow Allen to more overtly critique his world.

This slightly more serious stance is highlighted by Boris’ frequent philosophical—although always comic—soliloquies on life, death, and morality. Allen never lets the audience forget these serious themes, but at the same time, his bathetic comedy never allows us a stable vantage point from which to view them. In the opening scene for instance, Boris awaits his execution in a French prison, and through voiceover, he relates to the audience the events that led up to his current situation. This device immediately establishes the film’s existential aspects, but in the film’s opening speech, the universal import of Boris’ situation is immediately dismissed for a joke:

Absolutely incredible: to be executed for a crime I never committed. Of course, isn't all mankind in the same boat? Isn't all mankind ultimately executed for a crime it never committed? The difference is that all men go eventually, but I go six o'clock tomorrow morning. I was supposed to go at five o'clock, but I have a smart lawyer. Got leniency.

Allen humorously moves from a metaphysical platitude to an individual complaint. This structure suggests that in the face of death, philosophy is pointless; each condemned person is overwhelmed by his or her own predicament.

Allen’s comic debasement continues in Boris’ opening monologue. Relating the events of his childhood, he tries to maintain an emotional connection to the past, but the realities of the physical world inevitably intrude and puncture any attempt at sentiment. “Uncle Nikolai with his wonderful laugh,” Boris muses, while on the screen we see a

bulbous, bearded man simultaneously laughing and coughing. Upon recalling the image, Boris immediately revises his memory: “God he was repulsive.” Boris also attempts to search his childhood memories for something that will provide him with an understanding of his imminent demise. He recalls his first experience with death, relating the death of a serf who was struck by lightning: “Old Nehamkin was on the roof, putting up a lightning rod, when a storm broke out. After he failed to show up for dinner, Mother went to look for him.” On screen we see Boris’s mother looking down disapprovingly at a pile of ashes; “What is it Old Nehamkin?” she asks, “You are not looking well.” In Boris’ search for an explanation into the workings of the universe and a clue into the mystery of death, all he finds is an instance of unfortunate slapstick caused by the random senselessness of a bolt of lightning.

Another important counterpoint to the characters’ lofty ruminations occurs in Allen’s attention to the material world of food and eating. Ronald D. Leblanc traces the film’s many allusions to food, arguing that, for Allen, food “plays a double role as both a deflator of philosophic pretensions and a conveyor of ultimate questions... food here affirms the physical joy of human existence at the same time as it reminds us of life’s inherent cruelty, injustice, contingency, and meaninglessness” (153). Allen presents the “inherent cruelty” of eating through Boris’ understanding of the natural world, which he explains to his cousin/wife Sonja: “to me nature is, I don’t know, spiders and bugs, big fish eating little fish, and plants eating plants, and animals eating—it’s like an enormous restaurant.” Boris’ presentation of the world as a restaurant highlights his dislike for living in a society where physical superiority ultimately trumps mental acumen. At the same time, Boris greatly enjoys the sensual pleasures of eating (at the opera with Russian

aristocrats he anachronistically asks for popcorn and gum drops), and he actively conflates these pleasures with the pleasures of sex. When Sonja tells Boris that she considers herself half saint and half whore, Boris just hopes that he gets “the half that eats,” cementing the connection between dietary and sexual appetites. Later when Boris and Sonja are finally together, we see Sonja’s frigidity in the bedroom literalized when Boris puts on gloves midway through intercourse. This sexual coldness is then mirrored in the kitchen when Sonja makes Boris meals made of snow and sleet.

While in these instances, food contributes to Allen’s ambivalent view of the body, he also uses it to deflate nationalist politics. In the war, a Russian general encourages his troops by describing for them the shame of defeat, but his rhetoric is couched in strictly dietary terms: “Imagine your loved ones conquered by Napoleon and forced to live under French rule. Do you want them to eat that rich food and those heavy sauces? Do you want them to have soufflé every meal and croissant?” This joke is repeated later when Napoleon consults with his chefs about the progress of a new pastry to be named after him. The emperor fears that his pastry will not be perfected before the British King completes the design for Beef Wellington. In a melodramatic flourish, Napoleon yells at his chefs, “We must develop the Napoleon before he develops the Beef Wellington. The future of Europe hangs in the balance!” In both jokes, Allen renders political and military ambition ridiculous by reducing them to the realm of food. But Allen simultaneously acknowledges the importance that food has in forming a national identity. The implication, especially when we remember Allen’s connections between food and sex, is that bodily appetites, rather than political ideals, are the actual driving force of

history. The film's emphasis on food then continues Allen's comic debasement of lofty ideals, whether political, philosophical, or romantic.

Amidst these dietary deflations, the main dilemma of Boris' character becomes figuring out whether or not there is a moral order to the universe, and if so, when if ever it might be morally sanctioned to take another human life. Allen treats these issues seriously in later works, but here his characters' frantic delivery and use of unnecessary jargon makes these debates, usually between Boris and his cousin/wife Sonja, seem more like a Marx Brothers routine than an actual intellectual discussion. The issue reaches its culmination towards the end of the film when Boris and Sonja attempt to assassinate Napoleon. Boris finds himself standing above the emperor's unconscious body, pistol in hand but unable to take a life. The dilemma leads him into a comic soliloquy:

Look at him. If I don't kill him, he'll make war all through Europe. But murder? What would Socrates say? All those Greeks were homosexuals. Boy, they must have had some wild parties I bet they all took a house together on Crete for the summer. A: Socrates is a man. B: All men are mortal. C: All men are Socrates. That means all men are homosexuals. I'm not a homosexual. Once, some Cossacks whistled at me. I happen to have the kind of body that excites both persuasions. But, you know, some men are heterosexual, and some men are bisexual, and some men don't think about sex at all. They become lawyers. My problem is that I see both sides of every issue. I'm too logical. You know, the world is not logical...So, you know, I'm just racked with guilt and I'm consumed with remorse and stricken with suffering for the human race. And not only that, but I'm developing a herpes on my lip here that is really killing me.

The humorous monologue begins by addressing a broad political and metaphysical question. As Boris' thoughts progress, however, his concerns become more and more specific, turning first to the sexuality of the Greeks and then to his own sexuality. Ultimately, all moral dilemmas are forgotten for the annoying herpes on his lip. The

structure of Boris's speech suggests that the big questions of life are ultimately trumped by material reality. Our relationship with our bodies is more important than that with God or nation.

During Boris's Hamletesque delay, a French conspirator emerges and shoots the unconscious emperor, who it turns out is not the real Napoleon but his double. Boris is caught with a pistol in his hand and sentenced to death. At this point, the story catches up with itself, and we are back in Boris's prison cell where he awaits execution. In Allen's last comic swipe at metaphysical ideals, Boris has a vision in which an angel comes to his cell and ensures him that at the last minute he will be pardoned and set free. The vision, however, turns out to be false, and Boris is executed by the firing squad. The film ends with Boris being led into the afterlife by Death. Whether Boris' vision is actually a false angel or the product of his own imagination is unimportant, the point is clear: our understanding of anything beyond the physical world is not to be trusted.

Given Allen's repeated debasement of abstractions and ideals, it becomes clear that the object of his comedy is not only Russian novels but the entire tradition of Western literature and philosophy. In this way *Love and Death* can be seen as the culmination of Allen's postmodern parody. In the first four films discussed in this chapter, Allen uses physical comedy to parody various forms of popular culture and discourses of contemporary thought. And in *Love and Death* he posits the human body, with its desires and suffering, as the comic counterpoint to a cultural system that often prizes the ethereal over the material. The series of films then emerges as a critique of the individual body throughout Western history and even into the future. At times cynical and at other times celebratory, Allen's comic view of the body is ultimately ambivalent.



For Allen, the body is inherently weak, unstable, and flawed by desire. But at the same time, as Boris Grushenko notes, it “has all the fun.” Allen recognizes this contradiction and responds to it by placing the body’s capacity for joy alongside its inevitable suffering. The result of this juxtaposition is a physical comedy that elicits laughter but acknowledges the terror of living with a fragile, helpless body in a violent world.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Beyond Embodiment: Comic Detachment in Charles Johnson's Fiction

“And the Oxherder has a sense of humor and irony. How could he not? He knows that, despite all he has attained through a lifetime of practice, he is still an embodied being and, as such, will experience until the day of his death a residual stain of dualism, a tincture of *samsara*, and traces of suffering, which he recognizes when they arise in his consciousness” (24).

—Charles Johnson, “Reading the Eightfold Path”  
From *Turning the Wheel*

For writer and practicing Buddhist Charles Johnson, the body is a literal stumbling block on the path to enlightenment. As such, it provides him with endless comic potential. In the passage above, Johnson deliberately links the humorous worldview of the Oxherder (Johnson's preferred metaphor for someone seeking enlightenment)<sup>33</sup> to the possession of a body. That Johnson is African-American adds another layer of complexity to his concept of the body and body humor. African-Americans not only struggle with the usual desires, urges, and pitfalls that accompany all embodied beings, but they also must negotiate the stereotypes and negative imagery that are so often attached to black bodies. In numerous non-fiction writings and interviews, Johnson argues for the philosophical methods with which African-American subjects can overcome these harmful associations of race. He also suggests aesthetic means through which African-American writers and artists can begin to undo negative depictions of blackness and present a fuller vision of black life.

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<sup>33</sup> A major influence on Johnson's thought and work is the twelfth-century Buddhist parable, *Ten Oxherding Pictures*, which, through ten paired drawings and verses, tells of the oxherder's search for his lost ox, which is a Chinese symbol for the self. After seeking, finding, chasing, and taming the ox, the oxherder and the ox both disappear in the eighth frame, signaling the moment of realization that reality is illusory and the self is nothing. In the final two frames, the oxherder then returns to his origins as a teacher and healer. Thus the story of the ten oxherding pictures is essentially that of a quest for enlightenment in which the seeker eventually transcends human desire and then shares his knowledge with the world. For a detailed discussion of Johnson's use of *Ten Oxherding Pictures*, particularly in *Oxherding Tale*, see Jonathan Little's *Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination*, pp. 82-87. For examples of the *Ten Oxherding Pictures*, as well as a discussion of variations of the parable, see Daisetz Teitaro Sukuki's *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, pp. 127-144.

Johnson's arguments about race (and art) emerge from a unique blend of Western and Eastern sources. He draws heavily from phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty as well as from major Buddhist and Hindu teachings. In "The Phenomenology of the Black Body" Johnson, taking a cue from Frantz Fanon, contends that often in white consciousness, "blacks are stripped of mental life, which leaves them only a bodily existence" (110). This bodily existence is characterized by dark skin, which suggests stain or defilement and "seems figuratively to darken consciousness itself." In order to overcome these associations, Johnson argues for a phenomenological approach to blackness, which "involves a suspension or bracketing of all sociological and scientific theories concerning race" (113). This phenomenological suspension of race theories works in a similar way to Buddhist teachings, which seek to dismantle false constructions of the self. Followed to their logical conclusions, both systems of thought should eventually reveal racial categories to be a mere bodily barrier obstructing any sort of profound understanding of one's place in the world.

Johnson argues in *Being and Race*, a philosophical work that grew out of his dissertation, that only a few black writers in the history of African-American literature have successfully suspended racial preconceptions and offered a more complex view of black life.<sup>34</sup> While Johnson is sympathetic to nearly all African-American writers, he asserts that the African-American literary tradition is "an overwhelmingly tragic literature...Book after book discloses the desperate struggle of a people first to survive against stupendous odds and then to secure the most basic rights in a perpetually hostile

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<sup>34</sup> Johnson most often singles out Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison as African-American writers who have most successfully created what he calls "Philosophical Black Fiction." Amongst contemporary writers, Johnson speaks positively of Ishmael Reed and Gloria Naylor, amongst others. See the final two chapters of *Being and Race* for an extended discussion of a large number of contemporary black writers.

environment. Whites in this history act; blacks can only *react*" (*Being and Race* 7).

Elsewhere, Johnson similarly notes that

the sum and substance of our lives, to hear our writers tell it, is Black music, Creole dishes, dancing, sass, and certain African survivalisms. Accepting this interpretation (which, like all true perceptions, is partial, one-sided, and badly in need of completion) kills as surely as a knife thrust the evolution—expansion and efflorescence—of Black life. ("Philosophy and Black Fiction" 82)

Johnson argues that the reality of African-American life is much more complex than the majority of black protest literature would suggest: "we find...the black world *overflowing* with meaning, so rich and multisided that literally anything—and everything—can be found there, good and bad, and one of the first chores of the writer is to be immersed in this embarrassment of rich, contradictory material" (*Being and Race* 11).

In his own fiction, Johnson puts these ideas into practice, creating a body of work that at once draws from and interrogates the African-American literary tradition. In *Oxherding Tale* (1984) and *Middle Passage* (1995), Johnson transforms the traditional slave narrative into a vehicle for psychological and spiritual growth.<sup>35</sup> While the protagonists of these novels begin a quest for physical freedom from the bondage of slavery, by their stories' end they also achieve a metaphysical and psychological freedom from personal desires and narrow, racially driven conceptions of identity. These novels certainly acknowledge the horrors of slavery, but their primary focus is on the black

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<sup>35</sup> A number of critics have written about Johnson's method of rewriting the slave narrative. Lorraine Ouimet, using Johnson's often critical views of African-American literature as a springboard, argues that *Oxherding Tale*'s revision of the genre "critiques white historiography of slavery, as well as black literary traditions" (33). Keith Byerman uses Johnson's revisions to link the slave narrative to the picaresque tradition, suggesting "that human beings move constantly from one slavery to another, believing all the while that motion is freedom and that each new place is finally home" (108).

subject's relationship to himself.<sup>36</sup> As Marc Connor and William Nash note, while “all of [Johnson's] writings work resolutely towards righting injustice...his main impetus is without question the fate and character of the individual” (xvii). In his grappling with individual consciousness and experience, Johnson uses the particular struggles of African-American life as a means to explore larger, universal questions of existence, identity, and spirituality:

there is no reason, in principle, that we cannot work through the particulars of Black life from *within* and discover there not only phenomenon worthy of philosophical treatment in fiction, but also...significant new perceptions. Universals are not static...but changing, historical, *evolving* and enriched by particularization; the lived Black world has always promised a fresh slant on structures and themes centuries old. (“Philosophy and Black Fiction” 81)

A key universal that Johnson works to reveal through his exploration of the particulars of African-American history, is the illusory and transitory nature of the self. Johnson argues that identity is an ongoing process and that the self is “a verb and not a noun” (*Passing the Three Gates* 100). In both *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage*, Johnson depicts this ongoing process of identity formation, presenting protagonists who continuously perform and discard static versions of themselves. Circumscribed theories of the body, such as those focused on race and gender, are the primary obstacles that Johnson's characters face. As their stories draw to a close, however, these characters begin the process of suspending these reductive theories and approaching their bodies from a phenomenological perspective.

This philosophical approach to African-American life has elicited various critical responses. The majority of scholars who have written about Johnson view his work as an

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<sup>36</sup> The gender-specific language here is deliberate. As my readings of *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage* will demonstrate, Johnson—in these novels at least—focuses specifically on the struggles of black men and the relationship that they have with their bodies.

important contribution to African-American writing and to American literature in general. Stanley Crouch argues that Johnson's optimistic treatment of black life has "enriched contemporary American fiction as few young writers can," and Rudolph Byrd asserts that Johnson's unique blending of Eastern and Western sources "extends and complicates the wider tradition of the American novel" ("Charles Johnson: Free At Last" 277; *Writing the American Palimpsest* 9). But perhaps more interesting are those critics who have taken issue with Johnson's project. Not surprisingly, Johnson's argument for transcending race and his method of seeking larger philosophical truths within the history of black life has instigated charges of Eurocentrism. Molly Abel Travis calls Johnson's work "politically conservative" and "accommodating to the white male reader" (193; 181). Similarly, Richard Hardack argues that Johnson's use of slavery as a primarily metaphysical condition takes away from the historical import of the actual suffering: "American slavery is a specific bondage, and to distill it distorts its particularity to make it coincide with some imagined universal pattern" (1039). This "universal pattern," for Hardack, is little more than a Western myth, what he calls "white transcendental standards" (1041). In their charges that Johnson caters to white readers, both critics seem to willfully neglect Johnson's use of Eastern sources, but Hardack's point that Johnson distorts the particularities of actual slavery is worthy of further consideration.

When read in the terms of Johnson's own aesthetic, Hardack's accusation can hardly be called a criticism. Of course Johnson distorts the specifics of slavery; this should be evident from the slapstick-driven opening of *Oxherding Tale*, which reads more like a comedy of errors than a traditional slave narrative. Johnson approaches his subject as an interpreter and creator, rather than a chronicler, of historical particulars. In

this respect, Johnson's treatment of slavery is consistent with postmodern approaches to the historical record. Linda Hutcheon describes this postmodernist treatment with her useful term "historiographic metafiction." According to Hutcheon, postmodern historical writers "juxtapose what we think we know of the past (from official archival sources and personal memory) with an alternative representation that foregrounds the postmodern epistemological questioning of the nature of historical knowledge" (*Politics of Postmodernism* 71). In his approach to African-American history, Johnson similarly questions what we think we know of slavery by inverting key aspects of the slave narrative and infusing the slave's life with philosophical dilemmas that are typically left out of accounts that primarily chronicle material struggles. The key difference between Johnson and other postmodern writers is his choice of subject matter. Unlike Pynchon and Allen, whose postmodern revisions subvert the historical record of the oppressor, Johnson critiques the African-American tradition from within, using postmodern methods to offer, in Hutcheon's words, an "alternative representation" of the history of African-American life.

In this respect, Johnson's position towards the African-American literary tradition may also be seen in the context of Henry Louis Gates' conception of "signifyin(g)," a process of revision and repetition in which black writers pay homage to but also subvert their predecessors. According to Gates, "Signifyin(g)...is a mode of formal revision, it depends for its effects on troping, it is often characterized by pastiche, and, most crucially, it turns on repetition of formal structures and their differences" (52). We see something very similar to this process of signifyin(g) at work in *Oxherding Tale*. Johnson repeats the basic structure of the slave narrative but revises that structure at key moments

in order to challenge readers' understanding of black history and black life. Johnson, however, ultimately rejects the idea of signifyin(g) as a totalizing method of viewing the African-American tradition. In an interview with Jonathan Little, Johnson notes that,

We have a way of talking about these so-called differences between the white and black aesthetic that do not make a great deal of sense. Skip Gates has this idea of "signifying" as somehow being a part of this. But again, if that's a general aesthetic proposition, then you should be able to go back to any black literary work and find that it signifies in the way that Skip is talking about. You can't do that. All these works will defy that very simple notion of how you go about it. (*Passing the Three Gates* 108)

The similarities between Hutcheon's conception of postmodernist revision and Gates' definition of signifyin(g) seem to support Johnson's assertion that it is impossible to enumerate rigid differences between the white and black aesthetic. Both approaches explain, although in different terms, Johnson's philosophical method of complicating the received African-American tradition. When seen in this light, charges that Johnson's work is Eurocentric deliberately sidesteps the numerous, overlapping contexts in which his fiction can be placed.

Johnson's humor may be one of the reasons why critics sometimes take exception to his treatment of slavery. Comedy, especially body humor, is one of the key strategies that Johnson uses in his revisionary approach to the African-American literary tradition. Throughout *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage*, Johnson infuses the traditional slave narrative (a genre not known for comedy) with ribald humor and slapstick. Stanley Crouch notes this aspect of Johnson's work in an early review of *Oxherding Tale*, observing that Johnson is "essentially a gallows humorist" (272). Despite Crouch's shrewd assertion, critics have seldom discussed Johnson's comedy. Jonathan Little, in



*Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination*, provides a detailed analysis of the comedy in Johnson's earliest work as a cartoonist but largely neglects the humor in his fiction. Conner and Nash also note that Johnson's work conveys "a sense of the comic, as well as the tragic" but say little about this fact. Numerous other critics acknowledge in passing that, aside from being an innovative writer and perceptive critic, Johnson also happens to be funny. But Johnson's humor is more than mere happenstance, and comedy is an essential component in his phenomenological approach to blackness. In an interview with George Myers, Johnson illustrates the importance that he places on comedy, relating a story he heard from a historian in which students were shocked to read a nineteenth century document which mentioned slaves laughing:

The students refused to believe it. They couldn't imagine slaves having anything to laugh about, because, well, they were *slaves*...Our idea of what a slave is...categorically rules out the possibility of laughter. Isn't this strange? This is precisely the reason I felt I needed to write *Oxherding Tale*—to broaden the vision of black being, black identity, and black selfhood. (*Passing the Three Gates* 40)

By viewing slavery, and African-American issues in general, only through a lens of bleakness and oppression, Johnson argues that we in effect deny oppressed people an essential element of humanity. He seeks to restore this humanity by forcing readers to reconsider and interrogate those ideas of blackness which are so often taken for granted.

Johnson's comedy is firmly rooted in his depictions of the human body. In their pursuit of self-knowledge, Johnson's protagonists strive to transcend their bodies, but their bodies resist, usually with comic results. This comic treatment destabilizes preconceived notions of blackness. In the dominant discourse, black bodies have often been portrayed as comic caricatures, especially in minstrel show images. But Johnson

interrogates these images from within the history of African-American literature and infuses them with other discourses. Furthermore, Johnson's comic approach to the body contributes significantly to his characters' struggle for self-awareness. In Buddhist teachings, the body should be cared for but not overindulged; one should not form too close of an attachment to his/her body because it is inherently weak and will inevitably die. It becomes necessary, therefore, to form a certain distance from the body. For Johnson, body humor is a key way of achieving this detachment. Distance has long been considered an important aspect of comedy; as Henri Bergson points out, if we "look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy" (63). A similar point can be found at the heart of Mel Brooks' famous quip that "tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall down a manhole and die." Johnson's comedy, arrived at through Buddhism and phenomenology, turns this ironic distance back on the self. As his protagonists struggle to free themselves from the constricting forces of bodily desire and negative racial associations, they must learn to recognize what is comic about all bodies, especially their own.

This approach separates Johnson from most other African-American humorists whose comedy relies on a DuBoisian double-consciousness model of thought, which emphasizes the disparity between black and white cultures.<sup>37</sup> Ishmael Reed's fiction, for instance, often parodies the generic forms of Western literature (such as the western or the detective story) by infusing those forms with an Africanist presence. Stand-up

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<sup>37</sup> Mel Watkins notes that "DuBois's eloquent description of African America's psychological predicament provides a salient clue to the source and spectral tenor of black American humor" (27). Watkins goes on to explain that prior to the civil rights movement, African-American humor often played two roles: one that projected a veneer of complicity with the white oppressor and one that was intended only for black audiences. Since the 1970s, Watkins argues, these two forces have converged, as black comedians like Richard Pryor and Bert Williams actively discussed (and satirized) black and white social relations in their acts.

comedians like Dave Chappelle or Richard Pryor also emphasize the differences between black and white cultures, usually by providing caricatured impersonations of stuffy or uptight white men. Johnson does, on occasion, use racial stereotypes in his comedy (especially in his early cartoons), but he does so only in order to reveal their instability. Rather than using comedy to highlight or critique racial disparities, Johnson seeks to collapse dualistic modes of thinking and bring to light universal aspects of existence. Johnson certainly recognizes that the cultural assumptions and stereotypes that attach themselves to black bodies impede access to transcendence, but the ultimate goal of his comedy is to destabilize, rather than accentuate, ethnic particulars.

For Johnson, then, body humor serves not necessarily as a means of displaying or lamenting the inherent instability of bodily life (although it does do that at times), but as a functional method of transcending that instability. The subject's ability to laugh at his or her own body, Johnson's fiction suggests, demonstrates that he/she has begun the ongoing process of overcoming the matrix of desires, insecurities, and preconceptions that accompany bodily life. For Johnson's protagonists, these bodily stumbling blocks are most often associated with race and gender. In *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage*, the narrators grapple with how to find a meaningful way of becoming black men. This is especially difficult because for African-American men, masculinity is inextricably connected to blackness. Unlike traditional conceptions of white masculinity, in which the male body is either depicted heroically or not at all, the black male is usually seen as a highly sexualized beast or as passively effeminate.<sup>38</sup> As Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic explain, "the quality or content of the images [of black men] changes from

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<sup>38</sup> Examples of the former can be found in Thomas Dixon Jr.'s *The Clansman* (1905), and D.W. Griffith's film version *Birth of a Nation* (1914); an example of the latter can be found in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

period to period—now a hapless, dim-witted figure, now a threatening animalistic one...In one period, society needs reassurances that blacks are happy with their lot...in another, it needs to justify repression” (217). Both the complicit and the threatening depictions of black males acknowledge only the black man’s body, denying him access to intellect. Through humor, Johnson allows his male protagonists, and his readers, the comic distance necessary to look beyond these narrow conceptions of race and gender and to view their bodies, and thus their identity, from a phenomenological perspective. The first-person composition of *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage* reinforces this concept. Johnson’s narrators—Andrew Hawkins and Rutherford Calhoun—speak with humor about their bodily struggles, which are often brutal, thus testifying to the positive transformations they have undergone. By the end of their narratives they understand themselves in vastly different terms than they did at the beginning. They are able, therefore, to look back upon earlier versions of themselves with comic detachment.

In its optimistic use of body humor, Johnson’s fiction differs significantly from the other writers considered in this dissertation. Roth also frequently uses first person (or an extremely limited third-person omniscient), but he does so in a manner that tends to emphasize his protagonists’ irreconcilable inner conflicts; while Roth infuses these conflicts with humor, the characters themselves are generally still in the midst of their misfortunes, even as they relate them. Pynchon and Allen both, like Johnson, place their protagonists in politicized historical environments, but their cinematic treatment of this material rarely allows for moments of introspection. Allen, by appearing in his own films, recognizes the comic aspects of his own physicality, but within his films, the comedy is used primarily to reinforce his characters’ alienation. Just as Johnson

separates himself from much African-American fiction in his refusal to write from a stance of oppression, he also maintains a distance from many of his postmodern contemporaries (both white and black) by providing a distinctly hopeful perspective on the subject's place in the world. Thus Johnson's primary contribution to contemporary literature, both within and without of African-American studies, is his use of disruptive postmodern devices as a means to suggest an essentially optimistic view of life.

Johnson's comedy is a fundamental aspect of this vision, and in order to fully appreciate Johnson's aesthetic, we must consider in greater detail the Oxherder's "sense of humor and irony" that stems from being "an embodied being."

### **Drawing Comic Bodies**

Johnson's early work as a cartoonist shows his comic approach to black life in nascent form. In his two books of cartoons, *Black Humor* (1970) and *Half-Past Nation Time* (1972), Johnson uses physical caricature and parody to destabilize racial stereotypes and to reveal the social constructions behind racial categories. Throughout his cartoons, he uses a broad collection of well-known stereotypes, drawing with broad strokes a cast of easily recognizable characters who are comically fixed in their racial and social categories. Johnson satirizes the "Uncle Tom," the white Klansman, and the highly sexualized black man, working to undermine the stability of each figure by revealing its absurdity. A cartoon that features a black man and a white woman in bed together, for instance, undermines the myth of black male virility. The man, crying into his pillow, is turned away from the woman who says, "But I never expected you to be sexually superior, dear" (*Black Humor*). This cartoon blatantly inverts the well-known stereotype of black sexual potency, but its comedy also reveals the effect that such myths have on

the consciousness of their subject. The African-American man pictured in this cartoon has bought into the myth of the highly sexualized black body, and his own body's inability to live up to this myth, especially while in bed with a white woman, creates feelings of inferiority in regards to both his race and his masculinity. Ideally, the African-American man in this cartoon should be able to take a phenomenological approach to his own body (or view it from a stance of comic detachment) and suspend or bracket the myth of black virility. His inability to distance himself from the social constructions of blackness causes an identity crisis. Johnson treats this identity crisis in an irreverent manner and thus manages to highlight the comedy behind this man's relationship to his body.

Johnson's roots as a cartoonist are often evident in his fiction. While his characters are more complex than the simple sketches found in his drawings, he often relies on exaggerated visualizations or caricature, especially in his development of secondary characters who often embody static types. In his first novel, *Faith and the Good Thing* (1974), Johnson creates the grotesque figure of the Swamp Woman, a conjure artist and trickster figure who serves as the protagonist Faith's most important teacher on her quest to find the elusive and mysterious Good Thing. When Faith first meets the Swamp Woman (or werewitch, as she is sometimes called), the narrator describes her in terms both grim and comic: "[She] was a hairless old woman whose face held features like those glimpsed in novel arrangements of vegetation, freak potatoes in the shape of cow skulls...One tiny eye, the left one, was partially closed and had no pupil...The other, a disk, had a green cataract floating free in its center" (19). Upon seeing the Swamp Woman, Faith's surprise turns into a moment of slapstick as she

“jumped back a foot and lost her balance, falling along the moist boards of the bridge” (19). The detail here is both disturbing and humorous, and Faith’s stumble underlines the comic aspects of the Swamp Woman’s appearance. The Swamp Woman’s hyperbolic features and Faith’s physical reaction suggest that Johnson is adapting the aesthetic from his cartoons into prose form.

But in his fiction, Johnson also more explicitly complicates his physical caricatures. The initial description of the Swamp Woman conforms to what readers would expect a “swamp woman” to look like. And her personality, while amusing, obviously draws from stereotypical witches that can be found in children’s books or fairytales. One of the Swamp Woman’s first lines of dialogue deliberately alludes to a familiar, potion-producing witch figure at least as old as *Macbeth*: “Ya know what it takes to make a potion these days, girlie? Eye of newt and auric eggs don’t come as easy as they used to!” (19-20). But later in the novel, Johnson undermines this two-dimensional understanding of the Swamp Woman; her magic becomes the book’s central metaphor for art, and she serves as a living example of Faith’s Good Thing. In the final scene, Johnson literally undoes the Swamp Woman’s static physical appearance as she removes her “boil-ravaged skin” from her body “as though it were long underwear” and dons the skin of a young woman just starting out in life (190). Faith, herself once a young woman searching for the Good Thing, takes the place of the werewitch, pulling her discarded skin over her own. In this comic reversal of bodies, Johnson literalizes his assertion that identity is a process. In his later works, Johnson presents protagonists who work their whole lives to overcome harmful bodily associations; this scene anticipates such struggles by suggesting that material identity is purely illusory and can be discarded or changed at will.

Johnson's fiction is full of other secondary characters with grotesque or comic bodies, whose vivid descriptions display his roots as a cartoonist. In *Faith and the Good Thing*, there is also the "hatchet-faced" Dr. Lynch, a cold scientist with a "figure so scrawny it seemed to have been stretched on a rack" (35). And in *Oxherding Tale*, the narrator Andrew Hawkins is tutored by the Eastern transcendentalist Ezekiel Sykes-Withers who is "thin as a line in Zeno, with a craglike face, wild goatish eyes" and "tight pale lips [that] were the whole Jeffersonian idea of Insurrection" (11). Perhaps the most startling of all Johnson's physical descriptions is *Middle Passage*'s Captain Falcon, commander of the slaveship *Republic* on which the narrator Rutherford Calhoun is an unwitting stowaway. Calhoun's initial description of Falcon emphasizes a comic disjunction between his body and his character:

the master of the *Republic*, the man known for his daring exploits and subjugation of the colored races from Africa to the West Indies, was a *dwarf*... Though his legs measured less than those of his chart table, Captain Falcon had a shoulder span like that of Santos, and between this knot of monstrously developed deltoids and latissimus dorsi a long head rose with an explosion of hair so black his face seemed dead in contrast: eye sockets like anthracite furnaces, medieval lines more complex than tracery on his maps, a nose slightly to one side, and a great bulging forehead that looked harder than whalebone, but intelligent too—a thinker's brow... His belly was unspeakable. His hands like roots... I'd seen drawings of this gnarled little man's face before in newspapers... He was famous. In point of fact, infamous. That special breed of empire builder, explorer, and imperialist that sculptors love to elongate, El Greco-like, in city park statues until they achieved Brobdingnagian proportions. (29)

This detailed physical description is actually quite difficult to picture because different parts of Falcon's body seem at sharp odds with others, such as the short, stubby legs and the wide, muscular torso or the "thinker's brow" that "looked harder than whalebone."



And it is unclear precisely how readers should interpret an “unspeakable” belly. With every new modifier, Falcon’s body becomes more elusive and contradictory.

Johnson further highlights these problems of representation by juxtaposing Falcon with hypothetical “El-Greco-like” sculptures of him. The comparison underscores the vast discrepancy between Falcon’s body and his reputation. The Captain’s ambition, his intelligence, and his ego are all destabilized by his improbable body. Through this contradictory description, we see Johnson’s roots in phenomenology. William Nash explains Johnson’s phenomenological approach to literature as an “attempt to strip away externally imposed preconceptions that impede full access to any object” (3). In his presentation of Falcon, Johnson forces readers to reconsider what they think they know about dwarves, imperial slave traders, and tyrannical ship captains. Johnson is aware of the preconceived notions that readers bring with them to the text, and he plays on them, creating humor by deliberately and outrageously subverting them. Johnson’s comic bodies reveal much about his aesthetic, but they are still mainly cartoons and do not begin to approach the complexity with which he infuses the relationships that his questing protagonists have with their bodies in *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage*.

### **The Comic Quest of *Oxherding Tale***

In his introduction to *Oxherding Tale*, Johnson refers to the novel as his “platform” book, explaining “that everything else I attempted to do would in one way or another be based upon and refer to it” (xvii). The first chapter of this “platform” book, which serves as a platform for the novel, is infused with blatant instances of slapstick comedy. The novel begins with the narrator Andrew Hawkins relating the peculiar circumstances that led to his conception. Andrew’s father George Hawkins, a slave, and

his master, Jonathan Polkinghorne, stay up drinking late into the night. At one point, the two men realize the trouble they will get into with their wives if they come to bed in their drunken state. Polkinghorne proposes the odd solution of the two men swapping wives for the evening: George will sleep in the Big House with Polkinghorne's wife, Anna, and Polkinghorne will sleep in the slave quarters with George's wife, Mattie.

Not surprisingly, this plan does not lead to happy results. Anna Polkinghorne is at first aroused by the new man in her bed, but after having sex with George (and conceiving Andrew), she realizes what she has done and drives him out of the house with a series of screams. This comic encounter establishes the black male as existing in a purely physical realm. Anna's initial pleasure during her union with George coincides with the myth of black male virility, and her subsequent horror confirms the spectral fear that black male bodies stereotypically induce in white females. George's exclusively corporeal existence is seemingly cemented in a moment of physical comedy when, running from the house, naked, he trips and falls, "splattering himself from head to foot with mud deltaed in the yard" (7). But soon after, Johnson subverts this purely physical depiction of George, for this slapstick fall immediately segues into a social fall. After this incident, George is banned from the Big House and forced to work in the field as a lowly oxherder. George also extends his demotion to the realm of the metaphysical: "This Fall, [George] decided, was the wage of false pride—he had long hours to ponder such things as Providence and Destiny now that he was a shepherd of oxen and sheep" (7). The capitalization of "Fall" in this passage suggests an Old Testament parallel and gives George's predicament a cosmic import. Slapstick becomes the literalization of multiple symbolic plights, for Johnson conflates a physical fall, a fall from the social ladder, and a Fall from grace.

The novel's opening immediately foregrounds the connection between race and body humor. Slapstick—as we have seen in previous chapters—generally occurs when some sort of unexpected mishap disrupts the relationship between objects and humans. But according to the law, the slave himself is an object. When a slave suffers a slapstick fall, then, the resulting comedy risks highlighting the purely physical status of the slave and reinforcing the stereotype that African-Americans have only a bodily existence.<sup>39</sup> But by making this slapstick fall the medium through which we understand mental and metaphysical problems, this scene restores mind and spirit to the black body. Johnson contributes to his phenomenological approach to race by using potentially offensive humor as a means to destabilize static images of blackness.

The humorous story of Andrew's conception and its accompanying social and spiritual implications sets the tone for Andrew's life. The father's physical, social, and metaphysical predicaments are transferred to the son, and Andrew struggles with this inheritance throughout the rest of the novel. Andrew's lineage is immediately unstable because he has a white mother and black father. His light skin adds to this instability, for Andrew knows he could potentially pass for white. His place in the social world is precarious as well. Immediately after he is born, Andrew's mother sends him away from the house and asks never to see him again. Andrew is sent to live with the slaves, but Jonathan Polkinghorne recognizes in his wife's child the closest thing he will ever have to a son and gives Andrew a privileged status among the slaves, arranging for him to be given an education. Andrew's social position immediately mirrors his unfixing physical status: both black and white, Andrew also occupies a place in both the house and the field. And, as in Buddhist teachings, Andrew's spiritual struggles stem directly from his

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<sup>39</sup> It is this reinforcing of harmful stereotypes that makes minstrel show caricatures so offensive.

embodiment. He must first come to terms with his tenuous physicality before he can begin to understand himself.

The main plot of *Oxherding Tale* generally follows the structure of the slave narrative, depicting Andrew's subsequent quest for freedom from slavery. But as Johnson states in his introduction, the book is about Andrew's quest for "liberation from numerous forms of bondage (physical, psychological, sexual, metaphysical)" (xvi). In multiplying and complicating the types of bondage with which the slave must grapple, Johnson subverts some of the most familiar elements of the traditional slave narrative. In the story of Andrew's origins we see the unusual situation of a mulatto slave mothered by a white woman, a situation which inverts the more common scenario (such as that found in Frederick Douglass' narratives) in which the narrating slave is the result of a forced union between a white man and a black slave woman. This inversion immediately calls attention to gender, as well as race, as a key facet of Andrew's identity. Andrew also differs from traditional slave narrators in his education, his relationship to his owners, and in his contemplation of metaphysical (as well as physical) calamities. While, like all slaves, Andrew's basic predicament is that he possesses a body without legally owning it, his unique background causes him to view and experience this body in unique ways.

Throughout his quest, Andrew acts as the pupil to a number of teachers who influence the way that he views his body and, by extension, his entire self. Andrew's father, for instance, instills in him a sense of black identity and insists that Andrew understand himself primarily through his race. Another important influence on Andrew's worldview is his childhood tutor Ezekiel Sykes-Withers, a comic Emersonian figure whom Jonathan Polkinghorne hires to teach Andrew practical skills, but who instead

gives Andrew a “classical” education in Eastern and Western philosophy. Under Ezekiel’s instruction, Andrew learns “the 165 considerations, Four Noble Truths, the Eight-Fold Path, the 3,000 Good Manners, and 80,000 graceful conducts” (13). While the Eight-Fold Path and the Four Noble Truths are key teachings in Buddhist thought, the “165 considerations,” “3,000 Good Manners” and “80,000 graceful conducts” are wholly fictional and comically highlight the limitations of Ezekiel’s teachings. Unlike the short, easily graspable tenets of the Eight-Fold Path and the Four Noble Truths, designed to provide a way of life for those disciplined enough to follow it, something like the 80,000 graceful conducts smacks of school-room memorization and a hyperbolic need for categories and systems. As this suggests, Ezekiel’s lessons have little to no bearing on the actual world that Andrew lives in. It is clear from the outset that for Andrew to escape the various bonds of slavery that he will need to embrace a more fluid, practical philosophy than Ezekiel’s, one that can enable him to navigate the world of owners, slavecatchers, and reductive racial rhetoric.

The major flaw of Ezekiel’s teaching is that it does not offer Andrew a productive way of apprehending the physical world, especially his own body. Ezekiel is deeply troubled by materiality: he eats little, has no romantic attachments, and is even “afraid of cripples” (29). Furthermore, he views his gender as a mark of inferiority, viewing male genitalia as the signifier of a cosmic discord. He turns his discomfort with his gender into a lesson for Andrew: “Perhaps all philosophy boils down to the simple fear that the universe has no need for us—men, I mean, because women are, in a strange way, more essential to being than we are” (30). Ezekiel’s assertion that all men are inherently weaker takes on an additional dimension for Andrew, who also struggles with narrow

conceptions of blackness. The dominant culture, as Johnson points out in his essays, often views black beings as living a primarily physical existence, and for the black male this usually means an abundant sexual virility. Rather than countering this stereotype in a productive manner, Ezekiel's view of masculinity serves to further mark Andrew's body as other. Andrew's blackness separates him from the thinking world, while his maleness separates him from, in Ezekiel's words, "the universe."

Andrew's tenuous understanding of both his masculinity and his blackness is foregrounded when he moves at the age of twenty to Leviathan, a neighboring plantation run by the highly sexualized matriarch Flo Hatfield, Andrew's next teacher. Andrew hopes to raise enough money to buy himself, his father and stepmother, and his girlfriend Minty out of slavery. Before he even arrives, however, Andrew hears strange rumors about Flo Hatfield. According to Andrew's father, Flo periodically chooses a male slave from her bondsmen and after bathing him and dressing him in her dead husband's clothes, she "entertained him" for weeks until a mortician comes by to retrieve the slave's corpse (20). The implication is that Flo sexually uses her male slaves even until the point of death. Like the details of Andrew's conception, this story also inverts expected gender roles. In chronicles of slavery, instances of a male slave master sexually abusing female slaves are common, but by switching the expected gender roles, Johnson achieves an odd sort of humor. According to the mythology of the impossibly potent, highly sexualized black male, Flo's slaves should readily and willingly have sex with Flo. But the slave's eventual death undermines preconceptions about both black male and white female sexuality. Black male virility is revealed as racialized mythology, and Flo Hatfield's

supposed sexual appetite stands in sharp contrast to stereotypical depictions of white women terrified by the specter of black sexuality.

When Andrew arrives at Leviathan, he finds that the actual situation is not far from the rumor. Flo does choose a male slave to sexually entertain her, and once she tires of him, she leases him out to the nearby mines where slaves are worked to death. Flo's current lover is a man named Patrick, but both Andrew and Patrick recognize that Andrew will eventually take his place. Soon after Andrew's arrival, Patrick commits suicide in order to avoid the horror of the mines, and Andrew begins his life as Flo Hatfield's sexual slave. He learns from Flo sexually and develops an addictive habit to opium under her direction. Johnson humorously details the taxing effect that pleasing Flo has upon Andrew's body. Andrew's account of his physical state after his initial sexual encounter with Flo borders on hyperbole: "The bedsheets (and Flo) were slick with my sweat. By afternoon I was able to crawl a little, then stand; stand a while, then walk" (63). The description comically echoes the rumor of Flo "entertaining" her men to death. Also significant in this passage is the phallic imagery used to describe Andrew's weakness. Unable to stand, Andrew's entire body is flaccid, and he must work to make himself erect again. Johnson comically conflates Andrew's penis with his entire body and illuminates the objectification that Andrew suffers in his relationship with Flo.

The two chapters that detail Andrew's life as Flo's lover are both called "In the Service of the Senses," a title that epitomizes the multiple levels of Andrew's enslavement at Leviathan. In a very literal way, Andrew is a servant to Flo, serving *her* senses sexually, but at the same time, Flo also gives Andrew sensual pleasure through sex and opium. In seeking to use this pleasure to obliterate Andrew's previous life of

education, Flo makes Andrew also a servant (or slave) to his own senses. Andrew's time with Flo Hatfield is in many ways the opposite of his tutelage under Ezekiel Sykes-Withers. With Ezekiel, Andrew realizes the limitations of a life that denies the material world, but with Flo he learns that a life strictly confined to sensual pleasure is equally damaging. But in an odd manner, Flo actually reinforces Ezekiel's limited perceptions of gender and masculinity. "Men," Flo tells Andrew, "don't enjoy sex at *all*. They're afraid to experiment. Things are so one-sided. Men don't know how to relax. They make love as a *task*" (45). Flo's critique is not expressed in the same terms as Ezekiel's, but by locating men's primary flaw in their sexual ability, she reiterates, in material rather than spiritual terms, Ezekiel's feeling that men are somehow out of place with the rest of the universe. Their inability to enjoy sex as a pleasurable act suggests a further discord with nature. Andrew learns from Flo to be a better lovmaker (to Flo), but he also continues to view his manhood as a signifier of a greater spiritual problem.

Andrew displays this masculine instability when he encounters the dead body of Moon, a runaway slave who was Flo's "lover" prior to Patrick. Without immediately recognizing Moon as one of his predecessors, Andrew nonetheless projects his own bodily insecurity on to the disfigured corpse: "I looked into his face. His face? He might have been anyone, given the decay, blisters, the green stains on his groin, gas ballooning his genitalia in a ghastly parody of eros" (67). After Moon's identity has been ascertained, Andrew further identifies with the corpse who once held his own job and continues his reverie on the dead body:

So here was the boy who was replaced by Flo's butler Patrick: purpled, reduced—in Nature's grim perversion of democracy—to liquefying tissue, his head smashed like a melon, chest and belly splintered from gas building like boiler steam in his



abdomen... Was this horror the coda of pleasure? There was, it seemed to me, something especially hideous in this end to enlightened hedonism, for the johnson (as we say—pronounced *yawn-sun*) of the lover expanded to Rabelaisian proportions, the testicles bloated like coconuts, as if Death mocked a man's single distinguishing feature by enlarging the genitals, exploded and powdered them green with breadmold: a nest for maggots. (69)

These descriptions of Moon's corpse could hardly be called "body humor" as I have been using the term, for they are explicitly disturbing and hardly intended to illicit laughter. But it is significant that in both passages Andrew uses comic terms to describe Moon's disfigured genitals. Andrew personifies Death as a sort of cosmic jester who seeks to reinforce man's alienation from the rest of the universe by highlighting the source of his physical desire and the mark of his inferiority (his penis) in a "ghastly parody of eros." The "Rabelaisian proportions" of Moon's genitals recalls the bountiful fertility that is associated with grotesque images of genitalia in carnivalesque literature. But this passage subverts any attempt to see the phallus as a force of renewal by infusing the description of Moon's body with imagery of infestation and decay. Andrew sees a possible version of himself in Moon's corpse, and he deliberately connects his current life of the senses ("enlightened hedonism") with a disfiguring death.

Andrew's sexual service to Flo affects him psychologically and spiritually, but since, in Johnson's world, the mind and spirit are inextricably tied to the body, Andrew's despair also manifests itself in material terms. When Andrew receives news that many of the slaves from his home (including his father and girlfriend) may have been sold to another plantation, he reacts physically and, fearing a heart attack, goes to see the veterinarian. Here Andrew learns that since his arrival at Leviathan his "heart had developed an extra sound: a sort of whisper, or moan on the diastolic downbeat, which

meant it never exactly rested now” (69). Johnson uses Andrew’s heart (the organ which both keeps the rest of our body alive and stands as the symbolic organ of our emotional state) as the darkly comic nexus of his despair. His servitude with Flo and his crisis of identity have made him anxious on every level of his existence. Seen in conjunction with his slavery and opium addiction, it is clear that Andrew has lost whatever little control he may have had over his own body.

This lack of bodily control reaches its peak when Andrew decides to confront Flo about his payment. The news from home concerning his family reminds Andrew why he came to work for Flo in the first place, and he makes a futile attempt to convince her to pay him. But Flo, only interested in Andrew’s sexuality, refuses to listen. In the midst of intercourse, Andrew’s body takes over in an act of revolt: “My fist shot up without telling my brain what it had in mind...then smashed five times...into Flo Hatfield’s nose...the next thing I knew I was standing across the room, wringing my hands. My knees banged together” (73). This moment of shocking violence also has a comic element, for Andrew’s seemingly involuntary series of punches implies that his body is a mere machine over which he has little control. The image literalizes Henri Bergson’s thesis that we laugh when a human acts as an automaton, and the comedy of the scene is reinforced by the unexpectedness of the punch and the fact that it occurs during intercourse. Johnson also makes sure to highlight the comic tone of the moment by providing Andrew’s cartoonish (and also involuntary) reaction to the violence in which his “knees banged together.” Andrew’s aggression is a complex act of revolt that is made even more multifaceted by the humor of the scene. That his arm seemingly acts without the permission of his brain suggests a further discord between Andrew’s mind and body,

working in a way to reinforce the objectification from which Andrew suffers as Flo's slave. At the same time, Andrew's strike against Flo is an overt act of rebellion and can be considered as his first real attempt to reclaim possession of himself since his arrival at Leviathan. The revolt does little at this point to free Andrew either spiritually or physically, but it begins to pave the way for a new method of perceiving his body.

To avoid punishment from Flo, Andrew's runs North with a fellow slave, Reb the coffinmaker. Reb is the the novel's primary Buddhist figure, and he serves as one of Andrew's most important teachers. He descends from the Allmuseri, a fictional African tribe that Johnson explores in greater detail in *Middle Passage*. After a life of suffering, in which his family and all earthly belongings have been systematically taken from him, Reb has taught himself to extinguish his ego, and with it, all emotional and physical desires. Reb stands in stark contrast to both Ezekiel's ego-filled life of the mind and Flo's reliance on pure sensuality. Andrew admires Reb, but he also recognizes that he could not be an adequate model for Andrew's own life. He explains that for Reb, "Desire was painful. Duty was everything... This was his Way. It was, I thought, a Way of strength and spiritual heroism—doing what must be done, dead to hope—but like Flo Hatfield's path of the senses, it was not *my* Way" (76-77). That Andrew ultimately rejects Reb's way of life is an important clue to Johnson's project. Johnson does not idealize a monkish life in which subjects exist (like Reb) outside of the social world; rather Andrew emerges as a model for a meaningful life lived *within* society. This is reflected in the structure of the Buddhist text *Ten Oxherding Pictures*, which serve as a loose model for the novel. After reaching spiritual enlightenment in the eighth frame, the oxherder returns to society in frames nine and ten in order to share his learning with the world. We see this return to

community in the novel's ending when Andrew becomes a schoolteacher and father, but perhaps more important, we see this return in the novel's composition, for the text of *Oxherding Tale* itself serves as Andrew's method of sharing his learning with the world.

Participating in society has its risks and pitfalls, however, when the subject is a runaway slave. Andrew's slavery to his senses further complicates this quest. After the escape, Andrew is forced to suddenly quit opium, and in this manner, he is involuntarily thrown into overcoming his bodily desires. The first day on the run, Andrew doubles over in withdrawal pains, and must be fastened to his horse in order to ride without falling off. At night, Andrew's sickness causes him once again to experience his body as something other than himself: "Between the thought *Move your arms* and my body there was no connection, an abyss between will and word" (97). The opium withdrawal literalizes the discord between Andrew's mind and body that he has already been experiencing ever since his arrival at Leviathan. Its lasting symptoms work on the surface level to comically hinder Andrew and Reb's escape, but it also works symbolically as the former life of the senses that Andrew must purge before he begins on a new path. Andrew's nights of delirious suffering serve as a rite of passage between his old identity as a slave chained to his sensuality and the one he will soon take on as an educated white man in the white world.

In their escape, Andrew and Reb are hunted by Horace Bannon, also known as Soulcatcher, a bounty hunter of runaway slaves. Bannon serves as the novel's primary villain, but he can also be seen as Andrew's final teacher before his quest is complete. Bannon is described in terms both frightening and comic: his physical appearance is a collage of both black and white features, giving him the appearance of someone in

“masquerade, a slave who, for reasons too fantastic to guess, hunted slaves” (68), and his gestures are a series of “tics absorbed from the countless bondsmen he assassinated” (115). Bannon’s peculiar mongrelized physicality is an extreme version of Andrew’s own situation. Andrew’s features (as well as his upbringing) enable him to fit into either black or white society, and his conflict between the two worlds is ultimately internal, despite its many physical manifestations. Although we never learn his actual racial pedigree, Bannon seems to be visibly both black and white: not a “cream colored” mixture of the two, but a disarming juxtaposition of features that don’t seem to fit together.

On top of his odd physical appearance, Bannon’s relationship with his body suggests an internal chaos, for we are told that he “gets erections at funerals—his emotions get crossed all the time” (135). Aside from being a humorous version of the socially inept person who cannot help laughing at funerals, Bannon’s funereal erections again link him to Andrew. The involuntary nature of these erections is similar in nature to Andrew’s mechanical violence against Flo during intercourse. In Andrew’s case, aggressive and violent masculine force is conflated with sex while, in the Soulcatcher’s body, it is death that is joined with sex. These overlapping and darkly comic images of sex, violence, and death also remind us of the disfigured body of the dead slave Moon, whose genitalia is swelled in a “ghastly parody of eros.” We learn quickly enough that Bannon is the bounty hunter who caught and killed Moon, suggesting that Bannon is actually the figure of Death himself, who in Andrew’s mind seeks to mock man through his “single distinguishing feature” (69). Johnson creates a complex relationship between Andrew and the Soulcatcher, in which the Soulcatcher is at once Andrew’s dark double and his chief adversary.

This doubling effect provides insight into Andrew's quest for freedom. Bannon highlights the numerous forms of bondage (beyond the physical) with which Andrew struggles. Bannon's method of catching runaway slaves is more existential than physical, for Bannon does not kill a runaway slave until that slave succumbs to the despair created by his own desire and wishes to be killed. Bannon explains that the runaway slave's capture "happens like a wish, somethin' he wants, a destiny that come from inside him, not outside. And me, Ah'm just Gawd's instrument for this...his humble tool, and Ah never finish the kill 'til the prey desires hit" (115). Bannon promises that if he were to ever come across a slave who did not reach this point of utter despair, he would give up slavecatching all together. While Bannon is primarily a villainous figure, his peculiar philosophy of slavecatching forces Andrew to begin considering his struggle for freedom in terms beyond the purely physical. Until meeting Bannon, Andrew did not fully realize his multiple forms of bondage. In order to truly gain freedom, Andrew must bypass not only the laws of slavery but also his physical desire and his narrow conception of his own body.

Andrew initially attempts to gain his freedom by passing as a white man in the town of Spartanburg, but upon his arrival, it is immediately clear that he is still plagued by bodily desires and insecurities. Andrew's skin color and his education make passing theoretically possible, but he fears that he will be unable fake the sort of "belongingness" of whites who feel "that the world is an extension of [their] sitting room" (109). Andrew's cultural anxiety is mirrored by the continued instability of his body, which, even after he arrives in Spartanburg, is in a precarious position from opium withdrawal and exhaustion. Dr. Undercliff, Spartanburg's curmudgeonly but kind physician whose

life-giving qualities are highlighted by his “fertility god’s belly” (121) humorously explains to Andrew his tenuous health:

You, my young friend . . . are suffering from a few minor physical complaints, not one of which is fatal, but taken all together, and if not watched closely, their federation will lead to the medical equivalent of the Panic of 1837; you have, for a lad of two and twenty, the constitutional makeup of a matador, a very *old* matador, or perhaps his bull, an adrenal output suited for the Cro-Magnon Era, and, if I had not examined you myself. . . I would conclude that my daughter. . . had dropped the neurological chart of an antediluvian shark on my desk. (120)

Given what we know about Andrew’s past as a slave, and that his previous medical encounters were with a veterinarian, it is significant that Dr. Undercliff compares Andrew’s body to a bull, a shark, and a man from the Cro-Magnon era. Andrew is trying to escape the type of rhetoric that would posit him as a type of animal (or prehistoric caveman) because of his body. That the doctor, who believes Andrew is a white man, should choose such metaphors in his diagnosis indicates that Andrew is held back not only by the demeaning institution of slavery but also by his own relationship to himself. For Andrew’s physical suffering at this point has been caused by his former life of superficial sensuality, and his freedom must be one not only from the likes of Flo and Bannon, but also from his own body.

Rather than transcending his embodied desires in a sudden epiphanic moment, Andrew finds his freedom gradually, through building for himself a life of responsibility and meaning within the community of Spartanburg. He marries Dr. Undercliff’s daughter Peggy, an avid reader who is impressed by Andrew’s learning, and he becomes the town’s schoolmaster. Andrew’s intellectual skills find a social use in the classroom, and he discovers that Flo Hatfield’s sexual lessons are handy in his new marriage. Andrew

therefore manages to build a life that combines the teachings of both Ezekiel and Flo. In this life, Andrew comes to discover that his “dharma [or essential nature], such as it was, was that of the householder” (147). As a husband in a successful companionate marriage, Andrew also manages to undo the anti-masculine tendencies which were instilled in him by Ezekiel and Flo; in his marriage, he thus finds a place where his body and mind can coexist.<sup>40</sup> *Oxherding Tale*, then, does not undermine the traditional male position of husband and provider (like the comic works of Roth and Allen do), nor does it overtly endorse this role. Rather, the novel approaches all gender roles from a phenomenological/Buddhist perspective. Every subject must strip away the preconceptions attached to identity formation and find the role that suit his or her “dharma” best.

It is ultimately the traditional image of domestic content that we are left with at the book’s close; we even learn that Andrew and Peggy soon begin a family. This ending firmly establishes *Oxherding Tale* as a comedy, for it places the novel both in the tradition of the romantic comedy, which typically ends in a marriage and with the ancient Greek comedies, which emphasize rebirth and renewal. In his happy ending, Andrew has managed to not only escape from his literal slavery but also to undo those racial and gender biases that threatened to lead him into a static life chained to the determinancies of his body. Like the oxherder in the classic Buddhist parable *Ten Oxherding Pictures*, after a life of wandering, Andrew returns to society and shares his learning with the world. In

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<sup>40</sup> The novel does not immediately end here. Andrew must still make peace with his past, which manifests itself in both the appearance of his old girlfriend Minty and in one last encounter with Horace Bannon. But Andrew flies by these traps relatively quickly: Minty dies of pellagra, freeing Andrew to continue in his marriage with Peggy, and Bannon, true to his word, gives up slavecatching after he is unable to capture Reb, whose freedom from desire makes him impossible to catch according to the Soulcatcher’s metaphysical methods.



the final pages, it is clear that it is from the position of peace and contentment that Andrew has been telling his story all along. From this position, the novel's humor and irreverency is most significant. For in his ability to tell his story of struggle and suffering with humor, Andrew demonstrates that he has achieved the necessary detachment to laugh at his bodily predicaments. Andrew will never be completely free from desire and suffering, but he gained ample distance from his own body to view his plight with what Johnson calls the Oxherder's "sense of humor and irony" (*Turning the Wheel* 24).

**Slapstick at Sea: *Middle Passage***

Johnson's next novel, *Middle Passage*, takes up many of the same themes as *Oxherding Tale* and suggests a similar need for comic detachment from the body. The novel's narrator and protagonist Rutherford Calhoun is a recently freed slave, and like Andrew Hawkins, he is unusually well educated for a former slave. Early in *Middle Passage*, it becomes clear that Rutherford also shares many of Andrew's problems with embodiment. Rutherford explains that after his manumission he moved to New Orleans to lead a life of crime and debauchery. In the opening pages he confesses his obsession with bodily pleasure: "I was hooked on sensation, you might say, a lecher for perception and the nerve-knocking thrill, like a shot of opium, of new 'experiences'"(3). Rutherford's life of reckless hedonism eventually leads him into a massive debt to Papa Zeringue, a local gangster. His girlfriend Isadora Bailey agrees to pay off his debt but only on the condition that he marry her immediately. Finding this proposition unacceptable, Rutherford stows away on the slave ship the *Republic* and begins a long, comic adventure that will transform him from a man of selfish sensuality to one of enlightened responsibility.

Like Andrew Hawkins, Rutherford tells his story after he has already undergone his major transformation, and he relates his suffering and adventures with comic distance. Rutherford establishes his story's irreverent, comic tone from the very beginning. Rutherford's description of Isadora and the prospect of a life as her husband, for example, is infused with a humor that showcases Rutherford's preoccupation with sensuality and the material world. He explains that Isadora is pretty "in a prim, dry, flat-breasted way," but he is put off by her home, "where she lived with eight one-eyed cats, two three-legged dogs, and birds with broken wings" (6). The room, Rutherford explains, smells like a zoo. This setting presents a comic version of the domestic life that Rutherford must endure if he agrees to Isadora's marriage proposal. Rutherford admits that Isadora "had an inner brilliance, an intelligence and clarity of spirit that overwhelmed [him]," but these unseen qualities are not enough for the sensualist Rutherford, who ultimately concludes that "people fell in love as they might fall into a hole; it was something I thought a smart man avoided" (7). Rutherford's comparison of an abstraction such as love to a physical calamity like falling down a hole illuminates his rootedness in the physical world. The use of slapstick as a metaphor also establishes the type of world Johnson is creating in *Middle Passage*. Johnson extends the physical instability implied by slapstick to every aspect of life, from the material world to the unseen.

This slapstick view of the world is particularly significant in Rutherford's description of the *Republic*. Rutherford explains that the ship "was physically unstable. She was perpetually flying apart and re-forming during the voyage, falling to pieces beneath us, the great sails ripping to rags in high winds, the rot, cracks, and parasites in old wood so cancerously swift, springing up where least expected . . . she was, from stem

to stern, a process” (36). Like the slapstick opening of *Oxherding Tale*, which establishes the instability for the rest of the novel, the *Republic* is immediately established as a location that provides nearly endless slapstick potential. For the rest of the novel, the instability of this setting is kept constantly in the foreground since the ship’s men continuously fall atop the fluctuating ship or hit their heads upon swinging beams. The ship’s name also promotes an allegorical reading, for as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that while the *Republic* is physically unstable, the republic of the United States is culturally unstable. The mixture of African and European cultures and the uneven distribution of power created by slavery make the entire nation, like the ship, an ongoing process. In this manner, Johnson uses physical instability as a means of suggesting unsteadiness on nearly all levels of existence.

This slapstick view of nearly every aspect of existence is also reflected in Rutherford’s internal landscape, as he is unable to find a stable position for himself amidst the culture of the ship. The all male crew is comically described as having “only two good teeth among them all” (22), and the homosocial environment creates a stereotypical culture of rude masculinity which Rutherford finds unsettling:

The *Republic* was, above all else, a ship of *men*. Without the civilizing presence of women, everyone felt the pressure, the masculine imperative to prove himself equal to a vague standard of manliness in order to be judged ‘regular’...It led to posturing among the crew, a tendency to turn themselves into caricatures of the concept of maleness: to strut, keep their chests struck out and stomachs sucked in, and talk monosyllabically in surly mumbles or grunts because being good at language was womanly. Lord knows this front was hard to maintain for very long. You had to *work* at being manly...The crewmen had drinking contests nearly every day. They gambled on who could piss the farthest over the rail, or on whose uncircumcised schlong was the longest, and far into the night lie awake in their hammocks swapping jokes about nuns sitting on candles. (41)

Rutherford's reaction to this situation illuminates his struggle with his own identity. That Rutherford recognizes this "caricature of the concept of maleness" as a mere social construct sets him above the rest of the crew, a point that is also highlighted when we contrast his own eloquent use of language with the monosyllabic grunts of the other sailors. But Rutherford's superior stance towards his shipmates takes on an ironic quality when we remember that it is precisely the "civilizing presence of women" that Rutherford is running away from. Rutherford actively denies both the life of the husband (or "householder," as Andrew Hawkins would say) and that of the seafaring "manly" man. But in these denials, he is unable to posit any sort of alternative, positive version of masculinity for himself.

The ship's environment, furthermore, has limited appeal for someone, like Rutherford, who is "hooked on sensation" (3). The absence of all luxuries provides Rutherford with little sensual pleasure, but the thin culture and uncertain morality of the ship's crew do not provide any sort of adequate means for Rutherford to overcome his dependence on bodily thrills. When the *Republic* arrives in Africa and picks up its cargo of forty Allmuseri slaves, however, Rutherford's education begins. He is immediately fascinated by the Allmuseri, and sees in their culture a way of life that stands in sharp opposition to his own hedonism. He explains the Allmuseri's habits with a mixture of awe and guilt: "Eating no meat, they were easy to feed. Disliking property, they were simple to clothe. Able to heal themselves, they required no medication. They seldom fought. They could not steal. They fell *sick*, it was said, if they wronged anyone. As I live, they so shamed me I wanted their ageless culture to be my own" (78). While Rutherford respects the Allmuseri's way of life, he also recognizes that he can never be

one of them. Like the relationship between Andrew and Reb in *Oxherding Tale*, Rutherford gleans from the Allmuseri a sense of duty and responsibility but he knows that, due to his background, his life must be separate from theirs. As Rutherford states, “he could never claim something he had no hand in creating” (78). Just as the environment of Africans and white men create an uncertain atmosphere on board the ship, Rutherford’s understanding of himself is made unsteady by these competing cultural examples.

Rutherford’s skin color reinforces his tenuous place in this situation: as the only black man among the shipmates, Rutherford occupies a middle space between the life of the crew and the life of the cargo.<sup>41</sup> Due to his race, Rutherford must take on the daily jobs of feeding and exercising the slaves. While the Allmuseri recognize the superficial similarity of Rutherford’s complexion with their own, they by no means consider him one of them. The Allmuseri, according to Rutherford, “saw whites as Raw Barbarians and me (being a colored mate) as a Cooked one” (75). The vast differences in culture and worldview between Rutherford and the Allmuseri contribute to Johnson’s phenomenological approach to race. While a shared skin color provides a thin connection between Rutherford and the captives, this connection only exists because of the presence of the white crew who insist on constructing identities based on skin color. Yet Rutherford is profoundly affected by the example set by the Allmuseri. Even though he cannot join their tribe, Rutherford’s understanding of his American identity becomes complicated through his contact with them. Rutherford himself sums up his predicament late in the novel when he describes himself as feeling “culturally dizzy” (142). This

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<sup>41</sup> See Brian Fagel’s essay “Passages from the Middle: Coloniality and Postcoloniality in Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*” for an extended discussion of the various middle spaces that Rutherford occupies.

description is especially apt in that once again Johnson conflates physical precariousness (dizziness) with a cultural or metaphysical condition.

Once the Allmuseri are brought on board, the physical world of the ship and Rutherford's body immediately begin to change. When he sees the harsh treatment of the Allmuseri prisoners, Rutherford notes that "[i]t was then that my hair started going white" (66). Whitening of hair is a comic signifier of stress, and in this case it suggests a bodily reaction to Rutherford's struggle over the moral implications of his own contribution to the enslavement of the Allmuseri. Rutherford's physical manifestation of his internal plight is mirrored by an increased instability in the external world of the ship. Not long after bringing the Allmuseri aboard, the *Republic* encounters a violent storm, the chaotic effects of which Rutherford describes with hyperbole, as bodies are "catapulted overboard" or end up hanging upside down "[e]ntangled in the twisted rigging." The ship's chaos is once again personalized in individual bodies, for as Rutherford explains, the storm was the type that "induced madness in seamen; triggered acute appendicitis, respiratory attacks, and suicide." One crewman asserts that "the storm proved the ship was cursed by its black chattel and infernal cargo" (81-82). The moral instability on board the *Republic* thus manifests itself in physical terms.

Rutherford's difficult position is made clear when all of the various tensions on the ship threaten to erupt. The Allmuseri, a group of potential mutineers, and Captain Falcon all stand on the verge of violent action, and each group assumes Rutherford's loyalty. Rutherford finds himself unable to act in this dilemma; instead he explains, "I began hiccupping uncontrollably (my body's typical reaction to dilemmas that had no solution)" (125-126). The image of Rutherford erupting into a fit of hiccups wonderfully

illustrates Johnson's humor. Rudolph Byrd notes that Rutherford's comic hiccupping spell brings "a welcome and necessary levity into a scene that, in the hands of a less gifted writer, could deteriorate into melodrama" (*Charles Johnson's Novels* 133). These hiccups also reinforce our understanding of Rutherford's relationship with his body. It is especially fitting that Rutherford, the sensualist who cannot see past the material surface of the world, experiences his internal struggles on the surface level of bodily discomfort. Like seeing love as a hole that one falls into, Rutherford's hiccups display his rootedness in the strictly material world. This comic moment, however, signals the beginning of Rutherford's change. The strength of his hiccups (and the depths of his despair) force him down to his knees where "involuntarily, my hands clamped together in a bedside, precynical posture I'd not taken since boyhood, one of surrender and bone-felt frailty in the face of troubles so many-sided my mind trembled to think of them. 'God,' I asked, 'is this some kind of *test*?'" (126). The physical symptoms of Rutherford's predicament (his hiccups) therefore segue into divine supplication, revealing a shift in his worldview. The "involuntary" nature of Rutherford's praying posture suggests his still precarious relationship with the body as does his "bone-felt frailty," but Rutherford's question of God indicates a willingness, for perhaps the first time in the novel, to look outside of himself and view his own predicament not in strictly selfish or bodily terms but to consider it as part of a larger cosmic project.

Although Rutherford's question goes unanswered, the act of prayer serves as a catalyst for a sort of emotional and spiritual catharsis, as he bursts into uncontrollable tears: "I cried for all the sewage I carried in my spirit, my failures and crimes, foolish hopes and vanities...in a cleansing nigh as good as prayer itself...I discovered I no longer

cared if I lived or died” (127). The metaphor of “sewage” used to describe Rutherford’s vanities and flaws once again underscores the physical nature of his earlier way of life. Through his tears, Rutherford is able to purge this waste, and he finds himself cleansed, body and soul. This cleansing is all the more striking when we remember that only a page and a half previous to this epiphanic moment, Rutherford was comically caught in the throes of a paralyzing hiccup spell. The rapid shift of emphasis from the purely physical to the metaphysical is reminiscent of George Hawkins’ slapstick fall in the opening of *Oxherding Tale*. Johnson once again suggests that the material and ethereal are inextricably linked, and in this instance, the physical act of crying serves as mediator between overlapping physical and metaphysical realms.

This cathartic moment is still somewhat ambivalent. Rutherford’s assessment that the “passion for life” in him “is dead” suggests that the purifying moment has possibly taken him too far. We are reminded of Reb in *Oxherding Tale*, whose total lack of desire and personal relationships frees him from many of life’s possible pitfalls but also separates him from the actual world in which he lives. Rutherford’s epiphany demonstrates that he is making progress, but the emptiness with which it leaves him suggests that his development is still incomplete. This point is driven home as the violence of the world crushes in upon Rutherford’s reverie, forcing him into action, for while Rutherford is suffering these transformative pangs of indecision over how to handle the competing interests of the ship, the Allmuseri make the decision for him in an act of revolt.

After a violent battle between the Allmuseri and the crew, the Allmuseri gain control of the ship, and Captain Falcon commits suicide. What follows is a decidedly non-



comic section of the novel; the Allmuseri find their worldview severely compromised by the violence they committed, and they break into factions. Thus even the Allmuseri's seemingly superior culture can be destabilized by oppression and violence. This social and cultural instability is once again mirrored in the physical world: the ship begins to fall apart, all of the survivors become violently ill, and many of the Allmuseri begin to die. This low point, however, does not last long. The survivors (who by this point include only Rutherford, the ship's cook, and three Allmuseri children) are eventually rescued by another ship, the *Juno*. Almost immediately after this rescue, the tone of the novel shifts back to comedy. And it is here that Rutherford's transformation becomes most apparent. In keeping with the rest of the novel, Rutherford's change is manifest both physically and internally. Rutherford describes how months at sea have transformed his youthful virility into a world-weary, premature old age:

My beard was Biblical in length, my joints Job-like in their creaking. Each morning when I rose, my ribs felt like iron rods. Our travels through several time zones had played badly with the metabolic cycles of my body...causing a loss of nitrogen and sulfur, and confusing my inner ear. And, given the diseases I'd lived through, I feared I was probably sterile. No matter what I did—hairstyling, mud facials, or fancy perfumes—I could not hide what I was; a wreck of the *Republic*. (190)

The biblical references suggest that these exterior changes also reflect Rutherford's spiritual development. The long beard, sterility, and creaking joints all point to old age, highlighting the fact that even though Rutherford has only been at sea for three months, his entire being has changed from the journey. This onset of old age, however, also points to a new sort of wisdom in Rutherford's understanding of the world. This wisdom is also reflected in the humor with which Rutherford describes his precarious bodily position. He has achieved the necessary distance to find comedy in his suffering body.

The full depths of Rutherford's changes are apparent when he finally reunites with Isadora. By a convenient coincidence that recalls Shakespeare's comedies, the ship that rescues Rutherford also happens to be carrying Isadora *and* Rutherford's creditor, Papa Zeringue. In fact, Isadora and Zeringue are to be married. The changed Rutherford manages to get out of his debt and win back Isadora by threatening to reveal Zeringue's involvement in the slave trade. In addition, Rutherford and Isadora make arrangements to adopt the surviving Allmuseri children. Thus the two have an instant family and, like Andrew Hawkins, Rutherford may also find his meaning in the role of the householder. Also like Andrew, Rutherford not only manages to see past harmful bodily and cultural associations, but he finds a social use for his new understanding, a way of living in the world without being driven by purely sensual desire.

The ending of *Middle Passage*, however, is ultimately more complex than that of *Oxherding Tale*. The final scene seems to promise a romantic union between Rutherford and Isadora. However, Johnson undermines these expectations with physical comedy. Isadora's appearance, like Rutherford's, has also changed during their separation; she has lost fifty pounds and now has, to use Rutherford's words, "heart-stabbing" beauty (192). But Isadora's physical beauty is balanced with a comic gracelessness. When the two "lovers" are at last alone together, she attempts to be seductive, but Rutherford recognizes her seductive stance as a performance and suppresses the urge to laugh. What follows is a comic attempt at lovemaking that subverts the concept of romantic closure achieved through intercourse but ultimately reinforces Rutherford's movement away from a reliance on sensual pleasure. Rutherford describes his and Isadora's futile effort to consummate their relationship, emphasizing the slapstick elements:

We groped awkwardly for a while, but something was wrong. Things were not progressing as smoothly as they were supposed to. (“Your elbow’s in my eyeball,” said I; “Sorry,” said she; “Hold on, I think I’ve got a charley horse.”) I was out of practice. Rusty. My body’s range of motion was restricted by the bruises I had taken at sea, yet my will refused to let go...but, hang it, my memories of the Middle Passage kept coming back, reducing the velocity of my desire, its violence, and in place of my longing for feverish love-making left only a vast stillness that felt remarkably full, a feeling that, just now, I wanted our futures blended, not our limbs, our histories perfectly twined for all time, not our flesh. (208)

This long passage begins with a moment of slapstick and then builds upon it in order to display Rutherford’s spiritual and emotional state. Here we see an inversion of Johnson’s previous uses physical comedy. Earlier in the novel, Johnson uses the physical unsteadiness implied by slapstick to indicate a deeper instability in his protagonists’ place in the world. In this scene, the slapstick is actually the result of a “vast stillness” or calm through which we learn that Rutherford has finally managed to see beyond his physical desires. Rutherford’s bodily condition no longer mirrors an interior state because he has transcended (or at least begun an ongoing process of transcending) his body. The implication of this ending is that all bodies are inherently precarious but that this tenuous aspect of physical existence need not overly impede access to a greater inner peace. In this moment, more than any other in Johnson’s work, we see the oxherder’s “sense of humor and irony” that necessarily springs from embodiment (*Turning the Wheel* 24).

Johnson’s two neoslave narratives are framed by instances of slapstick comedy, thus demonstrating the prominent role that body humor plays in his work. In the opening of *Oxherding Tale*, the slapstick mishaps of Andrew’s conception establish the bodily issues with which he will struggle for the rest of the novel. The physical comedy highlights the racial and gender preconceptions that Andrew needs to overcome in his

quest for freedom. That he is able to relate his story with humor testifies to the distance he has achieved from negative bodily associations. Physical comedy works in a similar manner throughout most of *Middle Passage*, but in that novel's final scene Johnson's body humor undermines the easy notion of romantic closure. Instead, he offers readers an image of inner peace despite bodily chaos. While Rutherford's body is bruised and battered from his trials at sea, he manages to distance himself from pain, desire, and reductive bodily categories. Our bodies, being weak, will continually fall, Johnson suggests, but our laughter creates a necessary distance from them and can allow us to achieve an inner stillness despite the fragility of the fleshly world.

All of the artists in this project recognize the body's humorous capabilities, and they use body humor to dramatize the instability of the modern world and to deflate traditional depictions of heroic masculinity. Each of them achieves these objectives in drastically different ways. The multitude of cultural discourses and aesthetic strategies through which these artists approach the body indicate the impossibility of pinning down a static or stable understanding of bodily life. Rather than presenting a grand narrative of the body, this dissertation presents a series of small narratives, what Lyotard calls *petit récits*, that each focus on a distinct aspect of bodily life.<sup>42</sup> Philip Roth approaches body humor from a psychological perspective. For Roth, the body and mind are irreconcilably conflicted, and the struggle between them—which often becomes the nexus of a series of other cultural struggles—can generate disarming physical comedy. But this comedy is tinged with sadness, for it ultimately suggests that each body is fundamentally alone, and every attempt to live up to cultural standards or to integrate our bodies with the rest of the world will inevitably end in failure.

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<sup>42</sup> See Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.

In contrast, Thomas Pynchon eschews psychological dilemmas and presents his comic bodies cinematically. In Pynchon's fiction, slapstick comedy becomes a central metaphor for the instability of the world. This slapstick view of existence applies primarily to Pynchon's bumbling protagonists, men who stand in sharp contrast to the violent cultures in which they find themselves. But Pynchon simultaneously applies his slapstick to the powerful, using physical instability to comically undermine oppressive governments and violent technological systems. His view of bodily life is ultimately ambivalent, both funny and serious and both a lament and a celebration. Like Pynchon, Woody Allen also uses various historical settings to establish an ambivalent—and cinematic—view of bodily life. While both Pynchon and Allen deplore violent, militaristic versions of masculinity, Allen more overtly presents a viable alternative to phallic manhood. Allen's schlemiel persona, developed over a series of comic films and reaching its apex in *Love and Death*, serves as a means for Allen to posit cowardice as a heroic stance in its own right. Allen's physical comedy suggests the precarious position of the individual subject in the modern world, but it also highlights his heroes' humanity in often inhuman worlds. Of the figures discussed in this project, Charles Johnson's use of body humor is the most optimistic. While Johnson does acknowledge the unstable position of African-American bodies, he suggests that a humorous view of the body, comic detachment, can be a functional means of transcending reductive bodily associations. By comically dismantling traditional representations of the body, the artists in this project get the last laugh.

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