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The Idea of Comedy: History, Theory, Critique (review)

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(Review)

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For each of her six novelists, Walkowitz identifies a key perverse “tactic” that in separate chapters she skillfully explicates: Conrad uses “naturalness”; Joyce uses “triviality”; Woolf “evasion”; Ishiguro “treason”; Rushdie “mix-up”; and Sebald “vertigo.” In an especially subtle account of Ishiguro’s complexity, she locates him in a Jamesian tradition that finds “treason” synonymous with representation itself, with the refusal of the transparent and stable, and concludes that some of his characters learn that “fleeting moments may be more valuable, and more reliable, than permanent monuments. Committed to change but also to conflict, Ishiguro commits to treason . . . the willingness to test and change allegiances.” She considers this a “principle of critical cosmopolitanism and political transformation” (131–132). In conclusion, there are two caveats to this review: the inclusion of the native Woolf seems anomalous, given that immigrancy is the basic commonality of her cohort; and Walkowitz’s careful organization has, perhaps inevitably, the defect of its virtues in a too tidy, too tightly-controlled argument. But on the whole, this book is an impressive debut that imaginatively realigns and redefines those essentially contested terms: modernism and the cosmopolitan.

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The Idea of Comedy: History, Theory, Critique. By Jan Walsh Hokenson. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006. 287 pp. \$52.50.

This book intertwines stunning erudition, acute insight, and searching examination. Hokenson does not shy away from polemics, many of which are found even in the midst of its most painstaking scholarly portions. The reader will find herself learning something on virtually every page, and also reacting—most often with agreement, but also with disagreement. Perhaps even the book’s apparently innocuous title surprisingly proves to be provocative. The very *idea* of comedy, in this postmodern and even post-postmodern era (Hokenson calls the latter “transmodern”) tends to cause some amount of

incredulity. Yet she insists upon the term, employing Wittgenstein's doctrine of family resemblances as a way to gather the many and disparate strains.

The task she sets for herself could hardly be more ambitious: "to bring into panoptic view the wide landscape of comic theory as a terrain of thought extending from antique to contemporary conceptions" (14). Hokenson melds textual history, philosophical observation, and critical appraisal as she maps this terrain with both richness and subtlety. Every chapter could serve as an intriguing and substantial book synopsis on its own.

An outline of the history of comic theory from the classical to the modern period (which she dates to the mid-twentieth century) is presented in her first chapter. While one can find quarrels with her approach (for example, her literal reading of Plato's *Republic* on mimesis seems no longer sustainable, at least to me), the chapter charts what might be called a historico-topographic map. As such, it sets out the principal locations of comic theory, its major texts, their animating notions, and their temporal placement. A major component of her overarching view is the enormous influence of Aristotle's denigration of Aristophanes and "vulgar" comedy upon most subsequent comic theory.

Her second chapter, "The Dominant Modernist Conception of Comedy Premises and Elisions," observes that "the modernist dominant is highly theoretical, that is, it is much more interested in elaborating a global theory—edging into ideology—than in questioning its reach" (101). She explores the sources that culminate in her discernment of this conception, which conjoins incongruity with elements of the Freudian (and Jungian) unconscious. In light of this, she comments upon many influential texts that employ these elements.

"The Late Modernist Conception of Comedy: Premises and Elisions" is her third chapter. It begins by noting a peculiar omission in comic theory: "For centuries, no comic writer ever ignored medieval comic modes . . . but critical theorists and commentators surely did" (109). Many late modernist theorists resuscitated populist comic themes and, working on the premise of the opposition of the comic character to society, reinstalled some of the exuberance of Old Comedy. But these theorists elide the medieval Fool.

The next chapter, "Twin Modernist Elisions," responds directly to this omission of medieval texts and of the medieval Fool from comic theory, however. In splendid description and argument, Hokenson concludes that the latter cannot be captured by any of the modernist theories, then hastens to add, "I hold no brief for the fool, except as a wedge issue" (170). However, given the élan with which she describes him, it is my guess that this disclaimer only applies to Hokenson *the scholar*.

I doubt whether postmodernists would look kindly on the title of chapter 5, "The Interlude of Postmodernist Conceptions." While the modernists' difficulty lay in fitting a large number of texts into their global theories, Hokenson claims that the postmodernists "rarely seek to avoid [this problem] by discussion of large numbers of comic texts," opting instead to select a very few and only those that match their philosophical view (193). According to this view, only language holds sway, and there is no real "I" or "we." She sees these primarily French writers (Hokenson's first expertise is French language and literature) as "extreme refinements of the populist view," except that here theory itself is insurgent (204).

Her concluding sixth chapter, entitled "Comedy in Contemporary Thought," briefly treats promising recent developments that aim to provide a connection to comic texts that was lacking in postmodernism. Aesthetics returns again to comic theory, though hardly in traditional ways. In this chapter, she discusses various extensions of earlier theories, feminist theories, and theories that return to reason and system as a way to understand what belongs to comedy and the spectator's response to it.

Hokenson's epilogue credits contemporaries with beginning to restore unity to the splintering of comic theory by aiming toward "a critical canon," the members of which she calls "parts of a discursive whole" (265). This is hardly an uncontestable conclusion, but there is no doubt that any contestant would need to marshal much energy and spirit, as well as much learning and thought, to cross swords with Hokenson. I recommend laughing along with her instead.

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The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature. By Steven Pinker. London: Penguin Books, 2002. 528 pp. \$16.00.

Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate* has many virtues: its critique of radical scientists is cogent, even shocking; its differentiation between the reasonable