



DOCUMENT SERIES

Edited by Eric Bentley

Letter on TARTUFFE

Probably by Molière

W. G. Moore writes in Molière: A New Criticism (Doubleday Anchor): "... the most consistent theorist of le ridicule [mistranslated as ridicule in the Hill and Wang edition of Fernandez's Molière, and elsewhere—E.B.] is the most natural and the least regarded, Molière himself. This is not demonstrably so, because the dramatist did not sign his work, but after Monsieur R. Robert's rigorous analysis, I think we may assume that Molière inspired, even if he did not actually write, the Lettre sur l'Imposteur of 1667. "This pamphlet, in defense of a play [Tartuffe] which Molière was forced by public outcry to describe as an attack on vice, contains admirable definitions of the comic. Molière defines it as the shape or perceptible outline of whatever is unreasonable... He finds its essence to lie in disconvenance (incongruity)... " Monsieur Robert's analysis is to be found in his article: "Les Commentaires de première main sur les chefs-d'oeuvre de Molière," in Revue des Sciences Humaines, 1956. It is the final pages of the Lettre that I have chosen as a TDR Document. The rest of the Lettre, wholly taken up with the question of "vice," has interest only for the social historian. No cuts have been made in the section translated. The "Panulphe" of the Lettre is, of course, Tartuffe; The Impostor is Tartuffe.—E.B.

... And that, my dear sir, is the play that was forbidden; it may be that its poison is hidden in flowers, and that the eyes of certain powerful people are more refined than those of the crowd; if that is the case, it would seem that the religious persecutors of poor Panulphe should be charitable enough to point out the poison that others are swallowing because they do not recognize it; with this exception, I do not permit myself to judge such delicate matters; as you know, I fear being involved in an incident, and for this reason I shall simply mention to you two ideas that came to my mind, ideas that have perhaps been voiced by few people, and, since these ideas do not touch upon the root of the question,

they may be offered without disrespect to the judgment of legitimate powers.

The first bears upon a strange point of view about this comedy. Although certain people suppose or believe that nothing that is said or done in the play can have harmful effects (which is the point at issue), they nevertheless condemn it because it deals with religion, and they maintain the theatre is not a place for teaching religion.

They must be very angry with Molière, to be led so obviously astray; the desire to criticize and wound, having based its fight on such a miserable and ridiculous defense, can take refuge behind no feebler commonplace. Even though truth was presented with all the dignity that should surround it everywhere; even though minor and accidentally unfavorable results of portraying vice were foreseen and avoided; even though, to oppose the corruption of our time, precautions were taken, such as complete familiarity with the moral health of antiquity, solid veneration for religion, profound meditation on the nature of the soul, experience of many years, and a frightful amount of hard work—even though all this was done, people have still been capable of so horrible a mistake as forbidding a work that is the product of so many sound preparations, for the simple reason that religion has never before been discussed in a theatre, no matter how well, how worthily, how discreetly and usefully it is done. I confess to you that this feeling seems to me one of the most serious products of the corrupt time in which we live; it is by this principle of false benevolence that reason and truth are relegated to uncivilized, unvisited countries, that they are shut up in schools and churches where their powerful influence is almost useless because they are sought only by those who know and love them; it is as though their force and authority are doubted, since no one dares expose them to their enemies. But that is precisely where they should appear in order to triumph—in the least sacred places, in market-places, law-courts, palaces of the great; since reason and truth are what they are, strictly speaking, only when they convince people, when they sweep away the shadows of error and ignorance by their divine light. One might say that their essence lies in their action, that those places that most need their works are their natural dwellings, and that to incarcerate them with their admirers is, in one sense, to destroy them. But let us go further.

It is certain that religion is merely the perfection of reason applied to morality; that religion purifies morality, elevates it, and merely dissolves the shadows that original sin has spread over her dwelling-place; in short that religion is only perfected reason. To doubt that truth would plunge us into the most deplorable pagan blindness. That being so, and since even the philosophers most concerned with the senses never doubted

that nature gave us reason in order to guide us with her light; since reason is as present to our soul as our eye to our body, and since reason makes no favorites of person, place, or thing; who can doubt that the same is true for religion, that this light, divine and infinite in its very essence, must show its dazzling quality everywhere; just as God fills everything with Himself, and does not disdain to be as present in the most nefarious places as in the grandest and most sacred, so that the holy truths that He has vouchsafed to man can be proclaimed in every time and every place where there are ears to hear them and hearts graced to cherish them.

A truly Christian soul should be very far indeed from this unworthy caution and from cruel rules of decorum that seek to prevent us from working towards the moral health of our brothers wherever we can; charity should know no limits; all places and all times are suitable for her to do her good work; she is not concerned with her own outward dignity, when it is a question of her welfare, and indeed how could she be so concerned, since her welfare lies precisely in converting the wicked? She has to seek them out to struggle with them, and how can she find them except by seeking them in places unworthy of her?

Therefore she must not disdain appearing in these places, must not have so poor an opinion of herself as to think that she could be soiled by being humble. Such base considerations may motivate the nobles of this world, whose dignity is borrowed and relative, who should be seen only fully garbed and from a distance, so they can preserve their authority, fearing that if they are seen nude and close, their spots may be discerned, or their natural smallness; they greedily husband their weak sort of greatness, carefully choosing the days that best display it; they are very careful never to expose themselves in places which fail to make them appear exalted and perfect. That is good enough for them, but it is unthinkable that charity would dread these disadvantages, that this sovereign quality of Christians should fear to see her dignity diminished in any place that she chooses to appear. As the saying goes, before one accuses Cato of a vice, drunkenness will be made a virtue. One might say with far more cause that the most infamous places will be made worthy of the presence of this queen, rather than that her presence in these places could soil her worth in any way.

As a matter of fact, my dear sir (for do not believe that I am dealing in paradoxes), these unworthy places are made worthy by her; when it pleases her, she can convert a palace into a temple, a theatre into a sanctuary, and a place of debauchery and abomination into one of blessing and grace. There is nothing so profane that she cannot sanctify it, so corrupt that she cannot purify it, so evil that she cannot make it

righteous, nothing so extraordinary, unusual, or new that she cannot justify it. Such is the power of truth produced by this virtue, which lies at the root of all other virtues.

I know that there may be exceptions to the principle I am trying to establish, but I maintain that it is always true and constant, as long as we are merely talking as we are here. Religion has special times and places for sacrifices, ceremonies, and other mysteries; one cannot celebrate them elsewhere with impunity; but the truths that are produced by words belong to all times and all places; because speech is necessary in all times and all places, it is always more useful and healthy to employ speech in proclaiming truth and preaching virtue, rather than in any other way.

Antiquity has been wise in this respect as in all others; the pagans, who respected their religion no less than we do our own, had no fear of presenting it in their theatres; quite the contrary, knowing the importance of impressing it upon the people, they wisely believed that the best way to persuade the people of its truth was by enjoyable spectacles. It is for this reason that their gods so often appear on stage; and their dénouements (the most important part of the play) are almost always brought about by a god. All their plays are delightful teachings, proof of celestial clemency or justice towards men. I realize that I shall be told that our religion has a place for such teachings, whereas theirs did not; but apart from the fact that it is impossible to hear the truth too often or in too many places, one cannot doubt that the truth makes a greater impression by the agreeable way in which it is subtly revealed in the theatre than in the places where it appears in all its austerity.

For all these reasons, our forefathers (whose simplicity was as close to the Bible as our excessive refinement is distant), wishing to edify the people by means of their natural taste for spectacles, were the first to establish a drama showing the passion of the Savior, and other such pious subjects. And if, since those happy days, the moral corruption of our time has reached the theatre, making it as impious as it should be pious, and if we are lucky enough to be presented with that gift from Heaven, a genius who can restore moral health to the theatre, why do we prevent him, why do we not permit him to do what we should eagerly welcome if charity were in our hearts (not to mention our present crying need to denounce hypocrisy and espouse true piety)?

The second of my ideas bears upon an accidental if very important consequence of the presentation of *The Impostor*—an ineluctable consequence, which is simply that no ruder blow than this play has ever been struck against what is politely called gallantry; if any thing can safeguard marriages from the schemes of its corrupters, it is certainly this

comedy, because the most frequent and potent means of seducing women are ridiculed in so lively and forceful a manner that anyone who attempts them afterwards will appear ridiculous, and therefore cannot succeed.

Some people may find this suggestion strange, but I beg them to make no judgments until they have seen the play or at least spoken to those who have, for far from sufficing as proof of my claim, I doubt whether reading the play can give a complete idea about the effect of the performance. I know too that I shall be told that the vice in question, being the most natural of all, will never lack sufficient charm to conquer its ridiculousness through comedy. But I have two answers to this: first, that in the opinion of people who know the world, this sin is as universal as it can be, and secondly, that the reason for this, above all in the case of women, lies much more in the habits, liberty, and easy morals of our country than in any natural tendency, since of all civilized countries, none is less temperamentally inclined in this direction than France. And if that is so, I am convinced that the amount of ridicule in which the play clothes all the conversations and persuasions which form the natural prelude to gallantry in tête-à-tête (which is the dangerous kind), that the kind of mockery which the play fastens inseparably to these paths and ways of corruption, will be strong and powerful enough to dissuade three-quarters of the women from the attractions of the snare.

I can make you see this more clearly than the light of day whenever you like. In order to do this, I shall have to probe deeply into the question of the ridiculous, which is one of the most sublime working-materials of true morality, and since I cannot do that except at some length and by examining questions that are a little too theoretical for this letter, I do not think I should undertake it now. But it seems to me that I can see you complaining of my caution as far as you are concerned, and deploring that I do not disclose all my thoughts; I want you to be completely satisfied, and here is what you request.

Even though nature made us capable of knowing reason so that we might act accordingly, she realized that if she did not mark it plainly, enabling us to recognize it easily, our weakness and laziness might deprive us of the fruits of such a rare advantage; she therefore wished to give reason an easily recognizable external form. Generally that form lies in a cause for joy, a source of pleasure that our soul finds in every moral act. When this pleasure arises through reason, delight is awakened in our heart by the knowledge of truth and virtue; and when it comes from the sight of ignorance and error, in other words from the lack of reason, it is precisely through this feeling that we judge something ridiculous. And as reason awakens in the soul joy mixed with esteem, so the

ridiculous awakens joy mixed with scorn, because all knowledge of the soul must necessarily produce a feeling of esteem or scorn in the understanding, as it does an impulse of love or hate in the will.

The ridiculous is therefore the external form which Providence has attached to everything unreasonable, in order that we may recognize and avoid it. In order to recognize the ridiculous, one must notice the absence of reason thus revealed, and one must see, in turn, where reason resides. Basically, it is a matter of propriety, whose trademark is decorum, in other words, the famous *quod decet* of the ancients; so that decorum is to propriety what the Platonists say beauty is to goodness, that is, its flower, its outer covering, its body and external appearance. Decorum is apparent reason and propriety is essential reason. Thus, what is fitting is always based on some reason of propriety, as improper deeds on lack of propriety or in other words, the ridiculous is based on some failure of reason. Now if lack of propriety is the essence of the ridiculous, it is easy to see why the gallantry of Panulphe seems ridiculous, as well as hypocrisy in general, because the secret deeds of the bigots clash with their public image of pious grimace and austere speech.

But if this is not sufficient, the rest of the play gives the final proof of what I have been saying, for the bad impression that Panulphe makes there renders him so powerfully and clearly ridiculous that the least intelligent spectator is fully convinced of it. According to my analysis, the cause of this is that we judge ridiculous whatever is lacking in reason. Now when certain methods produce a completely unexpected result, we assume rightly that very little reason was used in selecting these methods, for the general opinion is that there are all kinds of means to an end, and that when one fails, it is because it is not good. Thus, since we see that Panulphe does not seduce the lady, we conclude that lack of propriety does not lead him to his goal, and that consequently it is ridiculous to act in such a way.

Not only is Panulphe's gallantry out of keeping with his obvious humiliation, failing in what it sets out to achieve, and thus making him ridiculous, but both gallantry and humiliation are extreme, making the worst possible impression, and this makes him extremely ridiculous, as was necessary to bring about the result that I claim.

You will say that I have convinced you that Panulphe's reasoning and conduct seem ridiculous, but it does not therefore follow that they would be so in another person; because I have established the ridiculous as something relative, a lack of propriety, the reasons by which Panulphe's actions are unsuitable for him would not hold for a man of the world who was not professionally devout, and who, therefore, would not be as ridiculous as Panulphe.

I answer that the extremely ridiculous in Panulphe's actions will be reflected each time the spectator sees them, even if somewhat diminished in another subject than Panulphe. The soul, which naturally seeks joy, will be delighted at seeing something already recognized as ridiculous, and at recalling that first enjoyable scene; in this state, the soul cannot distinguish between the person who is performing these ridiculous acts and the one it first saw perform them. I mean that a woman subjected to the same blandishments Panulphe used cannot help first finding them ridiculous, and she will be far from reflecting upon the difference between Panulphe and the man who is addressing her, will be far from reasoning about that difference as she would have to do, in order not to find these blandishments as ridiculous as she thought them when she heard them from Panulphe.

The reason is that the normal working of our imagination, which is the natural receptacle of the ridiculous, links that quality more closely with what it first sees concretely (such as the words and deeds of Panulphe), than with any subsequent evidence. First we are struck with the memory of that first time (if it has made a strong impression) which is then blended inopportunately with the present occasion, sharing its spirit because of the pleasure it gives, fusing the two times into one, and then memory carries into the second time everything that charmed and delighted us in the first—which is nothing more than the ridiculous element.

No one who has studied the nature of the soul and its moral workings will be surprised by the way in which it acts irregularly, attributing to one occasion what has actually taken place on another, and yet this is a necessary result of the violent and strong impression that was made at first, so that it recognizes and forms opinions through the resemblance of a situation to what has happened before, and which first struck the senses.

This is so true, and the power of caution is such, that I think I can prove what I claim simply by pointing out to you that the reasoning of Panulphe (which is his way of attaining his goal) becomes ridiculous for anyone who has seen the play, and therefore bad in the manner I have shown. Thus, any woman to whom one offers such reasoning, will render it useless by resisting it, through the warning of the play that such reasoning is useless in itself.

And if it is argued, in spite of everything I have said, that the soul returns to itself after the first moment of response to the ridiculous image, and that it does distinguish between the subjects, at least you will grant me that this return does not happen at once, but that it takes time

to get rid of that first impression and that for at least a few instants, something that seemed most ridiculous in another place will still seem so, even if it actually is not so in this place.

Now these few instants are of great importance in such matters, and have almost as much effect as a long duration, because these instants interrupt the sequence of passion, and the free flow of the imagination which must dominate the soul from the beginning to the end of an amorous undertaking in order for it to succeed; and further, because the feeling of ridicule,¹ being the coldest of all, deadens and absolutely extinguishes that agreeable emotion and that sweet warmth which must move the heart on such occasions. It is evident that ridicule is the coldest of all feelings, since it is a pure act of judgment that is agreeable and playful, whereas nothing is more serious than passion. Thus, a passionate feeling of amorous pleasure is opposed by nothing so much as the mental pleasure that springs from ridicule.

If I were seeking to philosophize, I could tell you, in order to completely convince you of the importance of the first few instants in questions of ridicule, that the strong attachment of the soul to whatever gives it pleasure (such as the ridiculous quality of certain acts) does not admit reasoning that will deprive it of that pleasure, and consequently the soul is naturally reluctant to stop considering as ridiculous whatever it has already so considered. It is perhaps for this reason that it often happens that we cannot treat certain things seriously, once we have seen their ridiculous side or even merely their link with something we consider ridiculous and that has delighted us—all the more reason for that first impression to leave its mark on occasions as serious as the one under discussion. As I have just indicated, these are not laughing matters, since there is nothing more serious than this sort of undertaking; and I should like to repeat, since it is most important to my argument, that nothing is harmed more by the slightest suggestion of the ridiculous, as experts can testify; and all this because the feeling of the ridiculous is the most shocking, disheartening, and odious of feelings.

And if it is usually disagreeable, it is all the more so for an amorous man, which is the subject of our discussion. There are few honest people who are not convinced of this truth by experience, and therefore it is very simple to prove it. Just as nothing pleases us so much as to see a passionate feeling in someone else (and this may be the greatest principle of true rhetoric) similarly, nothing displeases us so much as the coldness and apathy that accompanies ridicule, above all in a person whom one loves. It is preferable to be hated by that person, since a strong feeling

¹ Apprising or recognizing the ridiculous in an act or person.—*Translator's note.*

of any kind shows that you can move her, that she is thinking of you, and that she is glad that you love her, rather than not moving her at all, being a matter of indifference for her, and even more, being contemptible for any reason whatever—that is like being a complete zero to her when she is all your world. Therefore if a man has any courage at all, or any way still open to freedom and reason, the least sign of being ridiculous will cure him completely, or at least will disturb him, and as a result he will no longer desire to seduce a woman this time, and she will be safe from him, which is the point of my argument.

But even if the woman's first reaction of ridicule to Panulphe's reasoning in the mouth of a man of the world disappears after her reflection on the difference between Panulphe and the man in question, even if that happens, the first impression will not completely cease to have the effect I claim for it, as I have proved. It is false that it disappears entirely, for not only do such reasons seem ridiculous, as I have shown, but they are indeed ridiculous in anybody's mouth, even if not quite so ridiculous as in Panulphe's. If the ridiculous resides in a lack of propriety,² it follows that the ridiculous resides in every lie, disguise, deceit, dissimulation, appearance that clashes with its basis, and every contradiction between act and principle. Now all the gallant gentlemen who use the same arguments as Panulphe are deceivers and hypocrites like him, for none of them would care to admit in public the feelings that he declares in private to a woman he wants to seduce, for that would mean that there is no clash between feelings revealed in tête-à-tête and those publicly admitted, and therefore there would be no impropriety, and no instance of the ridiculous; for the root of all this is what I have already established, namely that Providence has caused everything evil to be somewhat ridiculous, in order that we mend our ways through this evidence of lack of reason, and that our natural pride be stung by the scorn that this lack inspires when one sees it as one does through ridicule. And thence arises the extreme power of ridicule on the human spirit, and from that power comes the result I claim. For awareness of a lack of reason that makes us look ridiculous necessarily makes us scorn the cause, since we believe that reason should regulate everything. Now this scorn is relative, and depends, like any kind of pride, upon our feeling of superiority to the person whom we ridicule. When we see a ridiculous act, our awareness of the ridiculous in that act raises us above the person who commits it, first because nobody acts with conscious lack of reason, and we assume that the man who acts in this way, not knowing it is unreasonable, thinks it reasonable; therefore he is in error and ignorance, which we naturally

² *Convenance* is used here, and it means "inner bad manners," the principle which gives rise to the act.—*Translator's note.*

consider a bad state; moreover, since we recognize his error, we are exempt from it by that very recognition; therefore we are more enlightened, more perfect, in short superior to him. Now this awareness of being superior to someone else is very agreeable, so that the scorn that accompanies this awareness is mixed with joy; this combination of joy and scorn excites ridicule in those who feel it, and since these two feelings are based on the two oldest and most fundamental human weaknesses, pride and pleasure at the faults of others, it is not strange that the feeling of ridicule is so strong, and that it delights the soul; the soul, rightly doubting its own excellence ever since the original sin, seeks avidly to convince both others and itself of that excellence through advantageous comparisons, that is, through consideration of the faults of others.

As a last objection, do not tell me that these feelings that I attribute to people and on which I base my reasoning in this whole discourse, are not as I say, for it is clear only on certain occasions whether or not one possesses them, and not even then is one aware of having them. But people behave as though they have these feelings, and I have described the natural and usual actions of the soul that is not aware of most of its own movements, that rarely notices its own action, and that cannot be understood unless analyzed in this way by the light and power of reason.

And that, my dear sir, is my evidence. It is not for me to say whether it is right, but if it is, the matter is extremely important, and if remedies for incurable illnesses are to be all the more highly esteemed, you must admit that this comedy is an excellent thing in this context, since all other injunctions against gallantry are completely useless. Indeed, preachers thunder, confessors exhort, ministers menace, good souls tremble, relatives, husbands, and teachers keep incessant watch, making continual efforts as great as they are useless, to stem the impure tides that are ravaging France; but one cuts an unusual figure in the world if one does not indulge, and some people glory as much in loving incontinence as others do in drawing back from it. This disorder arises quite simply from the impious opinion of most modern men of the world that sin is a matter of moral indifference, and that religion contradicts natural reason. How can one combat this opinion more powerfully than by uncovering the natural turpitude of these low attachments, and by showing in a natural light, like this comedy, that this passion is not only sinful, unjust, and unreasonable, but that it is so to a very great degree, since it makes one look ridiculous? And there, my dear sir, are the dangerous warnings present in *The Impostor*. I will say no more; the thing speaks for itself.

I am doing a great disservice to Molière, although I do not intend to,

since I am winning for him the enmity of all the gallants of Paris, who are neither the least enlightened nor the least powerful people, but he has only himself to blame. This would not have happened, if he had followed in the footsteps of the first comic writers and the moderns who preceded him, and had censored his own works in an impudent, indiscreet, and uncontrolled fashion, with no attention to the habits of the time; instead of that, he has acted for virtue and truth, flouting the laws of custom and the fashion of society, attacking to the end its dearest sayings and its frankest privileges.

And there, my dear sir, is what you wished of me. Please do not believe that I have any personal interest in this whole story, and do not think that my effort to please you arises from any premeditated opinion; I have been speaking on assumptions of my own, just in order to entertain you a little longer, according to your wish. With that in mind, I do not care who is right, for although this affair has a certain importance, there are many others of the same kind treated as *trivia*, or solved by the wrong principles. Not being strong enough to oppose the bad examples of our time, I am growing accustomed, thank God, to laughing like everybody else, and to viewing everything that happens in the world as a series of scenes of comedy played by men on earth. I am,
dear sir,

Yours, etc.

August 20, 1667.

Translated by RUBY COHN