Pure Humor: Lardner's Nonsense Plays

by

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Ring Lardner, 1924, from the collection of Roger Lathbury.

For many fans and students of the writing of Ring Lardner—I am one—some of his most original and striking writing is found in the ten short nonsense plays he wrote between 1921 and his death in 1933. —Wait, let me revise that: nine of the ten. I set aside "The Bull Pen," which, though amusing, is less committed to zany non-sequitur and the irrational and closer to the world of *You Know Me Al* and the baseball stories. The nine plays are, in the approximate chronological sequence in which they were composed, *The Tridget of Greva; Thompson's Vacation; Clemo Uti—"The Water Lilies"; I Gaspiri; Taxidea Americana; Quadroon; Dinner Bridge; Cora, or Fun at a Spa* and *Abend Di Anni Nouveau.*

Three of these were first published in *What of It?* (Scribners, 1925), six in the posthumous *First and Last* (1934) edited by Gilbert Seldes (Scribners, 1934), and the final play to be published—actually the first Lardner wrote, "The Tridget of Greva," in *Shut Up, He Explained* (Scribners, 1962) in a version "slightly edited and cut" by the author's son Ring Lardner, Jr. Notwithstanding their scattered appearances in print, the plays have had a persistent life of their own and a steady though low-profile reputation. Robert Frost, an unlikely a person as ever to find in this context, reported being helplessly convulsed by lines from *I. Gaspiri,* and in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* the adolescent narrator refers admiringly to Lardner and singles out "these very funny, crazy plays." That *Shut Up, He Explained,* the 1962 compilation, adds *Tridget* and collects all the others is further

testament to their enduring appeal. Maxwell Geismar editing *The Ring Lardner Reader* reprints eight of them under the heading “Native Dada.”

Why does this small body of work, especially four or five plays totalling less than thirty pages in print, continue to provide such pleasure and retain such a special fascination?

Some of the immediate force and appeal of the plays can be seen from their historical and biographical context. When the first few appeared in book form, Lardner was a famous man, but not for this kind of writing. Known as a sports columnist, author of the widely loved *You Know Me Al* as well as less prominent books, *Gullible’s Travels, The Big Town* plus a series of individual small volumes such as *Say It With Oil, Treat ’em Rough, The Real Dope* and *The Young Immigrunts*, Lardner was something of a household name. He regularly published short stories in *Cosmopolitan, The Saturday Evening Post,* and, later, *The New Yorker.* It had been something of a climb to fame; the power of his sharply satirical short stories, with their dumb ingéenues, self-deceivers, shallow but well intentioned bumblers, and small-minded fools, was apparent only after 1924 when Scribner’s, partly at the urging of Fitzgerald, issued *How to Write Short Stories.*

Readers who enjoyed “Alibi Ike,” “My Roomy,” “I Can’t Breathe,” and “The Golden Honeymoon” either in their original magazine appearances or in *How to Write Short Stories,* were not prepared for offerings as avant-garde and apparently anomalous as *Taxidea Americana* or Abend *di Anni Nouveau.* In short, the nonsense plays were oddities, and many Lardner readers passed them over in favor of the fiction. Even H. L. Mencken, as high profile a booster as Lardner ever had, did not mention the plays. It took time for them to attract an audience beyond the small band of high brows that were first drawn to them.

However, they did. Ironically, the timing of their appearance would seem exactly right for the 1920’s, yet Lardner plainly brought only a few of his followers

with him into nonsense land. Their esteem was restricted to a small of sophisticates such as Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, Ben Hecht, Donald Ogden Stewart, Alexander Woollcott, and Edmund Wilson among them. One of the plays, *I. Gaspiri,* was published by Hecht in the *Chicago Literary Times* and then republished by Ernest Hemingway in *The Transatlantic Review.* A few of them were staged by these glittering people at small venues in New York and elsewhere. For some of this group Lardner's reputation was enhanced; not only was he the author of well regarded short stories with a perfect ear for the American vernacular but also he was a modernist *manqué.*

Modernism, the rejection of middle class conventions of any aesthetic form, was to the 1920's what the theory of literary criticism was to the 1970's: cutting edge. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Joyce's *Ulysses* were both published in 1922. Although Lardner's sensibility was not inherently modernist, he shared the post World War I's generation scorn of convention and their feeling for the emptiness of ordinary life. Indeed, he may have exceeded all of them in terms of nihilism, for he was even too cynical to commit himself whole heartedly to their rejection.

That is to say that unlike the prestige practitioners of modernism, Woolf, Pound, Joyce, or Eliot, the surrealists Breton, Éluard, Crevel, et. al., or their precursors Appolinaire, Jarry, and Lautréamont, not to mention deliberately experimental playwrights such as Strindberg or O'Neill, Lardner was unable to believe in anything at all. He had no theory or practice upon which to base his writing—no stream of consciousness, no sustained faith in a radical agenda, no ability to say "these fragments I have shored against my ruins." This may explain, without wholly taking away its surprise, the somewhat astonishing fact that at the same time as Lardner was able to write *The Tridget of Greva* and *Dinner Bridge,* he continued to produce short stories for the "slicks," newspaper columns, and commercial Broadway plays.

This inconsistency does accord with the bitterness and appalling emptiness behind the stories. In back of “The Love Nest,” “Some Like them Cold” and “In Conference” is a despair as authoritative as that of the more intellectually informed Eliot. One has to wonder whether Herbert Bayard Swope and the magazine editors who paid Lardner so lavishly for take-offs on lower middle class families and their pretensions knew with whom they were dealing. If not, the nonsense plays could have informed them, but those who bought “Ex Parte” and “The Golden Honeymoon” would not have taken quite so readily to the dadaists and the radical moves of Lardner’s most original and intensely comic work. George Horace Lorimer bought writing by Gertrude Stein only after she had become a “name.”

For Lardner’s nonsense dramas switch, with apparently complete ingenuousness, between incompatible modes of thought, levels of diction, satire and self-parody. They create a world almost tantalizingly coherent and at the same time are beyond coherence. When Sethso (a teasingly suggestive name—saith so?) asks Gethso in *Clemo Uti—“The Water Lilies”* “Who is our father?” and is told “What of it? We’re twins, ain’t we?” the response is just close enough to start to seem like a reasonable answer, since the idea that one is part of a set of twins alludes to familial bonds, but the reply does not, of course, answer the question. In the next line in *Clemo Uti,* a character named Wama, who has appeared seemingly from nowhere, utters, “Hush, clemo uti—*the Water Lilies.”* This is a genuine non-sequitur that makes an implicit criticism of the portentous but empty resolutions avant garde drama might propose. It is a generalized kind of parody, of the sort that S. J. Perelman would later claim as his specialty.

This atmosphere is abetted and undercut by the nonce words “clemo uti.” The play purports to clarify the inexplicable by adding the phrase “the water lilies.” Thus the language turns in on itself. And of course all this, while compact, suggestive, and hilarious in itself, is an illogical follow up to Sethso and Gethso’s

nonsensical dialogue. It all seems an uncanny echo, to no relevant religious or satirical point, of the close of *The Waste Land* "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. / *Shantih shantih shantih."*

We do laugh, though—laugh helplessly if the play "works" for us, at the same time find ourselves back in the Waste Land with no succor from Eastern religious thought, but with only the frightening concept of laughter itself. Laughter is at once an "answer" and no answer at the same time.

This self-sufficiency and insufficiency is a characteristic of nonsense and lodges *I. Gaspiri, Clemo Uti* and others firmly in the genre. These and many of the others feature moments of obliquity that suggest a paradigm partially apprehended, a feeling that reminds a reader of the half glimpsed meanings in the portmanteau words of Lewis Carroll's poem "Jabberwocky" in *Through the Looking Glass* ("'Twas brillig and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe...") or the white map in *The Hunting of the Snark:*

> He had bought a large map representing the sea,
> Without the least vestige of land:
> And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be
> A map they could all understand.
>
> "What's the good of Mercator's North Poles and Equators,
> Tropics, Zones, and Meridian Lines?"
> So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply
> "They are merely conventional signs!"

Divesting conventional signs of their significance is a key trope of Lardner's nonsense. Words slip into and out of their conventional boundaries as they are used for position and function more than as established signifiers. In *I. Gaspiri,* "A new character" asks, "Who is the cough?" "Cough" has been personified or perhaps might be a simple if unusual metonymy, but the decontextualization of the play doesn't let one determine which of these alternatives, if either, obtains. Nothing

loth and apparently unpuzzled, "Two Moors" answer the question, however, with explicit and detailed if ungrammatical ("my" should be "our") confidence: "That is my cousin. She died a little while ago in a haphazard way." "Haphazard," an adjective that should be meant to restrict the meaning of "way," instead broadens and confuses it. "A Greek" then extols the mythical "cousin," whoever she might have been: "And what a woman she was!" The empty formulas continue with language drained language of its import.

Then in one of Lardner's most revealing strokes, appears the stage direction: "The curtain is lowered for seven days to denote the passage of a week." Any reader's reaction is likely to be immediate laughter at the sudden descent into obviousness and at the absurd idea that a play can last as long as actual time itself (cf. the map in Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno* with a "scale" of 1 : 1). This stage direction, arbitrary, then, and comically unexpected, is also seen to have no relevance to the preceding dialogue. At the same time it makes a shrewd point about language. "Denote" invests a self-evident proposition—that seven days constitute a week—with unexplained mysteriousness. Moreover, it points to the fact that the nonsense plays at the same time as they reduce us to hebephrenic hilarity divest "denoting" or defining of words to both an arbitrary and self-evident act. And, as well, after the oblique, disorienting and half relevant sequence of remarks a plain and obvious truth hits the reader like a shock, another way of convulsing a reader—more, may I say, than post-structuralism and Ferdinand de Saussure have ever done for anyone.

The title of the play, *I. Gaspiri,* subtitled "The Upholsterers," is completely opaque. If there is a language in which such a word exists, I have yet to discover it. It sounds Italian, but Italian for "upholsterers" is "tappezzieri." Needless to say, upholstery or decorating does not in the least apply to anything in the "play." Lardner with Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll is the third great creator of such

words. Most memorable are the “tridget” of “Greva,” the “queels” that appear at the end of *Clemo Uti—“The Water Lilies,”* and the “snail-gunders” that (who?) ride tricycles at the end of *Abend Di Anni Nouveau.*

Not all the plays reach into such extreme territory as *I. Gaspiri, Clemo Uti,* and *The Tridget of Greva.* Except for *Thompson’s Vacation,* even the more stageable plays, such as *Dinner Bridge,* where laborers repairing the Fifty-ninth street bridge break engage, on their lunch break, in polite conversation after being served dinner in a manner appropriate to an expensive New York restaurant, employ the same arbitrary uses of language and sometimes even focus on it:

> AMOROSI, *to* LLANUZA: If you’ll pardon a newcomer. Mr.-----, I don’t believe I got your name.
> LLANUZA: Llanuza.
> AMOROSI: If you’ll pardon a newcomer, Mr. Keeler, I want to say that if the United States isn’t good enough for you, I’d be glad to start a subscription to send you back to where you came from.
> LLANUZA: I was beginning to like you, Mr. Amorosi.
> AMOROSI: You get that right out of your mind, Mr. Barrows. I’m married; been married twice. My first wife died.
> HANSEN: How long were you married to her?
> AMOROSI: Right up to the time she died.
> CHAMALES, *interrupting*: Mr. Amorosi, you said you had been married twice.
> AMOROSI: Yes, sir. My second wife is a Swiss girl.
> HANSEN: Is she here with you?
> AMOROSI: No, she’s in Switzerland, in jail. She turned out to be a murderer.
> CROWLEY: When it’s a woman, you call her a murderess.
> TAYLOR: And when it’s a Swiss woman, you call her a Swissess. *(One of the waiters is now engaged in serving* AMOROSI *with his dinner pail.)*
> WAITER, *to* AMOROSI: Whom did she murder?
>
> (WAITER *exits hurriedly without seeming to care to hear the answer.)*

The Tridget of Greva, evidently the first play to be written, is also built around a recognizable situation: three men in three rowboats are fishing and share some of the same fixation with language and etymology. Jokes and non-sequiturs break into zaniness mixed with instances of ordinary, intentional humor. The

mélange revivifies stale japes by giving them a meta-quality of humor. Jokes are laughed at for their own identity as jokes:

> BARHOOTER: By the way, what was *your* mother's name before she was married?
> CORBY: I didn't know her then.
> LAFFLER: Do they allow people to fish at the Aquarium? (BARHOOTER *and* CORBY *ignore him)*
> BARHOOTER: You must know her first name.
> CORBY: I don't. I always called her Mother.
> BARHOOTER: But your father must have called her something.
> CORBY: Everything he could think of....
> BARHOOTER: *(To* CORBY) I wanted to ask you something about your sister, too.
> CORBY: What about her?
> BERHOOTER: Just anything. For instance, what's the matter with her?
> CORBY: Who?
> BARHOOTER: Your sister.
> CORBY: I'm not married.
> *(After a pause,* BARHOOTER *and* CORBY *both laugh.)*

The pause before Barhooter and Corby laugh is crucial. It underlines that neither they nor the reader know what is funny or exactly at what they are laughing. We are in the world of the impossible and helpless to sort it out. This paradox is similar to a description in *I. Gaspiri* of Sethso and Gethso: "both twins." The implication of "both" is that it would be possible to be one of a pair without being one of a pair. Or that seems to be one of the possibilities. At what, exactly, are we laughing? Humor has been detached from its context.

This is one of the supreme achievements of Lardner's nonsense. The plays are instances of pure humor. Although funny in and of themselves and plainly intended simply to produce laughter, they push the comic to the limit by so confusing and conflating frames of reference and the meanings that follow from them that they float, giddily, above their own particulars. As Henry James might have put it, they immensely disorient. They are instances of Platonic laughter.

Defining the comic, as Bergson, Freud, Meredith, Auden and others have shown, is a task in and of itself. Comic works of literature from *The Birds* to *Catch*

22 and a whole host in between, can be profoundly funny. But most of these works proceed from a criticism of some aspect of existence more or less simple to define: *The Birds* is an anti-war manifesto. The comic plays of Shakespeare have as heavy a philosophical weight as *Hamlet. The Importance of Being Earnest* is not only a skein of uninterrupted wit but also a satire on the hypocrisy of British social mores.

The nonsense plays of Lardner, however, while not devoid of social satire (*Thompson's Vacation* is a stab at those who spoil the pleasures of ordinary people) are not committed to an agenda. From one perspective that may render them trivial, but it also makes them purer sources of the funny. They force the reader—or the viewer who has a chance to see one of them performed—who cannot, being past the age of reason, ever put the world of logic, order and consciousness out of his mind, to regress to a pre-cognitive state where it is impossible to organize experience. Language, existence, and the terms through which we think we understand lead to randomness, contradiction, emptiness and paradox. It is not far from Pirandello to Lardner. Both free their audiences into an awareness that releases humor.

So—if all I have said about the excellence of these plays is true, or even partly true, why have the nonsense plays remained relatively obscure, both in the body of Lardner's production and in American literature as well?[1]

Not surprisingly, their virtues are tied to their limitations. Although he enjoyed his high literary reputation in the 1920's, Lardner never quite took himself seriously enough as a literary artist. His editor at Scribner's, Maxwell Perkins, made this point to F. Scott Fitzgerald explaining that Lardner really wasn't a *writer* at all. Fitzgerald said something similar in his memorable essay "Ring," written upon Lardner's death in September 1933. According to Fitzgerald, Lardner remained a boy; he immersed himself in the ethos of baseball and never grew

beyond “Frank Chace’s diamond” and “got less percentage of himself on paper than any other American author of the first flight.”

From one angle, this immersion gives Lardner’s work a zestful non-literary quality. It seems as fresh as folk art, and at times as artless. It saves Lardner from pretention and makes his nonsense plays as sparkling as *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. With characteristic literary perspicuity, Fitzgerald called the plays “the most uproarious and inspired nonsense since Lewis Carroll.” But Lardner’s inability to believe in himself as an artist also prevented him from trying to develop his most original impulses into anything more substantial. Just as Lardner could not write a novel, with a single narrative and a plot line, a deepening accretion of meaning contained within one sustained story, he could never extend his most original manner beyond seven or so typewritten pages. Perhaps as such it is unsustainable at greater length. It might be sustainable if the manner were altered, or it might have been sustainable hands other than Lardner’s, but only Lardner could have created the work.

Lardner could, with others, write for the commercial theater, although even the best of his efforts in that direction, *June Moon* (1929), written with George S. Kaufman, has little that sounds distinctively Lardneresque and, with its pat, happy ending, much that sounds like a slick New York play of 1930. One even has no sense that Lardner valued his best work more than his less successful efforts—or even, if we are to believe Fitzgerald, that he thought highly of any of it at all. Without confusing the adopted persona of Sarah E. Spooldripper, the purported introducer of Lardner’s 1926 volume *The Love Nest,* with Lardner himself, one feels that behind the comical conclusion of “Spooldripper’s” prefatory remarks to that volume something shudderingly direct: “The Master is gone and the next question is who will succeed him? Perhaps some writer still unborn. Perhaps one who will never be born. That is what I hope.” Or one sees it, just as tellingly, in the

end of *Clemo Uti—"The Water Lilies":* "They want to play the show over again, but it looks useless."

Useless to bemoan what we don't have. The very exiguousness of the output gives the nonsense plays an added, precious quality. For the cognoscenti—not just the in group of the now long dead Round Table at the Algonquin Hotel—Lardner's nonsense plays lift a reader into a rarefied and temporarily blissful and helpless state of laughter. Γελως, god of laughter, has breathed into our nostrils, given us as deep a look into the world as we are likely to get, and the results are bright illumination and explosive laughter.

[1] Or even in studies of nonsense. The three best in my judgment are Elizabeth Sewell's *The Field of Nonsense* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952)—highly recommended for its lucidity and insight on nonsense writing as a whole; Susan Stewart's *Nonsense* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979)—an intermittently brilliant but diffuse and partly inchoate study; Jean-Jacques Lecercle's *Philosophy of Nonsense* (London: Routlegde, 1994)—which avowedly concentrates on Victorian nonsense literature.

Of the biographies, Donald Elder's *Ring Lardner* (Garden City, 1956) has the best general account (p. 283-288) of the nonsense plays—one that starts on the path I have tried to clear further; Jonathan Yardley's *Ring* is respectful but less detailed and illuminating about the workings of the plays; Yardley quotes more than he analyzes.

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