

# Divine comedy

by Julian Gough

*The Greeks understood that comedy (the gods' view of life) is superior to tragedy (the merely human). But since the middle ages, western culture has overvalued the tragic and undervalued the comic. This is why fiction today is so full of anxiety and suffering. It's time writers got back to the serious business of making us laugh*

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*Julian Gough's comic short story "The orphan and the mob" (published in Prospect, March 2006) has won the 2007 National Short Story Prize*

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What is wrong with the modern literary novel? Why is it so worthy and dull? Why is it so anxious? Why is it so bloody boring?

Well, let's go back a bit first. Two and a half thousand years ago, at the time of Aristophanes, the Greeks believed that comedy was superior to tragedy: tragedy was the merely human view of life (we sicken, we die). But comedy was the gods' view, from on high: our endless and repetitive cycle of suffering, our horror of it, our inability to escape it. The big, drunk, flawed, horny Greek gods watched us for entertainment, like a dirty, funny, violent, repetitive cartoon. And the best of the old Greek comedy tried to give us that relaxed, amused perspective on our flawed selves. We became as gods, laughing at our own follies.

Many of the finest novels--and certainly the novels I love most--are in the Greek comic tradition, rather than the tragic: Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift, Voltaire, and on through to Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and the late Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5*.

Yet western culture since the middle ages has overvalued the tragic and undervalued the comic. We think of tragedy as major, and comedy as minor. Brilliant comedies never win the best film Oscar. The Booker prize leans toward the tragic. In 1984, Martin Amis reinvented Rabelais in his comic masterpiece *Money*. The best English novel of the 1980s, it didn't even make the shortlist. Anita Brookner won that year, for *Hotel du Lac*, written, as the Observer put it, "with a beautiful grave formality."

The fault is in the culture. But it is also internalised in the writers, who self-limit and self-censor. If the subject is big, difficult and serious, the writer tends to believe the treatment must be in the tragic mode. When Amis addressed the Holocaust

in his minor novel *Time's Arrow* (1991), he switched off the jokes, and the energy, and was rewarded with his only Booker shortlisting.

But why this pressure, from within and without? There are two good reasons. The first is the west's unexamined cultural cringe before the Greeks. For most of the last 500 years, Homer and Sophocles have been held to be the supreme exponents of their arts. (Even Homer's constant repetition of stock phrases like "rosy-fingered dawn" and "wine-dark sea" are praised, rather than recognised as tiresome clichés.)

The second reason is that our classical inheritance is lop-sided. We have a rich range of tragedies--Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides (18 by Euripides alone). Of the comic writers, only Aristophanes survived. In an age of kings, time is a filter that works against comedy. Plays that say, "Boy, it's a tough job, leading a nation" tend to survive; plays that say, "Our leaders are dumb arseholes, just like us" tend not to.

More importantly, Aristotle's work on tragedy survived; his work on comedy did not. We have the classical rules for the one but not the other, and this has biased the development of all western literature. We've been off-centre ever since.

But of course Europe in the middle ages was peculiarly primed to rediscover tragedy: the one church spoke in one voice, drawn from one book, and that book was at heart tragic. All of human history, from the creation, was a story that climaxed with the sadistic murder of a man by those he was trying to save, whose fatal flaw was that he was perfect in an imperfect world. The nicest man ever, he is murdered by everybody. Not only is this tragedy; it is kitsch tragedy, overegged, a joke. It cannot survive laughter, it is too vulnerable to it. And the Bible, from apple to Armageddon, does not contain a single joke.

The church spoke with one voice because it was on such shaky foundations. The largest and richest property empire of all time had somehow been built on the gospel of the poor. All other voices had to be suppressed, even dissenting gospels. Only once a year, in carnival, on the feast of fools, could the unsayable be said. A fool was crowned king, and gave a fool's sermon from the altar that reversed the usual pieties. But these speeches could not be written down or circulated. They existed in the air, for a day, and were gone. By the late middle ages, the paralysis was almost total. If you change one word of the old Vulgate Bible, the whole thing comes under suspicion. All you could hear was a single voice reading a single book, the Vulgate, a Latin translation from a Greek original. When Erasmus finally retranslated the Bible, threw it open to interpretation, he caused a crisis that ultimately tore the church apart.

The problem is not specific to Christianity. Islam has always had a problem with comedy at its expense, as Salman Rushdie showed in *The Satanic Verses*. In Medina, in year two of the Hijra migration, with Mecca not yet fallen, the Prophet asked the faithful to kill the Jewish-Arab poet Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf for reciting his poems satirising the Prophet (and joking about Muslim women). The faithful obliged.

It is interesting, but unsurprising, that all the satirists murdered and allegedly murdered on Muhammad's orders were,

among other things, Jewish. With its vigorous tradition of Talmudic debate, and with no Jewish state to stifle or control that debate, Judaism never fell into the paralysis of the younger monotheisms. It was, to put it mildly, never state-approved. Judaism, excluded from the establishment in so many Christian and Muslim nations, has consequently produced a high proportion of the world's great satirists, comedians and novelists. And, in Yiddish, it produced perhaps the world's first compulsively comic, anti-authoritarian language, with its structural mockery of high German.

In Christian Europe, the Renaissance rediscovery of the classical texts occurred when the habit of submission to authority was at its most extreme. When printing was invented, no one thought to use it for anything other than the Christian Bible, for that was the myth of Europe, the one true myth.

As writers began moving cautiously away from the theological shore, they still felt the need for a holy book to guide them, to tell them how to write. Aristotle's Poetics provided that. If you wanted to write tragedy or epic, here were the rules. You need not think for yourself. It's particularly sad to see the narrowness of subject matter and style in the pictorial art of the era--Madonna after pink-cheeked Madonna, saint after martyred saint. So much talent, all wasted doing the Renaissance equivalent of Soviet realist art.

And then something astonishing happened: the invention of the novel privatised myth, because the novel, invented after Aristotle, did not have a holy book. The novelist was on his own. Sometimes he's even a she. There were no rules. The chaos of carnival had found its form. The fool's sermon could be published, could live on. All you learned from Rabelais or Cervantes was to mock everything sacred, all that went before. Including them.

And the reaction was fierce. Rabelais was jailed for his wild comedies. Voltaire, praised for his early tragedies, was jailed for his satires. Cervantes apparently started Don Quixote in a debtors' prison. All had to flee town on occasion for fear of worse. Printing had to be done abroad, in secret, and the books smuggled to their destinations. The early years of the novel look remarkably like a guerrilla war, as pro-Bible forces try to put down the insurgency of the novel across Europe. Both were fighting for the same piece of territory: the territory inside your head.

Now a man could invent his own myth and spread it across the world. And the reader, head bowed over the novel, could have a vision without religion: a full vision, transmitted through space and time by marks on paper, using the novelist's arts.

The novel, when done right--when done to the best of the novelist's abilities, talent at full stretch--is always greater than the novelist. It is more intelligent. It is more vast. It can change your entire internal world. Of course, so can a scientific truth. So can a religious experience. So can some drugs. So can a sublime event in nature. But the novel operates on that high level. Sitting there, alone, quite still, you laugh, you murmur, you cry, and you can come out of it with a new worldview, in a new reality. It's a controlled breakdown, or breakthrough. It's dangerous.

The resistance of the monotheisms to comedy has another, more subtle, cause. The comic point of view--the gods'-eye

view--is much more uncomfortable for a believer in one all-powerful God than it was for the polytheistic Greeks. To have the gods laughing at us through our fictions is acceptable if the gods are multiple, and flawed like us, laughing in recognition and sympathy: if they are Greek gods. But to have the single omnipotent, omniscient God who made us laughing at us is a very different thing: sadistic, and almost unbearable. We do not wish to hear the sound of one God laughing. The western comic novel has often had a harsh, judgemental edge. Swift has a hint of Yahweh about him. But the recent death of God has freed a lot of space for the comic novel. Science has given us a high, impersonal, non-judgemental perspective from which to regard ourselves (brilliantly used by Vonnegut in books like *Breakfast of Champions*). The various eastern philosophies give us other high vantage points. Indeed, both physics and Zen can handle laughter, and are superb tools for writing the western comic novel because they do not require absolute faith and they do not claim absolute certainty. With freedom from a death-obsessed monotheism and new tools, new places from which to view humanity, we should have entered a golden age of comedy.

Some writers seized the chance. Evelyn Waugh became perhaps the greatest English novelist of the 20th century by applying a flawless, deadpan, comic technique to everything from modern manners to modern warfare. PG Wodehouse developed the purest comic style of his age but, unlike Waugh, felt no need to apply it to real life. The great comic writers do survive, but are seldom seen as great till much later. The tragic bias remains deep in the industry. And the more original the comic masterpiece, the harder it is to get it through the filters of western commercial publishing. Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, one of Ireland's three greatest novels, could not find a publisher in the author's lifetime. John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* was rejected by 36 publishers, and Toole eventually killed himself. Only a decade after his death was it published. Publishing is a form of authority too.

No, the novel has not, in general, been able to seize its freedom--it has not gone comic. This has consequences. An unnecessary tragic bias, in something so powerful, will cause a great deal of avoidable suffering. Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, with its revoltingly sentimental suicide note, depressed a generation and caused a wave of fashionable suicides across Europe. (They even dressed in the same blue frock coat and yellow waistcoat.) Autobiographical novels are particularly revealing of the bias in the culture: in real life Goethe felt no need to kill himself after his heart was broken, but when he wrote a book about it, it had to be a tragedy and the hero had to die. A comedy would have been far more suitable. It might even have led to a cheerful late 18th-century Europe. But no, he gave us the furrow-browed Romantics.

Tragically (or comically, depending on your temperament), the bias caused by Aristotle, Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus and the church continues today. The youthful brow remains furrowed.

It would be useful to look at a representative cross-section of the finest young novelists of the US, the largest and most diverse of the English-speaking nations. A big job, but luckily Granta has just carried out the task for me, and announced its *Best of Young American Novelists 2*, a list of 21 talents. In his summing up, the chair of the judges, Granta editor Ian Jack, mentions death, sorrow, uncertainty and anxiety. "All I know is that we read many books infused by loss and a feeling that present things would not go on forever." (These writers are mostly in their twenties and early thirties!) At the end, Jack regrets the absence from the list of Joshua Ferris, "whose first novel... had the singular distinction among all these writers of making me laugh aloud quite often."

No loud laughter in the whole top 21. Twenty-one Apollos, and not one Dionysus.

"Why so sad, people?" as Zadie Smith asks.

Well, it's just a habit by now. It's so ingrained in our culture that it has become an unexamined default position. What makes it much worse is that it is now being coached, reinforced. All of the writers on the Granta list attended university creative writing programmes. All, in other words, have submitted to authority. This is a catastrophe for them as novelists.

The novel cannot submit to authority. It is written against official language, against officialdom, and against whatever fixed form the novel has begun to take--it is always dying, and always being born.

If the literary novel has calcified into genre, the new novelists need to break its underlying, often unspoken rules. To not just question, but to overthrow authority. The novel, at its best, cannot even submit to the authority of the novelist: Gogol burnt his follow-up to *Dead Souls* because, on reading the book he had just written, he was shocked to find that he profoundly disagreed with it.

But the universities are authority or they are nothing. As the west has grown secular, the university has, quite organically, taken over from the church as a cross-border entity claiming universality, claiming to influence the powerful but not to wield power. "Education" is the excuse for a self-perpetuating power structure now, just as "religion" was the excuse then. The modern universities could claim to have no single ideology, but the same could be said of the Vatican under the Medicis, or the Borgias.

The problem is not that the universities are malevolent; they are not. They have no sinister intent in taking over the novel, professionalising it, academicising it. Like most of those who colonise territories that were getting on fine without them, they believe they do no great damage, they believe it's for the novel's good, they believe they are benign, idealistic and quite a bit cleverer than the natives. As ever, none of these beliefs is entirely true.

The literary novel, by accepting the embrace of the universities, has moved inside the establishment and lost contact with what made it vital. It has, as a result, also lost the mass audience enjoyed by Twain and Dickens. The literary novel--born in Cervantes's prison cell, continued in cellars, bars and rented rooms by Dostoevsky, Joyce and Beckett--is now being written from on high. Not the useful height of the gods, with its sharp, gods'-eye view of all human classes, all human folly, but the distancing, merely human height of the ruling elite, just too high up to see what's happening on the street below.

Luckily this situation is self-satirising. Campus authority generates campus comedy. The senior academic novelist is trapped in the small world of the university, cut off from the big world, embodying authority yet still driven to write. In this situation the novel, if it is to live, must turn against the novelist. Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge, writing novels at night, attacked their day-selves, their academic selves, as absurd buffoons whose work was meaningless. And the novelist in them was right.

The university model, any teaching model, of necessity implies that there is a Platonic ideal novel in some other dimension, which has all the characteristics that make for novelness and that the more of these attributes a novel has, the more like a perfect novel it is. This concept works for the tragic, it works for the epic, it works (less well, but it works) for the lyric, it does not work for the novel because, as Mikhail Bakhtin has pointed out, the novel is the only post-Aristotelian literary form. It is not bound by classical rules. It is not bound by any rules. The novel is not a genre. The novel is always novel. The novel is always coming into being. The novel cannot be taught, because the novel does not yet exist.

This professionalisation will make poor writers adequate. And will make potentially great writers adequate. Great novelists write for their peers. Poor novelists write for their teachers. If you must please the older generation to pass (a student writing for an older teacher, a teacher writing to secure tenure), you end up with cautious, old-fashioned novels. Worse, the system turns peers into teachers. Destroyed as writers, many are immediately re-employed, teaching creative writing. This is a Ponzi scheme.

During their second year, students are offered teaching appointments to teach introductory undergraduate creative writing workshops (ENL 5F or ENL 5P) in their genre or are hired as literature TAs or GSRs. (From the website of the English department at the University of California, Davis)

The damage this is causing to novel, writer and audience is particularly advanced in America. The last 30 years have seen the effects of turning novel writing into an academic profession with a career path. As they became professional, writers began to write about writers. As they became academicised, writers began to write about writing.

And the language of the American literary novel began to drift away from anything used by human beings anywhere on earth. Thirty years of the feedback loop have led to a kind of generic American literary prose, instantly recognisable, but not as instantly comprehensible. Professions generate private languages designed to keep others out. This is irritating when done by architects. But it is a catastrophe for novelists, and the novel.

Lastly, a series of thesis units, which is your writing time guided by your thesis committee members, will fulfil the required 36 units. (From the website of the English department at the University of California, Davis)

Much of their fiction contains not so much tragedy as mere anxiety. Pushed to look for tragedy in lives that contain none, to generate suffering in order to be proper writers, they force themselves to frown rather than smile; and their work fills with a self-indulgent anxiety that could perhaps best be called "wangst."

To teach is to imply that one would not otherwise learn. Do we teach children to breathe? The illusion that there is a solution comes from the illusion that there is a problem. There is not. The forest is open. Strike out.

The novelist's ambition is not to do something better than his predecessors but to see what they did not see, say what they did not say. Flaubert's poetics does not devalue Balzac's, anymore than the discovery of the North Pole renders obsolete the discovery of America. (Milan Kundera, "The Curtain")

If I don't like what the novel is doing, do I have any suggestions as to what it should do? Perhaps.

The novel grows by theft and observation, both of real life and of other "newer," yet often more conservative art forms. (Cinema was a tremendous influence on Joyce.) The problem with the novels of, say, John Banville is that, although brilliantly written, they steal only from other novels (and a few oil paintings). His is a universe in which the internet does not exist, and television scarcely exists. Yet new art forms, and their delivery systems, change the way we read the novel, and therefore must change the way we write it. This is not a catastrophe; it is an opportunity. We are free to do new things with the novel, which could not have been understood before now.

My generation, and those younger, spend a lot of time taking in information not in long, linear, structured, coherent, self-contained units (a film, a novel), but in short bursts, with wildly different tones. A youth spent channel-hopping and surfing the internet rewires the brain. (So does a youth spent reading critical theory: be careful.) See 10,000 Hollywood movies and the journey of the hero becomes utterly predictable: you can see the plot twists and ending coming from the start. Traditional story may have been broken by this overload: certainly it suffers from repetitive strain injury. Television has responded to this crisis. The novel has not.

A comparison between *The Simpsons* and a soap opera is instructive. A soap opera is trapped inside the rules of the format; all soaps resemble each other (like psychologically plausible realist novels). What the makers of *The Simpsons* did was take a soap opera and put a frame around it: "this is a cartoon about a soap opera." This freed them from the need to map its event-rate on to real life: they could map its event-rate on to cartoon life. A fast event-rate is inherently comic, so the tone is, of necessity, comic. But that is not to say it isn't serious. *The Simpsons* is profoundly serious. And profoundly comic. Like Aristophanes, debating the war between Athens and Sparta by writing about a sex strike by the women of Athens and beyond.

With its cartoon event-rate, a classic series of *The Simpsons* has more ideas over a broader cultural range than any novel written the same year. The speed, the density of information, the range of reference; the quantity, quality and rich humanity of the jokes--they make almost all contemporary novels seem slow, dour, monotonous and almost empty of ideas.

*The Sopranos* took a more subtle approach to the problem of the broken hero, the broken heroic saga, by deconstructing the hero through psychoanalysis, inside the frame. *Twin Peaks* and *Lost* have taken a more ostentatiously radical, metafictional approach to the breakdown of story.

Meanwhile, the internet is rapidly becoming Borges's library of Babel, Rushdie's sea of stories: everything is turning up there, in potential promiscuous intercourse with everything else. Everything is happening all at once, in the same place, with no hierarchy. It's as though space and time have collapsed. It's exhilarating, and frightening. Who's capturing that in the novel? Because the novel is the place to capture it. The novel has freedoms which television has not. It can shape and structure multiplicity and chaos in ways the internet cannot.

Novelists can take from these new art forms new structures and techniques for telling stories, as Joyce did from cinema. But who has? Weirdly, the modernists have a more accurate take on now than the most recent Booker winners. *Finnegans Wake* reads like a mash-up of a Google translation of everything ever. But John Banville and Anita Desai read like nostalgia (for Nabokov, for Dickens, for traditional virtues, for the canon). They feel far less contemporary than *The Waste Land*--which is what Bakhtin would call a novelised poem: a poem that escapes Aristotle's *Poetics* and hitches a ride on the energy of the novel. As Baudrillard should have said: postmodernism never happened. Since Joyce and Woolf (and Eliot), the novel's wheels have spun in the sand.

So steal from *The Simpsons*, not Henry James.

Realistic texture and a cartoon event-rate with a broad range of reference: is this a revolutionary new way of writing the novel? Of course not. It's ancient. Voltaire, for example, did it in *Candide*. But we keep forgetting. The novel is constantly pushed by the culture towards worthiness, towards Aristotle's *Poetics*, towards tragedy. The next great novel will do to the contemporary literary novel what Cervantes did to the chivalric romance. It's not that contemporary literary novels are bad. Line by line, book by book, they're often wonderful. But in the same few ways. Who needs more of that?

You may think that to praise *The Simpsons* at the expense of Henry James makes me a barbarian. Well, it does, but I'm a very cultured barbarian. The literary novel has gone late Roman. It needs the barbarians. It secretly yearns for them. It's leading them on. How many novels influenced by Henry James very politely fought it out for the Booker in 2004?

GS Frazer, writing about Henry James in 1964, said: "The novelist must recognise that the foundations of the world he walks are dangerously shifting, that we are living in a world of rapid and disturbing change, so that we can neither say with certainty when some new pattern of relative stability will emerge, nor what sort of pattern it might be. Yet the task of the novelist also, since the human heart hungers after permanence, is to project some image of permanence and to give the novel a coherence that life at large does not... possess."

This is completely wrong. The task of the novelist is precisely the opposite: not to fake a coherence that does not exist, but to capture the chaos that does. And in so doing, perhaps we shall discover that chaos and permanence are not, in fact, opposed. The novel, self-renewing, self-destroying, always the same, always new, always... novel... is the art of permanent chaos.

And to clarify: I don't want everybody to write comedies. I just don't want everybody to write minor, anxious, banal

tragedies, without thinking about why they've chosen such a crowded mode. Why all cluster under the one tree when there's a forest to explore? We do not live in tragic times. We do not live in comic times. We live in novel times.

Ah well, this praising of comedy at the expense of tragedy has gone on forever. Let us go back to Greece, before Muhammad, before Christ, and let someone else have the last word. In Plato's Symposium, Aristodemus, a bit pissed, has just woken up to find "... there remained awake only Aristophanes, Agathon and Socrates, who were drinking out of a large goblet that was passed around, while Socrates was discoursing to them. Aristodemus did not hear all the discourse, for he was only half awake; but he remembered Socrates insisting to the other two that the genius of comedy was the same as that of tragedy, and that the writer of the one should also be a writer of the other. To this they were compelled to assent, being sleepy, and not quite understanding what he meant. And first Aristophanes fell asleep, and then, when the day was dawning, Agathon."

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