

Light As A Hummer:***Associations on Comedy, Contra-Gravity and The World Turned Upside Down***

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Many years ago when I was a child, I asked my mother what my first word had been.

“Up!” she replied.

Flash-cut to middle-age and a recent stroll to my café, where of a weekend morning, I often share a leavening laugh among compatriots to counteract the gravitational vicissitudes of middle-age. Just as I was about to open the door, a flash of lights caught my eye. Then came the sirens. Something was definitely up a few blocks south on 9th Avenue. Adrenaline rush. Instead of sitting down, I grabbed a coffee to go, blew a kiss through the window to my mystified friends and walked doubletime toward the commotion. By the time I arrived, the scene consisted of four police cars, two EMS vans and a taxicab arrayed about an intersection. At the center of this vehicular galaxy, a huge black Lincoln Navigator lay on its back – well, roof.

Immediately my thoughts flew toward the catastrophic. Copious quantities of broken glass lay strewn on the macadam. Yet despite all appearances, this dramatic overturning caused neither fatalities nor serious injuries. By some extraordinary good fortune, the occupants of the SUV had emerged nearly unscathed from what might easily have been their last Sunday drive. The Navigator’s pilot, a policeman told me, had run a red light going west, then slammed on his brakes and swerved to avoid hitting a cab. The Navigator dinged the taxi, flipped over twice and came to rest, wheels in the air. Positioned thus, it looked for all the world, like an immense primeval tortoise, upended then left for inedible by a now-vanished predator. The near

perfection of this image and its irony could only have been sharpened if the inverted car had been a Hummer.

As I took in the spectacle, I found myself filled with a rare levity. Partly this arose with a rush of relief that an event with potentially tragic consequences had taken an unexpected turn toward slapstick comedy. Laughable as well to witness so deluxe a symbol of automotive power reduced to something helpless and absurd. But on later reflection, I realized the scene had scratched two of my separate, but closely associated, primal itches. What a thrill to see gravity transgressed and the order of the world turned upside down! It occurred to me that the desire to witness, and at times experience, weightless flight and inversion is both deep and widespread. Over time we have developed a cultural vocabulary to make whimsical the pull of gravity and mock established order. In doing so we have constructed, or discovered, two central elements of comedy.

When we are still babies, we achieve a stage at which we love to drop things. Over and over we grasp an object and simply release it. That the object falls is inconsequential – the joy lies in the letting go. Later, we learn to take pleasure in the effect our action has produced. For a brief moment in our lives we feel very powerful indeed. Certain little ones also particularly delight in upending their bowls. Some do it indefatigably. My experience with my daughter and other infants tells me that they love to be held by the ankles and dangled gently upside down. The inversion of the world, at this stage, is doubtless a wonderful thing. Exhilaration without consequences.

As we grow older and more conscious of where gravity ultimately leads, and as social life binds us within a matrix of proscriptions, the desire to challenge these

constraining forces remains viscerally alive within us, however we may sublimate or repress it. Evidence lies in the unconscious: since ancient times we've dreamt of flying. The actuality of airplane flight has not dethroned, or denatured the dream. And somehow too, disorder always results from our attempts to impose, individually or politically, too tight a system of control. What follows then is a loosely-tethered series of observations on the persistence and evolution of the themes of contra-gravity and inversion.

Psalm 146:9 affirms that "The Lord preserveth the strangers; he relieveth the fatherless and the widow: but the way of the wicked he turneth upside down." For his part, Isaiah (xxiv:1-2, 20-21) predicts the Lord will: "...maketh the earth...waste, and turneth it upside down...And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the servant, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress...The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard, and shall be removed like a cottage...The Lord shall punish the host of the high ones...and the kings of the earth upon the earth."

This fusion of social and spiritual overturning became a suppressed, yet resurgent theme among dissident Christians throughout the middle ages. It achieved a final flowering in mid-17th Century England in the years immediately after the overthrow of Charles I. Numerous revolutionary groups – Ranters, Diggers, Levellers and radical Protestant sects such as the Quakers – all thought the world ought to be turned upside down, for "Paul was so charged, viz. to bring things back to their primitive and right order again." (W. Penn, Preface to George Fox's *Journal*, I, p. xxxiv).

Though it was not turned upside down, the house of Mary, mother of Christ, was certainly "removed like a cottage." In a mini-genre of late-medieval painting it is depicted sailing through the air, the heavy lifting done by a flight of angels, replete with

gorgeous wings. Behind the paintings lies a legend that the house (shown more as a Gothic chapel than a humble cottage) was divinely “translated” from Nazareth in 1291, to save it from destruction or desecration by Saracen hordes. After a short layover in Dalmatia (for refueling?) it settled in the town of Loreto on Italy’s Adriatic coast.

Such images form link in a chain that concatenates the miraculous, fantastical and comedic. One need only sing “Somewhere over the rainbow” to leap epochs into a clapboard house, torn from its gray prairie and whirled through the heavens to land in a technicolor surround that surely “isn’t Kansas anymore.” Frank L. Baum, who wrote the book on which the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz* was based, subscribed neither to mysticism nor Catholic propaganda. He was a confirmed socialist writing fantasy for a scientific era. So rather than the hand of God, it took a natural event (supernaturalized) to send Dorothy’s house flying. Baum’s message is one of demystification: To escape the false-utopia of Oz and return to where we belong, we must to “follow our hearts’ desire.” Paradise lies “right in our own backyard.”¹

As for the world turned upside down, we have inherited a rich legacy from the European peasant culture of the Middle Ages.² A recurring stream of subversive iconography – one which survives today in cartoons and folk art – knocks Adam off the pinnacle of creation and inverts the supposed natural order. In this topsy-turvy world,

¹ The word “Utopia” means “nowhere” or “noplac,” as in *noplac like home*. It is generally meant to signify “good place” via a confusion of its first syllable with the Greek *eu* (*euphemism* or *eulogy*). Samuel Butler’s 1872 novel *Erewhon* (an almost-backward anagram for “nowhere”) still makes a mind-bending read.

² The most seductive and enduring manifestation of this material is the Land of Cockaigne, an upside down world of instant gratification and limitless abundance. In Cockaigne, roasted, self-regenerating pigs walk about with knives sheathed in their flanks, inviting the hungry to help themselves to a slice; people drink from rivers of mulled wine; whomever sleeps longest gets paid most – in short, a full inversion of Protestant values. A useful book is Herman Pleij’s *Dreaming of Cockaigne: Medieval Fantasies of the Perfect Life*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. Peter Breughel’s 1556 painting *The Land of Cockaigne*, evokes a distilled image of the myth.

sheep roast spitted human hunters, fish cast their lines to hook swimming men and horses gallop about on knight-back.

Until fairly recently, less urbanized parts of Europe celebrated holidays which temporarily upended the social pyramid: once a year the town fathers ceded political power to women; in one variant, the keys to the city were handed over to a company of fools. In twentieth century popular culture, inversions of both social and natural arrangements grew more common than one could shake a stick at. From the 1930s on, in a score or more of Warner Brothers cartoon shorts, Bugs Bunny ensnared and otherwise confounded his would-be predator, the ridiculous petit-bourgeois sports hunter Elmer Fudd. The combined live-action and animated feature *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1987), brought human and “toon” cultures into a hallucinogenic mélange in which it was impossible to maintain a straight face, or discern who, if anyone, could claim to be on top.

In the 1960s, of course, everybody got high, and there is a wonderful contra-gravity event inhabiting the core of the 1964 Disney movie *Mary Poppins*, based on the children’s book series by P.L. Travers. A précis of the lead-up will serve to set the scene. Mary Poppins (Julie Andrews) is a magical nanny who transports herself through time and space, holding fast to a black umbrella powered by a beneficent wind. She arrives in ultra-uptight Edwardian-era London and takes under her tutelage a little boy and girl, the children of a feckless suffragist and stuffed-shirt banker. Mary shows these fun-starved kids a grand time, while her strictness, in the vaunted tradition of British juvenile literature, serves to improve them morally. When Mary hears that her aged uncle Albert (Ed Wynn) has been stricken by an attack of some presumably dangerous malady, she rushes to his aid accompanied by her wards and would-be

boyfriend Burt (Dick Van Dyke). Mary arrives to find Albert's condition "worse than she thought": he is floating near the ceiling of his parlor laughing his head off. Albert does not use an umbrella to perform this feat. Rather he laughs – at his own jokes, or someone else's. And what's more, his levity is catching. Uncle Albert explains this phenomenon to the children by singing: "I love to laugh" while Mary, Burt and the children, along with a table bearing teapot, cups, saucers and toast rise into the air propelled by no other force than their collective good cheer. As the airborne tea party progresses, Burt and Albert and experiment with tumbling about weightlessly and to the delight of the children, trade joke after joke, eventually weeping with laughter on one another's shoulders. They are having such a high time of it that Mary, to restore a semblance of order, announces something very sad: "Uncle," she says, "we must be going now." Whereupon the old man bursts into tears of genuine grief and the tea party sedately and somberly, descends.

The film as a whole is notable for its contra-gravity scenes, among them the vaulting dance of the chimney sweeps, and a carousel sequence in which animated horses tear themselves away from their poles and become real, leaping with their riders over a countryside transformed into an impromptu steeplechase. In another scene, set before St. Paul's cathedral, the children buy packets of crumbs from a blind street vendor as Mary sings "Feed the birds, tuppence a bag." Though the telling veers toward the sentimental, a political message may still be adduced: if the pigeons, embodying the human spirit, are to cheat gravity and swoop freely over the city below, they must first be fed.

One also thinks (perhaps with a shudder) of two earlier Disney movies, *Fantasia* and *Dumbo*, both of which featured contra-gravity themes. Time has mercifully erased

my memory of whether *Fantasia's* tutu'd hippopotami danced in midair to Beethoven's *Pastoral* sonata or Tchaikovsky's *Rite of Spring*. Perhaps the victim was another "classic" altogether. But no one who has seen the latter film can fail to recall the moment when the elephant hero discovers the wondrous aerodynamic properties of his formerly crippling ears. Via *Dumbo's* flight, one arrives at the modern end-point of a long-wave cultural arc: across epochs and ideologies, the divine force behind the Virgin's levitating house has transmuted into a cartoon endorsement of the power of positive thinking. What remains consistent is the theme of material bodies made lighter-than-air through a special substance or property of the spirit – some metaphysical form of the "laughing gas" that powers flying cars. This may be the "flubber" that causes a Disney Volkswagen to rise, or levitating magic, as in the airborne sedan that serves as the vehicle for the hero's escape in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.

Chuck Jones's *Road Runner* cartoons, another Warner Brothers series begun in the 1950s, often feature a variant on a scene in which Wile E. Coyote pursues his prey off the edge of a cliff. The coyote continues running on thin air until he realizes something is amiss, whereupon he turns to the audience, gives a quizzical shrug and plummets into the canyon below. The Road Runner, who when pressed, really can fly, lands gracefully beside the Coyote's crater and fans away the dust with its wings.

When people or things become unbalanced, or topheavy enough, they eventually fall over, or in on themselves. Fritz Ermarth, a geo-political visionary of the 1930s likened fascism to a cyclist that needed to keep pumping. Otherwise, the system would topple over from inertia. Without the spreading *autostrada*, the tragi-clownish draining of the Pontine Marshes, without *Anschluss* and *blitzkrieg*, the destruction-production

machine would utterly fail. One wishes not to, but one thinks of Afghanistan's destroyed Bamiyan Buddhas, of the almost-twin towers of the World Trade Center and the hundreds of dwellings just leveled in the "cradle of civilization." How thrilling it would be if one could reverse the videotape of actuality and watch these structures rise up from their ruins, like Munchausen seizing his own pigtail to pull himself out of the swamp.

The enactment of our capacity to smile is itself a contra-gravitational gesture. Death, and the fear of it, must yield, in the space of comedy, to the laugh that rises within our bellies, our centers of gravity, to emerge like the soul, lighter than air. There is rebirth and resilience here. Some lyrics to *Tubthumping*, a contemporary pop hit by the English anarchist band Chumbawamba go: "I get knocked down but I get up again, you're never gonna keep me down." Indeed authority, with its heavy – and never seven league – boots, must ever suppress the rising of the risible.

The inverse suspension we loved as infants yields to the draw of older kids toward roller coasters or any sort of amusement park ride that flings us, in a kind of pleasurable terror, this way and that, or flips us head over heels. And, if we are not too puritanical, this desire takes on erotic-fantastical forms. Rather than invoke a literal bedroom scene, I'll quote in evidence the early 80s disco hit *Upside Down*, sung by Diana Ross: "Inside out, boy you turn me/Up side down/'Round and 'round...". And then there's the jitterbug.

For the adults of our species, human-made social order exists inextricably bound up with physical gravity. Are not our impulses toward contra-gravity and the world turned upside down indispensable for our survival in the face of constraining forces? Yet historical moments arise when our comic imaginings – the dish run away with the

spoon, the cow jumping over the moon, or the elephant who (for fifty cents) leapt over the fence, so high it hit the sky and didn't come back till the fourth of July – get serious and turn their energy toward real world revolution?

Who dares attempt the Lord's work of overturning order to restore its "natural" balance? G.W. Bush, in tandem and in competition with a goodly number of deadly serious bloodshedders, are trying as hard as they can to radically alter social arrangements on a global scale. Will it be Gaia who succeeds? Or perhaps, come the day when pigs truly fly, the still-dormant mass of people – for whom turning the world upside down would constitute a supreme act of common sense – will liberate a comedic life-force we have yet to imagine.

If some essential aspect of comedy draws from our desire to lose all constraint, another element lies in the whimsical acknowledgment of the forces which bind us. To end these notes in what Ernst Bloch calls a "light-spot," let me ask the not-quite-sixty - four thousand dollar question: What did Zero say to Eight?³

³ "Nice belt!"