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5. Liberal Democracy as Secular Comedy

Laughter is something social and relational, something involving a context of trust, in a way that suffering is not. It requires exchange and conversation; it requires a real live other person—whereas Marcel's [in Proust's novel] agonies go on in a lonely room and distract him from all outward attentions. To imagine love as a form of mourning is already to court solipsism; to imagine it as a form of laughter (of smiling conversation) is to insist that it presupposes . . . the achievement of community.

—Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*

TO BE SCHEMATIC about it, comedy presents a world in which human desires are satisfied, while tragedy tells us, in Nietzsche's words, that there is a "contradiction" between human needs and what the world will afford us.¹ For Northrop Frye, "tragedy seems to lead up to an epiphany of law, of that which is and must be. . . . [T]he overwhelming majority of tragedies do leave us with a sense of the supremacy of impersonal power and of the limitations of human effort."² Not surprisingly, then, the connection of tragedy with Necessity or Fate has led various writers to associate comedy with possibility. John Bruns tells us that "[o]ne of the most neglected of comedy's premises is that there are no limits, only unlimited, unforeseen possibilities."³ Kiernan Ryan, in discussing Shakespeare's comedies and romances, looks to the ways that they "project a world where 'the art of the possible triumphs over the intransigence of the actual.' . . . These plays are indeed not concerned with 'preserving a good already reached' under existing social conditions. They are powered by their commitment to unfolding forms of life liberated from whatever forbids the free play and shared satisfaction of justified desires. . . . The utopian romance dislocates and reshapes the present moment of history, and so 'serves to stimulate in its readers a desire for a better life and to motivate that desire toward action by conveying a sense that the world is not fixed once and for all.' Romances invite us to recognize and play experimentally with imaginable alternatives, which strengthen our conviction that a different kind of world could actually be realized."⁴

An emphasis on the utopian often accompanies an attempt to distinguish comedy from romance. For Frye, "the romance is the nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream,"⁵ and Stanley Cavell adopts this point of view when he calls the "remarriage" films he studies in *Pursuits of Happiness* romances in his text after designating them comedies in the subtitle of his book: "Our films may be understood as parables of a phase of the development of consciousness at which the struggle is for the reciprocity or equality of consciousness between a woman and a man, a study of the conditions under which this fight for recognition (as Hegel put it) or demand for acknowledgement (as I have put it) is a struggle for mutual freedom, especially of the view each holds of the other. This gives the films of our genre a Utopian cast. They harbor a vision which they know cannot be fully domesticated, inhabited, in the world we know. They are romances. Showing us our fantasies, they express the inner agenda of a nation that conceives Utopian longings and commitments for itself."⁶ Not surprisingly, this dismissal of the utopian is linked in Frye (as in the tradition more generally) with the claim that tragedy is more profound, and tells us a truer tale about the actual conditions of human existence: "Without tragedy, all literary fictions might be plausibly explained as expressions of emotional attachments, whether of wish-fulfillment or of repugnance: the tragic fiction guarantees, so to speak, a disinterested quality in literary experience. It is largely through the tragedies of Greek culture that the sense of the authentic natural basis of human character comes into literature."⁷ In Nietzsche and in Frye, despite the vast differences in their general outlooks, tragedy reveals to us the way things really are—and there is a deep consolation, even a kind of perverse pleasure, in knowing that the order of things is fixed (it cannot be disturbed by human action) and in submitting to that order.⁸ Tragedy's sadism, its staging of the spectacle of suffering, is perfectly matched by its masochism, the desire to be punished. Finally, there is the pride of knowing the worst without hiding in illusion, in standing up and taking one's medicine like a man. As Frye emphasizes, the tragic hero acts and suffers in isolation; his battle is with the forces of the universe, with the gods or with nature, more than it is with other men. In that sense, tragedy is a metaphysical form, attuned to questions about the nonnegotiable terms of existence.

But, for all that, we would do well to remind ourselves that tragedy is no less a humanly contrived story about ourselves, who we are, and what we can be than any of the other literary forms. Why should we ascribe a special authority to the form that tells that we cannot have what we want, that the world cannot be “as you like it”? Note Ryan’s appeal to “justified desire,” a formula that raises the suspicion that tragedy might be based on an unjustified sense of guilt, on a conviction that I do not deserve what I want. One of the tasks of comedy, then, would be to persuade us that we should not repudiate our desires out of hand, to teach us how to lose our “passionate attachment to subjection” (to use Judith Butler’s phrase).

Or take Cavell’s easy, almost unconsidered, claim that equality between a man and a woman is impossible in “any world we know.” Where does this assurance come from? He shows that the films he studies have numerous “scenes of instruction,” that they are often built around educating the woman into an acceptance (even joyful embrace) of a sexual desire the world has presented as shameful and around educating the man into expressing his desires, into passing from the habit of “command” to the ability “to wish, and consequently to make a fool of himself.”⁹ Certain received images of femininity and masculinity have trapped men and women into roles that hamper their ability to relate to their own desires straightforwardly—and to one another equally. Are these roles immutable? These films say otherwise. Why should the possibility of effective education be confined to the films themselves—and deemed impracticable and nonreproducible in the “world we know”? Especially when it is understood that the desires the films strive both to justify and then to realize are part of “the agenda of a nation,” namely ours, that affirms “pursuits of happiness.” Cavell, I am suggesting, does not have the courage of his liberal desires. He confines the longing for equality to film, refusing that longing any capacity to motivate political action or find fulfillment through any social practice or political institution.

To put it this way does raise the vexed question of what “comedy” means. Is it a literary form, a way of describing real-life events, or a structure of feeling (a way of understanding and living humanness.)¹⁰ In what follows I present comedy as a world-view that is a cross between a sensibility (an ethos) and a set of arguments about how our world is and could be. I rely on comic literary works to identify and

exemplify various features of that world-view. Literature is not life, but it can provide equipment for living. And it serves, in a different way than philosophy, as a site of reflection on human situations.

If comedy is about the fulfillment of desire (after in some cases overcoming, as in the Jane Austen novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, a prior failure to even know one's own desire), the fulfillment takes place in a social setting, in and through the self's relationship to others, and through a process of reform. The prevailing relationships need to be rewritten before fulfillment is possible. Comedy, unlike tragedy, is not metaphysical, but social, and deals not with an isolated individual, but with selves in relation to one another.¹¹ And comedy moves from a situation in which fulfillment is blocked (for whatever reason) to a renewed and revitalized society in which desire is satisfied. The usual way to tell this story is through a young couple whose desire to marry is thwarted by a father (or father-figure) who forbids the marriage or by a social order (usually it's an issue of class) that deems the chosen partner inappropriate. The anarchistic energy of sexual desire threatens to disrupt the prevailing social order, but desire wins out to the extent that it has its way, although that desire is reined in by giving it the sanctioned legal form of marriage. Society is rejuvenated, quite literally.¹² It is saved from becoming dry, sterile, and joyless, a mere following of established rules and roles. A creative chaos, which very often includes disguises of various sorts, especially of men pretending to be women and vice versa, loosens up the prevailing norms and allows them to be reformulated in ways that give greater satisfaction. Comedy is about change, about the movement to a social order that better accommodates our desires.¹³ The social world comedy imagines also accommodates "as many people as possible in its final ending: the blocking characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated. Comedy often includes a scapegoat ritual of expulsion which gets rid of some irreconcilable character, but exposure and disgrace make for pathos, or even tragedy."¹⁴

Comedy is the art of accommodation, of making things and people fit together. The tragic hero never compromises—and his intransigence marks both his nobility and his folly: "What tragic essentialism finds distasteful is randomness, contingency, the unraveling text of the empirical and everyday—in a word, comedy. Comedy is the domain of the non-intransigent, of those crafty, compliant, unkillable forms

of life which get their way by yielding. Its adaptive, accommodatory [*sic*] spirit is thus the very opposite of tragic deadlock and clenched resolution."¹⁵ The characters in a comedy do what it takes to make things work (pragmatism), but it is worth noting that, instead of being despised for their pains, a comity that is enjoyed by all results. Should we wonder that the agent of this social harmony is so often a woman? Against masculine pride and stubbornness, both of which lead to conflict, are poised the feminine virtues of listening to and making room for the views of the other. Announcing at the outset of *Attitudes toward History* his intention to take "comedy" as his desired attitude, Kenneth Burke adds: "Basically this book would accept the Aristophanic assumptions, which equate tragedy with war and comedy with peace." Humans need, Burke writes, "to learn to cherish the mildly charitable ways of the comic discount. For by nothing less than such humanistic allowances can we hope to forestall (if it can be forestalled!) the most idiotic tragedy conceivable: the willful ultimate poisoning of this lovely planet, in conformity with a mistaken heroics of war" (*AH*, v).

Comic accommodation does not require blindness to the follies and even evil of others, but it does require "discounting" them, of making allowances: "[T]he comic frame will appear the most serviceable for the handling of human relationships. . . . The comic frame is charitable, but at the same time it is not gullible. It keeps us alive to the ways in which people 'cash in on' their moral assets, and even use moralistic euphemisms to conceal purely materialistic purposes—but it can recognize as much without feeling its disclosure is the last word on human motivation" (*AH*, 105–6). Against a tragic view that focuses on, even fetishizes, purity, comedy recognizes mixed motives, the ways that our spiritual or idealistic aspirations are always already corrupted by baser desires, but eschews the temptation to cynicism on the one hand or to an unworldly transcendence of the body and/or of matter on the other, "an acceptance of nature and body that does not ask to be redeemed by any beyond."¹⁶ Hamlet captures the mood of comic charity when he responds to Polonius's promise to "use [the players] according to their desert": "God's bodikin, man; much better. Use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping? Use them after your own honor and dignity. The less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty" (*Hamlet*, act. 2, scene 2, lines 527–32).¹⁷ Comedy takes neither human virtues nor human sins too seriously, striving

to find a way of living with both. As C. L. Barber puts it, "The satirist presents life as it is and ridicules it because it is not ideal, as we would like it to be and as it should be. Shakespeare goes the other way about: he represents or evokes ideal life, and then makes fun of it because it does not square with life as it ordinarily is."¹⁸

F. H. Buckley, in his recent book *The Morality of Laughter*, misses this distinction between satire and comedy. Buckley argues that laughter is always directed against a "butt," and, therefore, "superiority is a necessary but not sufficient condition of laughter."¹⁹ Buckley pays homage to laughter's ability to create fellow feeling, but he sees such sociability as always produced by identification of a common object of ridicule, a scapegoat. I hardly want to deny that laughter can be cruel, or that there are sacrificial comedies. But there is an alternative, an egalitarian laughter of the kind that Bakhtin celebrates. The key is "ambivalence," the inclusion of the self in what is laughed at, and thus the mixture of affection and ridicule. This laughter "is also directed at those who laugh. The people do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world. They, too, are incomplete, they also die and are revived and renewed. This is one of the essential differences of the people's festive laughter from the pure satire of modern times. The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world's comic aspect is destroyed, and that which appears comic becomes a private reaction. The people's ambivalent laughter, on the other hand, expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it."²⁰ Buckley's refusal of ambivalence, his desire to use laughter as a purgative that lights the way to a pure world, is signaled by his statement of what the morality of laughter produces: "By highlighting comic vices, laughter teaches us a superior life-plan, of grace and suppleness, that is immune from ridicule."²¹ But a very different lesson emerges from comedy if the lesson is that no life is immune from ridicule, that all humans play the fool at times and in various ways, that we are all united in our bumbling attempts to find our way in this difficult world. Comic ambivalence, the comic discount, not only accepts that "there, but for the grace of God, go I," but also that solemnity, taking it all with utmost seriousness and a determination to be above ridicule, is one of the funniest of human foibles. If outrage at human folly and vice is not mixed with affection and with

the knowledge that I am hardly immune to what I condemn in others, the result is differentiating satire instead of inclusive comedy.

By endorsing Barber's and Bakhtin's distinction between satire and comedy, I would seem to have abandoned the utopian altogether. But I am instead, as I hope to show you, making the case for the convergence of the "comic frame" and liberal democracy—and describing a "modest" utopianism that echoes the modest faith in progress outlined in chapter 2. Another of the persistent qualities the tradition associates with comedy is its immersion in, even celebration of, "the ordinary."²² An essay by Gerald L. Bruns on Martha Nussbaum can help us here. Identifying Nussbaum as "essentially a comic thinker" and "the task of comedy" as eschewing "greatness" and accepting "the ordinary," Bruns contrasts the comic attitude with the tragic urge for sovereignty and tragedy's subsequent rejection of this world as a place where dreams of sovereignty can never be fulfilled: "Blindness and rigidity, and a will to control, to dominate or rule, are notorious features of the tragic hero, but above all there is his refusal of the world, that is, refusal of its otherness, its resistance, its limits." In Nussbaum, Bruns finds the desire to reconnect with the ordinary. Nussbaum's "ethics of reengagement" takes as its "point of departure" the "intellect's ability to acknowledge its body, its sexuality, its temporality, its contingency, its complexity, its entanglement with other bodies, its refusal of reason."²³ I would only add that comedy wages its battle against abstraction, against the desire to escape into transcendence, through laughter and through love. To the gentle shaming of ridicule, comedy adds a reminder of love for one's own life and love for cherished others as the means for affirmation of this world. In Richard Wilbur's words, "love calls us to the things of this world."²⁴

Stanley Cavell, of course, has been the great philosophical champion of the ordinary in our time, alerting us to the various ways that humans can refuse to acknowledge the everyday demands of the body, the claims of intimate others upon us, and (in general) the messy, nonideal terms with which one lives with one's self and with others. For Cavell there is something "theatrical" about our literary and philosophical presentations of characters "*look[ing] for something* for which to live or die. There are only the old things, and they are at hand, or nowhere. Then how . . . shall we make ourselves present to them."²⁵ As William James and Kenneth Burke each in their own way puts it,

the question is how to “accept” this world and our situated immersion in it.²⁶ The comic attitude strives to return us to the things of this world, to overcome the ever-present temptations to avoid the difficulties of the here and now in favor of imagined perfect realms. Back to the rough ground, as Wittgenstein puts it. But that comic attitude is utopian in that it aims to produce a “love of the world” of the sort Hannah Arendt championed. The ordinary is not just the realm of necessity, the scene humans *must* inhabit, but now transfigured, through the comic process, into the scene, the only possible scene, for a satisfactory human existence. The freedom to make *this* world the place of satisfaction is activated by the insight that, in Robert Frost’s words, “the earth’s the place for love: / I don’t know where it is likely to go better.”²⁷ Love of the world entails, in this secular vision, assuming responsibility for it. Humans live in the world they make—and their loving or their hateful relation to other humans plays a huge role in that making. The excessive responsibility I noted in Oedipus and Lear (in chapter 3) is a *generous* responsibility, one that takes on the task of making a better world, not a discourse of responsibility fixated on assigning blame for the current world’s less than utopian condition.

Comedy’s utopia is to teach us to love the ordinary, to make it the site of human satisfaction, instead of whoring after strange gods. Minimally, in Nussbaum’s words, it assumes the “the task of making us not hate who and where we are.”²⁸ Traditionally, this teaching is conducted by corrective laughter, by gentle mockery of two extremes that, wonderfully enough, Dewey identifies (surely without any explicit knowledge of the comic tradition): “On the one hand, we dream of attained perfection, an ultimate static goal, in which effort shall cease, and desire and execution be once and for all in complete equilibrium. . . . [On the other hand], [w]e reach out to the opposite extreme of our ideal of fixity, and under the guise of a return to nature dream of a romantic freedom, in which *all* life is plastic to impulse, a continual source of improvised spontaneities and novel inspirations” (*HNC*, 100). The mechanical man, tied to his *idée fixe*, identified in Bergson’s *On Laughter*, is by Dewey accused of scorning life for perfection, of substituting the idea (the ideal) for the messy actual. The enthusiast, like Marianne in Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, must learn that impulse should be tempered by law, since the eventual frustration

of unrealistic (infinite) desires can also lead to hatred of this world, most familiarly in the Byronic hero. Generally, comedy treats the enthusiast more gently because most of the danger is seen as coming from over-constraint; comedy aims for liberty, to loosen things up, so it looks indulgently on the character who errs too far in that direction, while treating more harshly the puritans like Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* who would not only deny themselves any fun but also deny fun to all.

The goal of comedy is a nonrigid law, a flexible stability that gives human society just enough predictability to prevent disempowering chaos, but not so much fixity to stifle creativity, imagination, and all impulse. Sounding like C. L. Barber, Dewey writes of the "renewing of habit rendered possible by impulse; the latter never wholly ceases to play its refreshing role in adult life. If it did, life would petrify, society stagnate" (*HNC*, 100). The modest utopia of the ordinary, then, is to learn how to love its imperfections while also accepting constraints designed to enable our peaceful intercourse with others even as we avoid turning those constraints into straitjackets. This utopia entails moving beyond mere toleration of our neighbors' various desires and actions to a delight in what diversity yields. It is to achieve commonality with our fellows through loose affiliations and affectionate appreciation rather than through deep and permanent agreements. This is the stuff of Burke's comic discount, of Bakhtin's ambivalent laughter, of comedy's ability to stage all our human foibles even as it promotes increased affection for our fellow humans.²⁹ Acquiring this double vision, a clear-eyed view of human imperfection joined with a love of this world, is comedy's utopia.³⁰ It is an ending both completely ordinary (what could be more ordinary, more imperfect, and more dependent on double vision than marriage?) and awfully difficult to achieve. In Nussbaum, a realistic love relationship stands for this clear-eyed acceptance of our humanity—with its imperfections and mortality: "If the loved one is not turned into a goddess, there is no surprise and no disgust at her humanity. . . . [In] a condition beyond both obsession and disgust, . . . the lover could see the beloved clearly as a separate and fully human being, accurately take note of the good properties she actually does possess, and accept both her humanity and his own."³¹ To alter Wilbur's phrase a bit, comedy calls us to be human, when so much else in our tradition calls on us to repudiate

our humanity, to flee from it in disgust, or righteous indignation, or flights of transcendental fancy.

What makes this comic vision “secular” is that it does not look to any nonhuman agents to create the society it desires. It is up to us. Even further. The secular vision applauds William James’s constant insistence that humans occupy “an unfinished universe” (*P*, 113) but finds his obsession with “salvation” and “redemption” disquieting. The sentence from James that I have quoted several times as a key mantra for nontranscendental thought—“Nothing outside of the flux secures the issue of it”—is immediately followed by this sentence: “It can hope salvation only from its own intrinsic promises and potencies” (*P*, 114). Why talk of salvation? What are we to be saved from? The demons in ourselves that keep us from loving this world and our fellow human beings? Some fundamental flaw in the nature of things or in our own natures? Why elevate the “blocking forces” that stand between us and happiness with such solemnity? We have met the enemy—and it is us. Comedy lays its wage on laughing that enemy off the stage, teaching ourselves the errors of our ways in a fashion that doesn’t overestimate the obstacles to success. Unkindness, greediness, even evil, are as ordinary as love and altruism. None of these human attributes poses a metaphysical puzzle, or is visited upon us from elsewhere. Each is there day after day; the important thing is to summon what resources we have to hand to create the world we want.

To talk of salvation is to dream of a once-for-all dramatic transformation, of a tool that will fix the human condition permanently. But our joy or our sorrow is enacted in countless actions just as our language is created and sustained by millions of communicative acts. Nothing could save us from English or “redeem” it as our way of communicating with other English speakers. (Of course, the early Wittgenstein was part of a movement in philosophy that did dream of perfecting language, so that his later work’s turn to the ordinary was precisely an attempt to cure himself—and us—of that misplaced longing.) Instead, our communicative acts struggle to make English a better tool for those communications. The scene of progress is in our relations one to another, not elsewhere, and whether our language or our society is on the whole good for its members or not rests on the tenor of those relations, not some elsewhere abstracted from them. Liberal

democracy is secular insofar as the democratic part resolutely places our own fate in the hands of the demos and the liberal part focuses just as resolutely on developing on-the-ground relationships that embody equality and foster effective freedom. The inclusive societies figured at the ends of literary comedies are produced through the relationships among the play's (or novel's) characters.

Why is this ordinary comic utopia so often found wanting? The biggest problem is death. To be utterly schematic once again, three primary desires stand in the way of an acceptance of this world: the desire to be loved, the desire for justice, and the desire to live forever. Christianity quite dramatically offers a fulfillment of all three desires—but not in this world. Christians are comforted by their relationship in this life to a loving God even as they defer justice and immortality to the next world. At least as interpreted by Nietzsche, the Greeks' world-view was tragic precisely because they accepted the primal injustice of existence; the human desire for justice conflicts with the gods' indifference to it—and the gods, because stronger, have the final say even as we, the audience, honor the hero for persisting in his allegiance to a vision of justice that cannot prevail. Christianity is essentially comic because human desires and the divine plan coincide. William James longed for exactly that conviction, even if he could only entertain it as a working hypothesis: “[W]e may well believe, on the proofs that religious experience affords, that higher powers exist and are at work to save the world on ideal lines similar to our own” (*P*, 131). But note that James has upped the stakes; in the traditional divine comedy of Christianity, it is individuals who are saved, not the world itself, certainly not this world.

Secular comedy says that love and justice are only to be won by our own efforts; there are no gods to hinder or to aid us in that effort. But this comic optimism, the assertion that a better world is possible (an assertion that underwrites the politics this book promotes), meets its limit at death. Christianity's divine comedy is based on sacrifice; only the willing submission to death by god himself “redeems” our fallen condition and wins us eternal life. And, of course, it does not win eternal life for all. The reprobate, those who do not acknowledge God's gift or will, go to eternal punishment. *The Inferno* is the most vivid part of Dante's poem, as if imagining the torment of one's enemies is much more real and exciting than imaging one's own eternal

bliss. For Paul Kahn, sacrifice alone provides humans with a way to face death squarely:

Finite experience can be interesting; it can also be entertaining. But interest and entertainment are not the sacred. No matter how intense, they are not sufficient to overcome the existential angst experienced by a subject aware of his own finitude. The finite self seeks a meaning that can overcome death itself. Every sacrifice is an exercise in the symbolic dynamics of resurrection. Through death is life. This is the violent act of sacrifice, which destroys in order to create. When sacrifice fails, we are left with only the evil of killing.³²

Secular comedy seeks to repudiate sacrifice, to insist that when humans kill other humans that act is evil, not some sanctified way of achieving life. Secular comedy does reach one limit of possibility with death—and thus the acceptance of the ordinary it seeks to achieve must include an acceptance of death. As Martha Nussbaum puts it, comedy opens us to “the possibility of another sort of narrative [as contrasted to the sacrificial narrative of tragedy or the disgust-filled narratives of Beckett]: one whose structures express the beauty of that which is human and fragile and call forth in us a love of that beauty and the limits that constitute it.” There are other possible responses to our finitude, to the necessity of death, than Beckett’s feeling of “guilt and disgust.” Comedy strives to exemplify the potential joys that “the contingent structures of human social life” can provide us, even in the face of our finitude, of death’s necessity. What we humans collectively produce as our life together can suffice. The great refuseniks, Nietzsche and Beckett, will never admit “that it is no disgrace to be a political animal.”³³ For Nussbaum, there are two ways to respond to the inescapable vulnerability that comes with mortality: “Lucretius mentions two responses to the danger in which humans find themselves: counteraggression and society.”³⁴ To be overly schematic about it once again, tragedy bodies forth the angry response that hits out at others (or the gods) as a protest against my own dependencies and mortality. The tragic hero finally says I won’t play this game of life if the ending is inevitably death. Comedy, instead, considers the resources our human togetherness might provide to render our dependence on one another an asset, not a liability, while considering to what extent our solidarity can defuse, even while it can never fully remedy, the sting of death.

In one way, the refusal to die, the desire to live forever, is portrayed in comedy as part and parcel of greediness, of the older generation's unwillingness to cede the world and the future to the young. The desire for personal immortality is linked to the desire to garner for oneself a lion's share of the world's resources. Comedies often center around dramas of inheritance, of the parents' desire to control their children's behavior by threatening disinheritance. "We are spending our children's inheritance," the bumper sticker reads—and I, at first, thought that was an environmentalist slogan. But, apparently, it more usually expresses a kind of gleeful greediness, an unwillingness to pass on. Comedy is deeply tied to fact that the love and sexuality it affirms also creates the children who will replace their parents in the order of time. It aims to make that succession a cause for celebration, not a tragic catastrophe. It is the difference between Lear's inability to abdicate gracefully or to accept that Cordelia's bond to her husband will be as dear as her bond to her father, and Prospero's learning to accept his daughter's love for Ferdinand. Yes, Prospero's final withdrawal from the stage into a retirement where "every third thought shall be my grave" (*The Tempest*, act 5, scene 1, line 315) is melancholy, but it does not overwhelm the comic ending, render its triumphs nugatory. Why should the fact that I will die mean that everything I do today is meaningless? The possible satisfactions of life are not dependent on their lasting forever.

Of course, the feeling that the time-bound nature of our endeavors does not undermine their significance has not been very generally shared. And since there is no humanly produced remedy for death, recourse to the divine follows. For Kahn, sacrifice is the means of production of that divine, of the sacred. Secular comedy is repulsed by this stratagem, by the introduction of killing done by humans as a way to defeat death.³⁵ In that logic lies a sickness that comedy must insist is not some inevitable part of human nature, not a ritual that will everywhere be enacted. Northrop Frye, who is a very Christian thinker, is inclined to assert that both tragedy and comedy are "imaginative form[s] of the sacrificial ritual . . . of the struggle, death, and rebirth of a God-Man, which is linked to yearly triumph of spring over winter."³⁶ But then Frye admits that Shakespearean comedy does not fit the pattern. Works like *As You Like It* and *The Tempest* do not (unlike *The Winter's Tale*) gain their happy endings through a death and

resurrection. A different dynamic, one I am calling secular comedy, where love, forgiveness (the generosity toward human faults that characterizes the “comic discount”), and a commitment to equality/justice does the work, produces the ending.

Iris Murdoch's *Bruno's Dream* (1969) seems to me the most profound recent meditation on these issues. Murdoch is the great novelist of love over the past one hundred years, and her abiding subject (I believe) is exactly the tension between a longing for transcendence and a reconciliation with the contingencies of this world. In *Bruno's Dream*, the character Lisa is marked by her otherworldliness. She has been a nun for a time (in a very strict order that confines her to the convent) and currently teaches schoolchildren in the slums of East London. She soothes the dying Bruno and, in strong contrast to her sister Diana (who is Bruno's daughter-in-law), is not disgusted by the smelly and disfigured old man. Lisa's saintliness proves irresistibly attractive as she seems to offer an escape from the mundane onto some higher place of existence. The catastrophe that drives the novel's plot stems from both Miles, her sister's husband, and Danby, Bruno's son-in-law, falling in love with Lisa. Lisa, herself, loves Miles. Her first reaction when the fact of their illicit love becomes apparent to Diana is an act of sacrifice. Lisa will repudiate Miles—and this world. She signs on to go work for an organization in Calcutta called Save the Children.

Murdoch is clear that this sacrifice is an act of misguided altruism that does no good whatsoever. It only humiliates the very person it is meant to help: Diana. To have her husband as Lisa's gift is insufferable to Diana; she would much rather have had Lisa and Miles run off together, so that she could work from the strength of being hurt, of having to reconstruct her life. Instead, the sacrifice has rendered her entirely passive, made her the victim even though, supposedly, she was to be the beneficiary. “I have no source of energy, no growth of being,” Diana reflects, “to enable me to live this hateful role of the wife to whom they have together planned to sacrifice their great love. I am humbled by this to the point of annihilation. . . . They have acted rightly and just by this I am utterly brought low.”³⁷ Sacrifice is unavailing, in part the novel seems to say (in ways that echo Nietzsche's persistent critique of pity) because the power invested in the one who sacrifices yields the true victory to the one who ostensibly has given

something up. We are back to Hegel's master/slave, but with a twist. In Hegel, the one who has sovereign power over life and death is the one who enjoys actual selfhood, while the other is reduced to a slave. In Murdoch, however, the master's power is revealed by her self-sacrifice in place of a commanded sacrifice of the other. (The analogue to the central sacrifice of Christianity is clear.) The crucial point is that the dynamic of sacrifice can never be between equals, must always destroy equality and introduce a strong distinction between the one who initiates/enacts the sacrifice and the one who is constituted as its passive recipient by that act. Christianity both accepts this strong divide between the sovereign god and the lowly human *and* seeks to disavow it by making the sacrificial/sacrificed God human as well. For Murdoch, in *Bruno's Dream* at least, the power dynamics of sacrifice make it deeply unsatisfactory. It does not offer terms on which any satisfying, reciprocal love can be achieved.

In the novel, Lisa herself comes to that realization. She decides, in the end, to renounce saintliness, to return to the world and aim for ordinary happiness with Danby. Instead of being "an angel," she has decided to be "only a woman after all." "I have never been more sane," she declares, "coldly sane, *self-interestingly* sane. I am a woman. I want warmth and love, affection, laughter, happiness, all the things I'd done without. I don't want to live upon the rack."³⁸ She has to learn how to give herself permission to be happy, to understand that her prior longings for transcendence are insane, that they did nothing for herself or for others.

Does the novel, then, affirm selfishness, recommend that one cultivate one's own garden attempts to alleviate the sufferings of others are unavailing? It's not quite clear since the suffering (of the poor) that Lisa had tried to alleviate remains off-stage. But I do think it fair to say that Murdoch is suspicious of charity that is not accompanied by love. The suffering she calls us to attend to is the suffering of those closest to us, of those we say we love. In that sense, like Cavell, Murdoch is constantly attuned to the "avoidance of love," of all the ways in which we manage not to "be present" to the others with whom we interact daily. Murdoch is quite clear that love is the only possible comfort in the face of the implacable necessity of death. After the destruction of her marriage, Diana finds meaning and comfort in taking over Lisa's role as the caregiver to the dying Bruno. To her surprise,

she comes to love him. And through that love Bruno and Diana come to a set of new convictions about the relations among life, death, and love. Stated baldly, as I will in quoting them here, these convictions might sound portentous, or even worse, vapid. But take my word for it (or, better yet, go read the novel yourself) that, in context, these sentiments feel “earned.” That they may also strike one as embarrassing truisms calls to mind the modernist’s peculiar shame of being sentimental, so that heroic aggression can loudly proclaim itself while the desire to love and be loved must whisper. Bruno, at almost the very moment of death, realizes how much he had focused on the hope that, somehow, “life could be redeemed.” But now he knows “it couldn’t be, and that was what was so terrible.” But, in facing up to this terrible realization, he must acknowledge “[h]e had made a muddle of everything”: “He had loved only a few people, and loved them so badly, so selfishly.” Now he can only wish he had known all this before: “It looks as if it would have been easy to be kind and good since it’s so obvious now that nothing else matters at all. But of course then one was inside the dream.”³⁹ The “dream” has been whatever has distracted Bruno from attending to those nearest and dearest to him.

As for Diana, she recognizes love’s impotence in the face of death. Love cannot conquer death, but that should not devalue the extent to which love does make life meaningful, well worth living, even if death comes at last: “The helplessness of human stuff in the grip of death was something which Diana felt now in her own body. She lived the reality of death and felt herself made nothing by it and denuded of desire. Yet love still existed and it was the only thing that existed. The old spotted hand that was holding on to hers relaxed gently at last.”⁴⁰ These are the final words of the novel. Murdoch may have written the only comedy in the tradition that ends with death. I am reminded of the famous W. H. Auden line in “September 1939”: “we must love one another or die.” Auden later changed that “or” to “and.” Even if we succeed in loving one another, we will still die. But the loving of one another can make a huge difference in other ways even while it cannot banish death. *Bruno’s Dream*, among other things, pursues the question of what it means to “experience” death in the company of a loved one. Both Miles and Danby have lost to death deeply loved first wives—and both of them feel that they have somehow failed to experience the death of those wives. Neither was present

at the deaths. In the final scenes of Diana's sitting by Bruno's death-bed, the novel explores how her sharing in death eases his passage into it, with the concomitant claim that she has his revelation about the centrality of love. Death and love are intimately connected, perhaps in that our love is elicited by the vulnerability of the other, by his or her powerlessness in the face of suffering and death. The liberal (comic) impulse is to work to end all unnecessary suffering, to which Murdoch's novel adds the impulse to ease the loved one's experience of unavoidable suffering and death. As John Bruns beautifully puts it: "The humorist acknowledges suffering, but his relationship to the world is not reducible to it. In other words, he refuses to allow suffering to have the last word, or the only word, about human experience."⁴¹

By focusing on the Murdoch novel, I have short-changed other comic responses to the necessary ills of human existence, including insouciant laughter. So, Bruns writes, "[t]he operation of comedy . . . is to look into the face of death not to say, 'it is nothing,' for the operation of comedy is not negation. Comedy does not turn tables on death but dances with it. Judged this way, comedy is not so much a worldview characterized by disorder and dis-inhibition but one characterized by a laughing disavowal—not of death, nor of suffering, disaster, or wounds of the flesh or mind, rather, of the finalizing, meaning-giving force we grant those matters."⁴² No one would ever mistake Murdoch's comedy for one that refuses the "meaning-giving force" of death. Murdoch strives to write her way through death (hence her focus on "experiencing" it), not rob it of its seriousness. A more playful refusal to take death too seriously can be found in Rosalind's breezy "Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but none for love" (*As You Like It*, act 4, scene 1, lines 101–2).

Let me quickly summarize what I hope I have accomplished to this point. Comedy as an imaginative form is important because it articulates, bodies forth, a vision of a better world, one that satisfies our desires to love and be loved on terms of equal reciprocity, to alleviate all unnecessary suffering by way of making the world just, and to (at least) ease the terror of death by mitigating the extent to which it is experienced alone. Comedy tells us two crucial things. One, that these desires are not illegitimate or shameful; humans are fully entitled to want these things for themselves and their fellows. It repudiates notions of "original sin," of other forms of guilt, or of more

worldly appeals to social station and/or meritocracy that justify claims that love and justice—in short, happiness—is not for the likes of you. Second, comedy tells us that fulfillment of these desires is possible in this world by way of human effort. It is to these “means” for fulfillment that I now want to turn.

What I find promising about discussing liberal democracy as secular comedy is that it reconnects politics with desire in a way that more sober political theory does not manage. Liberal democrats must make their vision desirable if they wish to be effective rhetorically; they must mobilize the human desire to love and to be loved. The longing for community, for a world in which we share our burdens and work collectively to alleviate them, is routinely dismissed as sentimental and utopian in our time. Acquiescing in that dismissal deprives liberal democrats of some of their most potent reasons for advocating the politics they favor. My previous book, *American Liberalism*, laid out what I took to be the primary values and commitments of liberalism: equality, social justice, an acknowledgement of irreducible pluralism, the rule of law, and a Deweyan notion of effective freedom joined to his focus on the individual embedded in associated living with others. As I confessed at the end of that book, these commitments felt a bit “thin” to me; even if I was passionate about equality and social justice, that passion did not seem widely shared, and it was unclear how to inspire it in others. Liberal democracy, in other words, seems to lack a story, a vision, that awakens desire.⁴³ It needs to present a world that we strongly want to inhabit. But then I recognized that we possess such stories in our tradition, that our comedies speak of such a world.

Admittedly, the number of secular comedies is sorely limited. The comedy of Shakespeare, Molière, Austen, and Trollope, which finds a *modus vivendi* to affirm even where scoundrels abound and “every third thought is of the grave” has had few twentieth-century practitioners. It is as if that century’s humanly enacted evils so far exceeded human scales of measurement that we couldn’t trust moments of worldly grace, could not tell stories of ordinary human happiness. Thus Cavell must turn to Hollywood comedies of the 1930s to find a modern artistic expression of mundane joy—and more recent Hollywood films barely enter this territory; they transport us instead to fantasy worlds inhabited by superheroes or vampires. Of course, I hasten to add, romantic comedies are still made, with films like *My Best Friend’s*

Wedding, *High Fidelity*, and *Love, Actually* among recent interesting examples. And then there are the TV sit coms, about which I know too little. That the comic has migrated from high to low culture since the days of Dickens fits with the modernist disdain for sentiment, but also with what Terry Eagleton calls "the Lord of the Flies syndrome—the quintessentially modernist dogma that beneath the smooth, paper-thin surface of civilization brood chthonic forces which betray its unspeakable truth, and will burst forth in some unspeakable epiphany once you dump a bunch of schoolboys without cricket bats and a prefect on a desert island."⁴⁴ Just why murderous passions are worthy of the ontological and epistemological honor of being deemed real, while domestic felicity and social conviviality (much more common experiences, let us remind ourselves, for most people) are dismissed as epiphenomenal, is never explained, just asserted. Among "serious" writers, Frank O'Hara and Thomas Kinneally are among the very few post-World War II writers who find much in this world to affirm, who are capable of striking the note of joy convincingly. I recommend Kinneally's *The Playmaker* especially in this regard, although in that novel Kinneally, like Dickens, requires sacrificial death to secure the happiness of his central couple. *Schindler's List* stresses that ordinary, imperfect nonsaints are all we have available to throw into the lists against evils that, however monstrous, are also human products of the here and now. The outcome hangs in the balance, but it is only human forces ranged on each side; the triumph of evil is not fated, not pre-written.

We have surprisingly few recent writers as resolutely secular as Kinneally, and none of them (J. M. Coetzee comes to mind) find much to affirm in this world, even if willing to acknowledge that it is the only one we've got and that we have only our own efforts to credit or to blame for what we make of it. Murdoch, the greatest comic novelist of the post-World War II era, finally goes mystical, unable to credit instances of human goodness unless underwritten as intimations of a true reality, a Platonic realm, that transcends the limits of the self and of the humanly produced. In that regard, *Bruno's Dream*, which plays out the tension between the ordinary and the transcendent that figures in so many Murdoch novels, is fairly unique among them in its giving the palm to the ordinary.⁴⁵ The movement of post-structuralist antihumanism toward mysticism in Derrida's later works

stems from a similar desire to see the fallible and frail human either aligned with or corrected by the light of some transcendent elsewhere. The “comic faith” in our own resources has been lost, as if we have come to believe that the human is only, and inevitably, capable of evil.⁴⁶ Fully aware that such pronouncements abstract away from complex particularities, and that the actual stories are preferable to generalities for the awakening and affirmation of desire, let me still venture a generalizing definition at this point, one to be valued more for making my polemical point emphatically than as any kind of covering law for the genre of comedy. Secular comedy is the literary form that imagines a society where no one avoids love: love of oneself, love for others, or love of the world. Secular comedy both builds upon and fosters the desire for such a society. Liberal democracy is the politics that aims to create a society where such love is possible. Rorty is right to call Dewey a philosopher of love, and the comic Martha Nussbaum is, at one and the same time, the philosopher of our time (along with Cavell) who has most fully thought about love, and one of the most important liberal thinkers.⁴⁷

Advocates for liberal democracy need to tell this comic story; they need to awaken the commitment to making a better world our reality. Secular comedy not only proves a useful supplement to political theory because it provides a desirable vision, but also because it suggests alternative means toward the realization of that vision. Where political theory emphasizes procedures (such as voting and deliberation), institutions (the rule of law, a free press, schools, and governmental bodies), rights, and public values (equality, justice, freedom), turning to secular comedy supplements the political theory view by introducing issues of sensibility, desire, and fellow feeling—and, crucially, the on-the-ground living out of our relations to others. As someone trained as a literary critic but who abandoned that field to mostly work in political theory, I hardly mean to disparage what political theory has to tell us. I have little patience for literary critics who think of their work as “political”—and yet who are mostly ignorant of political philosophy and theory. But I also think that political theory doesn’t tell the whole story and am turning to comedy to highlight certain themes the theory is prone to miss. It is not just themes, however. There is also plot, the attention to the dynamics of change, the ways that the present can yield to the future. The whole drama of falling in

love exists alongside comedy's celebration of how love transforms the ordinary. Crucially, comic plot is about change, about somehow moving from an unsatisfying present into a more affirmable future. Where tragedy highlights a necessary stasis, an irresolvable conflict, comedy stages metamorphosis, the sense of a new beginning. Laughter is unleashed by the recognition that something new is possible. Transience is not the tragedy of loss, but the joyful power of creativity: "Enormous creative, and therefore genre-shaping, power was possessed by ambivalent carnivalistic laughter. This laughter could grasp and comprehend a phenomenon in the process of change and transition."⁴⁸

Love makes the lover and the world she inhabits new. Perhaps its effects simply result from an escape from the prison of the self. "Love," Iris Murdoch tells us, "is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real,"⁴⁹ a formulation unwittingly echoed by Cavell when he writes: "A genuine conversation is the state in which one is no longer alone in the world."⁵⁰ The means toward love for these philosophers is conversation, which echoes liberal politics' focus on conversation (most pronounced in Rorty). For Bakhtin:

Carnivalization made possible the creation of the *open* structure of the great dialogue, and permitted social interaction between people to be carried over into the higher sphere of the spirit and the intellect, which earlier has always been primarily the sphere of a single and unified monologic consciousness, a unified and indivisible spirit unfolding within itself (as, for example, in Romanticism). A carnival sense of the world helps Dostoevsky overcome gnos-eological as well as ethical solipsism. A single person, remaining alone within himself, cannot make ends meet even in the deepest and most intimate spheres of his spiritual life, he cannot manage without *another* consciousness. One person can never find complete fullness in himself alone.⁵¹

The playful talk of courtship is central to many comedies, where "wooing the consent of the other" (Kant's wonderful phrase) is the business at hand. But that consent is never acquiescence. Such wooing does not aim to deliver the knockdown arguments that lead the other to surrender, to accept fully my point of view. Rather, this playful talk strives to enable the other to fully manifest herself as other, just as I discover in our sparring a new joy in my own existence. The most satisfying comic endings feature the marriage of two minds—of Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado about Nothing* and Elizabeth and Darcy in

Pride and Prejudice—not the merger of two souls into one. Love that aims at the transformation of the loved one is probably doomed to failure. More importantly, it seems a perversion of the very nature of love, of the affirmation of and delight in the singularity, uniqueness, and difference of the loved one, to attempt to win her over to my way of viewing the world. The dialogic is precisely the collapse of solipsism, the discovery of how I am most truly myself when related to another who is not me. Nussbaum expands the link between conversation and the escape from solipsism (expressed in the epigraph to this chapter) to a meditation on the *public* character of conversation. The “general social conversation, the giving and receiving of justifications and reasons . . . require that we permit ourselves and our actions to be *seen*. These practices both express our concern for our fellow beings and bind them to us in a network of mutual concern.”⁵²

In public, in front of strangers, we expose ourselves to laughter, even scorn, but we also have to own our actions and our selves, have to articulate in conversation with others who we are and why we hold these values and have done these things. The transformed self—and transformed society—that can result from these interactions is what comedy enacts through laughter and talk, as contrasted to violence. Orlando in *As You Like It* has gotten the public part down when he tacks his love poems to the trees in the Forest of Arden. He is willing to declare his love to the world, and bear its laughter. Now Rosalind needs to teach him eloquence, how to find words that will express his feelings better than his awful poems. She initiates him into the pleasures of adult conversation, thus rendering him a fit spouse before she will marry him.

In both conversation and love the self (paradoxically) is undone and comes to a fuller realization of itself. *Bringing Up Baby* offers a great example of this double movement. Katharine Hepburn as the heroine of the movie is a pure principle of chaos. Her very presence undoes identity throughout the movie; people quite literally lose any sense of who they are when she is around. She proliferates possibilities, thereby demonstrating to the uptight Cary Grant an entirely new world. The movie’s ending is a perfect instance of ambivalent laughter. Grant has, finally, reconstructed the dinosaur skeleton, has brought order back into his world—and Hepburn, thrilled by his admission of love, brings the whole thing crashing down. With all

three—skeleton, Hepburn, and Grant—in a jumbled heap on the floor, she asks if he can forgive her. With a groan, he takes her in his arms and kisses her. He has embraced his newly found life, accepting that a lifetime of loving her means a lifetime of forgiving her, and the loss of control that comes from letting the other be other. Being truly immersed in a dialogue means not being able to dictate the lines, being continually brought up short by the surprising, delightful, infuriating, and simply foreign things the other says and does—and to being undone, remade, through that openness. Comedy tries to communicate how such immersion has the capacity to make us feel more alive, more fully called forth in this moment, than just about any other experience. Where liberal democracy highlights communication across lines of difference as the path to peace, comedy goes one further and identifies such dialogue as the path to delight.

Bringing Up Baby also reminds us of the centrality of forgiveness to comedy. Where tragedy is often connected to the implacable logic of revenge, comedy aims to break that cycle by forgiving the trespasses of others against us. *The Tempest* is the great Shakespearean comedy of forgiveness; its whole unfolding illustrates the opening line of the mysterious sonnet 94: "They that have power to hurt and will do none." Forgiveness is much like love in that neither can be commanded and both establish the affectional ties, the social glue, that underwrite social relations. For Hannah Arendt, as I have already noted, the promises that humans make to one another, promises embodied in marriage vows and constitutional bills of rights as well as elsewhere, create the terms of sociality by introducing stability into an uncertain world. But precisely because of contingency, of changes we cannot fully anticipate, promises are extravagant, always binding us to do more than (at least in some cases) we can actually deliver. Sociality, for Arendt, thus relies as heavily on forgiveness as on promises. To survive, human relationships must find a way to maintain themselves even when promises are broken. The dynamics of forgiveness are difficult, the temptations to revenge all too attractive, but located here is another of those critical junction points between violent schism and ongoing dialogic relations.⁵³ There has been a huge interest in forgiveness recently, partly because of the dysfunctional cycle of revenge under whose spell the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lumbers on, and partly because of the experience of "truth and reconciliation"

processes in the attempt to restore shattered social relations in "post-conflict" societies. The political relevance of forgiveness has never been more apparent, even as the inability to command or force forgiveness means it cannot be mandated.

Ambivalent laughter communicates affection for the other along with mockery and reproof, accompanied by acknowledgement of one's own fellowship with the other in human imperfection. Mercy, rather than strict justice, is the way to reconciliation, to the creation of the inclusive social order of the comic ending. And since mercy is, like love, never deserved, but rather something generously bestowed, it calls forth a reciprocal generosity of spirit. I always think of the words of the Van Morrison song in this context: "You'll meet them with love, peace, and persuasion / And expect them to rise to the occasion. / And it gratifies/When you see it materialize / Right in front of your eyes / By surprise" ("Glad Tidings"). In a similar vein, James takes up the "question concerning personal relations, states of mind between one man and another" in his essay "The Will to Believe": "*Do you like me or not?* . . . Whether you do or not depends, in countless instances, on whether I meet you halfway, am willing to assume that you must like me, and show you trust and expectation. The previous faith on my part in your liking's existence is in such cases what makes your liking come. But if I stand aloof and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence, until you have done something apt, . . . ten to one your liking never comes" (*WI*, 473). Fellow feeling is created by generosity, by mercy, by affectionate laughter, by acting the part of a fellow. Without taking the risk of being played for a fool, James says, we cannot produce the trust that is essential to a successful society: "A social organism of any sort whatever, large or small, is what it is because each member proceeds to his own duty with a trust that the other members will simultaneously do theirs. Wherever a desired result is achieved by the cooperation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the precursive faith in one another of those immediately involved" (*WI*, 473-74).

Much evidence points to the absence of that precursive faith in contemporary American society. I blame the overwhelming insecurity that afflicts the majority of our fellow citizens, who are a health care disaster away from bankruptcy, mired in troubling debts, and rightly fearful of losing their jobs. No wonder a "grab and hold" mentality

prevails. Facing an uncertain future, people must fight for everything they can secure in the present and view everyone and everything outside the family circle as threats. The search for scapegoats, for someone to blame for these precarious lives in which one fears for oneself and fears even more for one's children, is endless, moving from welfare queens to gays to terrorists to immigrants and to socialists. Playing by the rules no longer guarantees one the solid middle-class life our parents enjoyed, and our children look like they will be even worse off. An ethic of care, articulated by feminist philosophers,⁵⁴ still obtains in our families, but has apparently departed completely from the public square. To fill that gap there has been an upsurge in "service" work on campuses and in communities nationwide, as people respond to their felt need to somehow connect to their fellow citizens. This service ethos, as I have already discussed, is certainly welcome as an attempt to counteract the noticeable fraying of our public sphere. Churches and charitable organizations like Habitat for Humanity, along with sports clubs and community arts organizations, offer the only opportunities for satisfying nonfamilial, quasi-public interactions. But the studied apoliticism of "service" and of other community activities is also an indictment of the extent to which our politics has become the means by which the haves are appropriating an ever-larger share of the nation's wealth to themselves. Politics, which should be our collective creation of the world we want to inhabit together, has become dirtier than ever, the refuge of those who want to take from their fellows, and thus shunned by those who found their relations to others on giving.

America today is afflicted by what Robert Reich has called the "secession of the successful" and Christopher Lasch "the revolt of the elites." The public square has been emptied and the public treasury plundered by the most privileged, who have abdicated all responsibility for the general welfare while avoiding all participation in the commons. Reich argues that the conservative obsession with private morality—drug use, teenage pregnancies, homosexuality—has blinded us to their evisceration of "public morality," of laws and attitudes that safeguard against "abuses of power and authority" by those who possess them. Sky-high CEO salaries, unconnected to actual company performance and garnered in the face of large lay-offs, are just one symptom of a loss of shame and of scale, a disconnection from the