

MY LIFE AS A JOKE: COMIC AUSTRALIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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In the television guide earlier this year I found the following description of a film: 'An unhappily married couple try to kill each other. 1987 comedy'. Obviously content is no criterion for judging what is comic. Nevertheless, at first squint comic autobiography may seem oxymoronic. Life, unlike comedy, does not end in marriage (despite what some wits might say) but, like tragedy, it does end in death. Comedy may also seem antipathetic to autobiography, since it is peopled by knaves, fools, gulls, dupes, rogues, tricksters, cuckolds, dandies, transvestites, indistinguishable twins and the two-dimensional. All this, we think wistfully, is not life.

This is why I'm interested in comic autobiography. Recent theories of autobiography have generally been anti-realist in stance. This stems from, in the main, a suspicion of narrative. Narrative and daily life, it is believed, are inimical. Adding the mode of comedy only seems to make it all the more suspect. Or, as a character in the comic autobiography of the Welsh writer Gwyn Thomas puts it, 'Anybody preoccupied with the thought of laughter is bound to end up as a corrupt sort of bastard' (129). This problem of anti-realism lurks behind many theories of comedy, such as that of Jonathan Miller (an ex-comedian) which proposes that comedy 'involves the rehearsal of alternative categories and classifications of the world' (11), that it is a 'sabbatical let out...to put things up for grabs' (12). If this is so, it would seem that autobiography would be hard pressed to be thematically comic.

Having argued in *Artful Histories* that autobiography cannot simply be ignored as 'fiction' (while not presenting it as unproblematic 'fact'), the idea of comic autobiography is therefore theoretically intriguing. Perhaps I too have been suspicious of comedy's (apparent) factitious status. Part of the problem stems from the implicit sense that comic autobiography may be proposing that *life* is essentially comic. But such a path leads into the trap of seeing autobiography not as a narrative account of a life at a certain point in that life, but as taking the place of that life. Autobiography, I believe, is a formal account of what I have called one's narrative life, that is, the struggle to form a more or less coherent narrative of one's past.

My three examples—Robin Eakin's *Aunts up the Cross*, Clive James's *Unreliable Memoirs* and Barry Humphries' *More Please*—demonstrate something beyond the plethora of anecdotal comedy in autobiography and allow us to consider not only tonal comedy (satire and so forth) but also the relationship between comic form and autobiography. The three subjects have a number of connections: all are expatriates, intensely interested in class, and in some way theatrical.

Aunts up the Cross is an autobiography of childhood ending with Eakin's

departure to England (where she became a successful theatrical agent). The main interest is the autobiographer's family. The Kings Cross family house is large and open to all-comers, eccentric family members (most notably Great Aunt Juliet and the author's maternal grandmother) and servants.

The comedy is based on schisms. Her mother Jewish, her father Protestant, Eakin's great aunts (those adverted to in the title) are, with one exception, absent. After marrying her father, Eakin's mother never speaks to her aunts again: 'The official reason given was that she had married outside her religion, but I think old animosities had fastened on any excuse'. Comedy defuses sectarianism. On marrying a Jew Eakin's paternal grandmother is reported to have said: "I don't care if you marry a Negress as long as she isn't a Catholic". Eakin adds that her own parents-in-law didn't speak to her for sectarian reasons until a year after her daughter's birth (13). *Aunts up the Cross* reinstates the social through comedy.

The comedy here is episodic, theatrical and often relies on repetition. It begins oxymoronically with a comic death: Great Aunt Juliet running into a bus. Comedy and tragedy have of course always had a de facto relationship. Here, the interest in the comic potential of death merges with other forms of humour, such as the linguistic. The mezzanine full of photographs of dead relatives is called the mausoleum. Death (especially within the family) is rendered into fairy tale and becomes notably farcical in the adventure of the illicit war-time pig-killing (reminiscent of Alan Bennett's *A Private Function*). Almost inevitably, the pig (when finally seen) 'had wispy grey hair, long enough to plait. He was obviously, prior to death, a very old pig' (87). The pig, being hacked apart in the kitchen, is also an affront to Eakin's Jewish grandmother.

Lack of privacy is a necessary ingredient of farce, and there is a notable lack in Eakin's house. This and the interest in death merges when the mother kills the plumber. Emerging naked on her way to the bath her mother meets the plumber (a new one) on the landing: 'He promptly had a heart attack from which he never recovered. My mother always felt that the fact that death was not instantaneous detracted from the impact of her nudity and the dramatic possibilities of the story' (37).

This emphasis on the physical is also an important aspect of farce and is present in all three autobiographies. For instance, Eakin's doctor father shoots himself in the knee while fiddling around with a gun and listening to a hypochondriac patient: 'Upstairs my mother's guests exclaimed at the noise, but my mother assured them, "Don't worry. The doctor's probably shot himself"' (71).

The dialectic here is between the comic and anti-comic; between the family and familial discord; between liveliness and death. Nevertheless, whilst the work is consistently comic it ends elegiacally, as if the comic tone cannot ultimately be sustained. The grandmother dies after outliving her family, the house is finally sold and Kings Cross becomes the charming area we know today: 'as a final gesture to conformity, the tree has been uprooted from the Cross' (104), writes Eakin.

Clive James's *Unreliable Memoirs* is notable for its reliance on the mock-heroic for laughs. Don Anderson seems troubled by this. Taking as his starting point the belief that it is written for 'an English readership, who are invited to see Australia as amusing exotica' (340) he goes on to ask 'must antipodean autobiography be hyperbolic?' (341). Does the mock-heroic 'fill vacancy, doubt, absence? Is it a rhetorical cultural cringe..?' (342). Presumably litotes, of which Eakin is fond, seems less cringing.

Certainly, *Unreliable Memoirs* is hyperbolic. Schoolyard 'brawls looked like the battle of Thermopylae' (32); the rush hour during James's brief period as a bus conductor is 'Dantesque' (158); and on telling his mother he was leaving for England she 'reacted as Dido might have done if Aeneas had sent a barber-shop quartet to tell her that he had decided to leave Carthage' (166). Not all of it is mock-heroic, either: kitchen duty whilst on National Service requires James to clean dioxies (something Humphries also mentions), the smallest of which are 'four feet long' and the biggest 'the size of a Bessemer converter and mounted on gimbals. I was lowered into it on a rope' (146-47).

This we are not expected to take literally; hyperbole is a standard of comedy but it upsets the tradition of soberly-written autobiographies. Certainly, the upsetting of autobiographical conventions is a central part of James's comic technique. The work's beginning is Chestertonian: 'Most first novels are disguised autobiographies. This autobiography is a disguised novel' (9). In the second volume of his confessions, *Falling Towards England*, he writes disingenuously: 'If I had asked to have my confession heard he would no doubt have granted that wish also, but whether from a Protestant upbringing or an innate suspicion of my own theatricality I have never been able to believe in that particular method of purging a sin' (77).

'Bounders are capital fellows' writes Evelyn Waugh in *Decline and Fall* and *Unreliable Memoirs* is an extended gloss on this joke. James's persona within the book is that of the joker as defined by T. G. A. Nelson; he has a gift for fantasy, inventiveness, humour, cheerful audacity and trickery (91) as well as a histrionic talent and a gift for lying (98). The narrator, however, is more of a fool which implies wisdom, since the fool knows he is a fool. By being one he shows up the folly in others (including his past self). The distinction is one of the most traditional of autobiographical tropes – self knowledge. (Keeping in mind Plato's observation that ignorance of the self is the true character of the comic).

Both these comic personae (fool and trickster) rely on self-deprecation (hence Anderson's charge of 'cultural cringe?'), but this is both a traditional comic and autobiographical trope. One thinks of Sir Philip Sidney's description of comedy as 'an imitation of the common errors of our life'; or much later Wells's observation that 'we all have shortcomings...any creative writer's life story will be a comedy' (22). James is highly aware of the self-serving nature of such self-deprecation as when he writes in *Falling Towards England*, 'But whereas it is simply good manners to make a story about one's ordinary human failings as entertaining as possible, one's extraordinary human failings require less self-indulgent treatment' (67).

Comedy, then, is to some extent an indulgence, to some extent a method of avoiding some of the potential indulgences of confession.

James's role as fool or trickster is complicated by his attitude towards his mother. The story is not simply the education of a talented young man, but also a dramatization of a sense of guilt, of not being supportive enough for his mother, widowed by the war. The mother's story literally punctuates James's own. After no news for years, at the end of the war she discovers that her husband is alive. Some letters are exchanged. Waiting for his return she is told that his plane had crashed and all aboard had died. James writes:

At the age of five I was seeing the full force of human despair...I understood nothing beyond the fact that I could not help. I think that I was marked for life. I know that until very recent years I was never quite all there—that I was play-acting instead of living and that nothing except my own unrelenting fever of self-consciousness seemed real. Eventually, in my middle thirties, I got a grip on myself (23).

Once again, the elegiac intrudes into the comic (as it does again at the end of the trilogy). However, this sense of play-acting—of playing the fool—is also presented as his means of surviving not just grief but also school and life generally.

One can perhaps see Anderson's point, since everything James does seems to be a mistake—with the exception of leaving Australia. However, this is also a comic ending in structural terms. On sailing out of Sydney harbour he writes: 'Passing between the Heads was like being born again' (168). At the same time, writing in London nearly aged 40, he says that his memories of Sydney 'taste like happiness' (173), a rare sensation to which we will come back.

Inevitably comparisons are to be made between James and Barry Humphries, creator of so many of Australia's sacred monster. Despite the similarities, it remains doubtful that Humphries could unequivocally say (as James does) 'the desire to amuse overcame the desire to shock' (155). Given the choice between knave and fool, Humphries chooses both.

Indeed, one of the main distinguishing features of *More Please* is its interest in shock and revenge. Humphries takes revenge on individuals, his school, his class and, finally, Australia. This is observable in the disturbingly bland presentation of Australia as sectarian, xenophobic, anti-semitic, and generally racist and sexist. Notably, these comic autobiographers seem more predisposed to revealing the sectarian nature of Australia a few decades ago. Comedy appears to give licence in a way similar to the licence given to the court fool to speak unpalatable truths.

The need for revenge finds 'pre-emptive' expression in Humphries' well-known desire to shock. 'I suppose it gave a schoolboy, who was in fact completely powerless, the illusion of power' (94). This need to shock is apotheosized in Humphries' well-known Dadaist 'jokes' which he inflicted on unsuspecting people in public places. For instance, his trick of spilling Russian Salad, which 'resembled

human vomit', onto a pavement in the city and eating it with a spoon whilst dressed as a tramp: '...I devoured several mouthfuls, noticing out of the corner of my eye, and with some satisfaction, several people actually being sick at the spectacle' (118). This 'satisfaction' shows, as Clive James has noted in *Snakecharmers in Texas*, that Humphries' revenge or need to shock is pathological and out of proportion to any alleged crime. The irony of Humphries being the caretaker of the Australian vernacular, is that he is that most un-Australian thing: a dandy (this paradox is at the heart of Jack Hibberd's satirical piece, 'Breakfast at the Windsor'). *More Please* demonstrates that Humphries sees these aspects as emanating from urban and particularly, suburban Australia; and that those things satirized are the simultaneously superficial and definitional aspects of Australian society. As this suggests, Humphries and *More Please* are a strange combination of the dandified and the vulgar (perhaps the two always go together).

However, it would be too simple to say that Humphries simply demonizes his past, that Dame Edna merely represents his mother as the monstrous in Australia. *More Please* demonstrates the ambivalence inherent in his humour. In particular, it further illustrates that satire and nostalgia go together in much of Humphries' work. And, in its benign form, nostalgia is a form of comedy.

The connection between nostalgia and comedy relies upon Humphries' well-known ear for nuance: for example, his father 'built houses in all the popular styles; mock Tudor, Spanish mission, neo-Georgian, Californian bungalow and moderne', or if the client was especially rich and daring 'jazz moderne' (17). As with his revue work, the catalogue is central: 'Soaped and scented with Cashmere Bouquet, Potter & Moore, Rexona, Cuticura, Pears, Palmolive and Faulding's Old English Lavender, the women's bouquet of aromas was modified by a medicated whiff of Lifebuoy from the menfolk' (41). (This, incidentally, perhaps gives an insight into why John Betjeman was so enamoured with Humphries.)

Like James and Eakin, Humphries finds solace in theatricality; especially spontaneous impersonation, such as his impersonation of Lord Snowden's mother while calling Lord Snowden outside the restaurant Humphries had been ejected from for dropping his pants (another of his impractical jokes) (258-59) (you'll have to read the book to work that one out). Like my other examples, Humphries marries the most visceral of humour with an interest in linguistic humour. His early incarnations of Edna, he states, are successful because of the novelty for Australian audiences to hear the vernacular (152).

The work ends with an epiphanic (and comic) moment twenty years previously when Humphries had finally given up the drink. Sitting in the doorway of a shop in Lower Regent Street he is convinced that he is having some kind of heart-attack. However, 'with a rush of joy I found at last the label to my strange and alarming condition. I realized I was happy' (315-16). 'Nothing is funnier than unhappiness' Beckett writes in *Endgame* (20), so it is apposite that a comic autobiography should terminate at this point. But that is not to suggest that happiness is terminal. Wordsworth writes in *The Prelude* 'But in the very world, which is the world | Of all of us—the place where, in the end, | We find our

happiness or not at all' (*The Prelude*, XI 142-44). This is not a million miles from Beckett and it suggests something of the secular role of comedy, of coming to terms with the world, rather than striving after the transcendental.

Humphries' *scène à faire* no doubt seems factitious to some, but is it any less so than Patrick White's auto-deathbed scene in *Flaws in the Glass*? Comic autobiography perhaps best illustrates that we need not necessarily figure our narrative lives as tragic. They suggest the social aspect of telling ourselves stories, and they also demonstrate that there is not one autobiographical tone. Comic autobiography need not be given any special dispensation in the way the Queen is said to be given honorary male status in some official situations. The comic perspective is, as these three examples show, one which is worked for, just as any other narrative life is worked for.

As I have argued elsewhere, autobiography is always the story of others. Characterized thus the relationship between autobiography and comedy may be less problematic. Comedy taken in its positive forms is a lively genre and episodic (that is, unlike tragedy, which exhausts a whole life). This social nature of comedy is a recurring theme in theories of comedy, even twentieth-century theories which have so often been occasioned by interest in the scornful. For instance, R. B. Heilman's *The Ways of the World* argues traditionally that comedy is an acknowledgment of the nature of life in the 'immediate world' (31); it allows concessions to others and curbs aggression (32). The mode is one of 'coming to terms with reality' (33).

As we have seen though, comedy is not wholly concerned with the social, as the so-called 'incongruity' and 'superiority' theories suggest. As is the way with comedy, then, there is a deal of ambivalence, as seen in James's self-subversion and Humphries' mixture of nostalgia and revenge. It is this ambivalence of James and Humphries which may make their comic facility seem difficult. Who else would write in the same book 'In many respects Rilke was a prick' and also 'Everything is a Madeleine' (56) (evoking Proust)? Is James an aesthete with a healthy dose of scepticism, or a sceptic with a healthy dose of aestheticism? What these expatriate comic autobiographers suggest need not necessarily be 'comic cultural subservience', as Bruce Bennett sees James and Humphries examples of (440), but rather an attraction to both the subversive as well as the harmonious aspects of comedy. That is, to admit into the struggle for the narrative life the struggle to see narrative as more than solely tragic.

Of course, we can never be totally at ease with, or certain about, the theatrical quality of life. As the histrionic James writes in his third volume of unreliable memoirs, 'I was a long time, by now stretching to a lifetime, in grasping how reality has a texture to which histrionics are an inadequate response' (247). The comic response, then, is a deeply ambivalent, though we might add, necessary one. It is in fact necessary in Jonathan Miller's terms: in the shifting perspective of the past, present and future, one's narrative life, funnily enough, is always up for grabs.

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