The Incommensurate/Illogical in Perelman/Marx: The Linguistic Pragmatics of American Humor

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Abstract

This article offers a preliminary analysis of the language of certain varieties of American comedy that arose out of the Vaudeville theater (from roughly 1910 – 1930) and, later, out of the culture of popular magazines from (roughly) the 1920s to the 1950s. The focus is on the exemplary and highly original comic language of S. J. Perelman (1904 – 1979), the Jewish prose humorist, and Perelman's quasi-mentor, the legendary stage and screen comedian Groucho Marx (1890 – 1979), who was renowned for his improvisational wit. The article's purpose is to explicate, with reference to important developments in 20th century linguistics and semiotics, some aspects of these highly original, self-conscious and indeed modernist verbal practices. It also tentatively explores the significance of these unconventional linguistic intuitions in regards to broader questions concerning the possibility of effective communication and, thus, the links between discourse and social ideology in a mid-century American context. The theoretical perspectives brought to bear on this subject include Grice's theory of conversational implicature and Austin's Speech Act Theory—both cornerstones of linguistic pragmatics—as well as Deleuze's concept of a 'minor literature,' a theory of modernist literary practice substantially determined by earlier developments in semiotic theory and philosophical pragmatism.

Keywords: Marx Brothers, Perelman, Deleuze, pragmatics, comedy

1. Introduction

Beginning in the 19th century with the popularity of the serialized works of Dickens, the magazine, with the daily newspaper, was the dominant form of American prose literature. It was the principal medium of satire. Around the first decade of the 20th century, the satirist transformed into the professional (prose) humorist: undoubtedly, Twain was a

forerunner, but the author-as-humorist entered the consciousness of the reading public during The Great War, with the wild success of Ring Lardner's semi-fictional newspaper columns, which used life on the front as a surprising source of comedy. Lardner's 'protagonists' were gruff working-class men, a key demographic of readership that was central to the development of American humor. From roughly 1900 to 1925, the working-class was, increasingly, a class of immigrants or first-generation Americans. With the general increase in standards of living and literacy, this demographic was also able to produce major writers whose use of the English language introduced new concepts and forms into American literature.

In this regard, one of the most significant voices in humor (and in the world of magazines generally) was that of S. J. Perelman (1904 – 1979). The son of upwardly mobile Russian Jewish immigrants, Perelman emerged as the most modernist and experimental among the humorists, and created the most singular literary style. In the world of print (as opposed to the stage, where he dabbled), Perelman was for decades the pre-eminent Jewish comic writer. For many contemporary and younger authors, he was pre-eminent full stop: Dorothy Parker, Nathaniel West, J. D. Salinger, Eudora Welty, Paul Theroux are among those who honored him as a master of the medium.

Nevertheless, despite his originality, Perelman had an older and vibrant tradition of humor on which to draw: the comedy of Vaudeville, an umbrella term given to the popular comic and musical theater which dominated the American stage from roughly 1880 – 1930.[1] Perhaps the only attributes that enable us to distinguish Vaudeville from the so-called 'legitimate theater' of the era are that (1) it was a de-centered, provincial and travelling theater and that (2) both its performers and the majority of its audiences were working-class and lower-class. A solid majority of these performers were immigrants or first-generation Americans. In the environs of New York and Chicago, urban Jews who were well-versed in the Yiddish theater easily translated that familiarity into Vaudeville success for a broader American audience.

With hindsight, the most successful of all Jewish Vaudeville comedians was Perelman's first literary employer, Groucho Marx (1890 – 1979), who used a highly original style of verbal wit to conquer Vaudeville, then Broadway, then the movies. For the first four decades of his career, Groucho was one of The Marx Brothers, a comedy team in which each brother specialized in a different type of Vaudeville humor: Harpo Marx was a highly original silent clown, a master of physical comedy who never spoke a word onstage; Chico Marx, who played a wily but none-too-bright con artist, was a 'dialect comedian' who performed the ethnic stereotype of the stage Italian. Groucho, the youngest brother, was a specialist in insults, 'wisecracks,' and improvisational wit. His mastery of the latter has given him something of the status of an American, 20th century Oscar Wilde: for although Marx collaborated regularly with a number of writers (including George S. Kaufman) in creating his mature stage performances, his wit was so legendary that his many off-the-cuff remarks have, like Wilde's, often overshadowed his formal, 'artistic' output. Like Perelman, Marx had a number of prominent admirers: most surprisingly, T. S.

Eliot. J. A. Ward (1992) maintains, persuasively, that the character of Shrike in Nathaniel West's masterwork *Miss Lonelyhearts* was a diabolical caricature of Groucho.

All the great verbal comedians of Vaudeville were highly skilled at getting laughs by manipulating and defying the semantic conventions with which their audiences were familiar (i.e. ordinary conversational English); but it was Marx, in particular, who specialized in comic non-sequiturs that challenged the rules of discursive grammar and thus, also, prevailing theories in the study of aspects of the language system—particularly in revealing the centrality of social context in linguistic comprehension.

The nexus between Marx's (Jewish) Vaudeville humor and Perelman's prose humor, as considered from a semiotic point-of-view, is the subject of this article. It offers a brief but close analysis of this comedy of linguistic transgression, which, I argue, anticipates and exemplifies a number of later developments in the theory and philosophy of language. Representing the pinnacle of the verbal art of the humorist, these artists express 'semantic intuitions' that also have a great deal of social relevance: they represent what was emerging during this period as an entirely new *episteme*, emanating from the American immigrant experience and penetrating, eventually, to the heart of American culture, using as its vehicles such popular media as magazines and Vaudeville, and the electronic media (radio, films) that fed off these innovations and granted a virtual after-life to this 'golden age' of American comedy.

A double focus on Perelman and Marx is essential to my argument, but necessarily disproportionate. The legacy of Marx, who was an international superstar, continues to overshadow that of his younger collaborator Perelman. Further, despite a considerable output of articles and books, Marx's comic language is chiefly theatrical and performative, whereas Perelman's is thoroughly literary. But I take this difference as an opportunity to explore different and sometimes medium-determined aspects of the American humorist's insights into language. Perelman's insight, I argue, is centered on problems of representation, the descriptive waywardness of the linguistic sign, whereas Marx's comic practice amounts to a parodic precursor of the theory of speech acts. In order to develop these affinities, I shall focus on two specific areas. The first focuses on the style that Perelman developed for the magazines, a comic style purely based on semantic difference—on the impact and consequences of unconventional or 'incommensurate' diction, especially in Perelman's descriptions of material goods, which call to mind the commodity fetishism that (arguably) underlies American social life. The second is germane to Marx's performative humor which problematizes the gap between the meaning of statements and their contexts, raising problems of definition, the priority of descriptive statements, and the conceptual logic of communication.[2] Both express an 'outsider's view' of prevailing cultural norms as reflected in the way that Americans believe they *should* speak or write.

I fancy that the following tentative analysis, as a study of comedy and comic literature, is somewhat original: for the treatment of comedy in twentieth century literary criticism, from Bergson to Frye and so on, has been overwhelmingly social-psychological and structural in orientation, whereas serious studies of comic language have been few

and far between. (At times this tendency borders on the absurd, as in the pre-dominantly mytho-anthropological tenor of critical writings on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which fundamentally misses the point of Shakespeare's whimsical poetic stylization of existing folkloric clichés). I hope to enable a new scholarly appreciation of the American humorist's linguistic art, without which such stylists as Perelman remain marginalized in academic discourses, while multi-media innovators like Marx, despite considerable intellectual contributions to culture, are relegated by their very adaptivity to some amorphous realm of ephemeral pop culture, the punitive realm of the 'not literary.'

2. Pragmatic Views of Language Practice

In my analysis of the theoretical anticipations of Perelman and Marx, I will appeal to two well-known research paradigms in semantic theory, not in and of themselves but as they can be shown to be applicable to the analysis of theatrical and literary language. These are, first, the theory of conversational implicature as developed by Grice to attack problems of linguistic meaning; second, the afore-mentioned speech act theory of Austin and Searle, which problematized any so-called 'formal semantics'. In addition, I shall invoke Deleuze's writerly concept of a 'minor literature', that is, the possibility of a 'revolutionary' practice of linguistic signs in literary composition.[3] Each theory, in treating their respective subjects of inquiry, represented the turn towards *pragmatic* analysis of language. For it is ultimately my aim to value this strain of (Jewish) American comedy, and its ideological provenance as an 'outsider's' art practice, as one that already appreciates the indispensability of pragmatics for any general semantics. In Marx and Perelman's relentless satire of the discourses of the elite institutions of the modern social and economic order (government, corporations, the scientistic academy) *they undermine all realist views of discursive representation* and its established formations, from those accepted by naïve common sense (e.g. 'a thing is a thing') to academic doctrines such as, e.g., purely extensional or truth-conditional accounts of meaning relations. In the comic transgressions by Marx and Perelman of the norms of standard and 'straight' ways of speaking (especially amongst the 'privileged' classes), the normative provenance and basis of linguistic structures is obliquely demonstrated. All formal theories of reference, such as those that would directly connect propositions with 'real world' facts, are implicitly called into question. In Groucho Marx's stage parody of Napoleon, for example, the 'wannabe' conqueror declares: "The Russians are in full retreat, and I'm right in front of them" (Marx, 2000, p. 8). As a proposition or a possible description of actions-in-the-world, this is nonsensical, contradictory; yet it is perfectly comprehensible as mockery.

With such intuitions, Marx and Perelman are fundamentally in agreement with one predecessor, C. S. Peirce, to whose 'pragmaticism' the modern school of linguistic pragmatics owes much:

In order to ascertain the meaning of an intellectual conception one should consider what practical

consequences might conceivably result from the truth of that conception; and the sum of these consequences will constitute the *entire meaning of the conception*. (Colombat, 2000, p. 17)

The content of signs of any class, and consequently our way of understanding linguistic signs, is not simply a question of acquaintance with stable semantic features, as a conventional dictionary might lead us to believe, but a result of what signs and relations *do* in relation to speaker intentions and a determining context.

The Marx/Perelman style of humor illustrates concretely what Peirce and the pragmatic school of linguistics established analytically and systematically. Paul Grice, like Wittgenstein and other so-called ordinary language philosophers, rejected the positivist view that all meaningful statements (other than logical truths) must be based on a direct link with observational fact. Grice advanced a *contextual* theory of meaning that relies on the existence of *conversational implicature*, arguing that successful, practical communication between hearers and speakers is only possible when certain extra-linguistic rules, what Grice calls *maxims*, are presupposed (often unconsciously) by both parties to a conversation. In this way, Grice establishes the difference between what is 'said' and what is 'conveyed' in ordinary language usage. Take a now-famous example (Levinson, 1983, pp. 27-28): supposing one asks the question, "What time is it?" Grice sets out to explain how it can be that the following response, which is perfectly ordinary yet highly elliptical, can make perfect sense:

Q: What time is it?
A: The milkman has come.

Even if we assume that both speaker and hearer are in full knowledge of the meanings/ definitions of the expressions used here, such knowledge does not suffice to explain how (A.) is in any way related or relevant to (Q.), nor how (A.) can possibly function as an effective response (p. 28). Furthermore, the fact that (A.) is both in propositional form and amenable to empirical verification does not help one iota to explain how it operates effectively in this context. This sort of exchange leads Grice to hypothesize the existence of certain sorts of implicatures that he terms *maxims* of (successful) conversation. This includes the *principle of cooperation*, the assumption of the hearer that a speaker is sincere in his efforts to convey information, that is to say, "when one asserts something one implicates that one believes it" (p. 105). Further, the assumption that the speaker will make his/her "contribution such as is required at the stage at which it occurs by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk in which [one is] engaged" (Levinson, 1983, p. 101). The cooperative principle leads to the other maxims of implicature, for instance, the *Maxim of Quantity* (e.g., don't say much more or less than is required in the mutually-comprehended situation).

What is at stake here—and what I suggest is intuitively present in the comic styles of Perelman and especially Marx—is larger than the rejection of Positivism; it is the

recognition that in ordinary communication, any formal semantics is not enough. Such a *system-dictated, formal semantic* view of language, as Stephen Levinson (1983) demonstrates, would be unable to account for an obvious matter such as the differing senses of the word "and" in two different statements such as (1.) "roses are red *and* violets are blue"and (2.) "he jumped on his horse *and* rode into the sunset". Only in (2.) is there is a sequential, narrative sense to the conjunction (pp. 98-99). Grice suggested that it is largely implicature that fine-tunes our sense of what words 'mean' to suit a particular context of utterance. Grice's example shows that *definitions (stable semantic features) are not enough*, that is to say, although linguistic meaning is rule-guided it is not rule-determined, nor are the relevant rules internal to any normative structure that *happens* to be in place in a given milieu.

J. L. Austin (1975) recognized that virtually all sentence forms as used in practice performed an *illocutionary act*, of which declaring something to be the case is only one kind. Hence, many expressions can only be comprehended by grasping the conventional 'force' of the expression, which is context-dependent in several ways. For example, 'Shoot her!" might be properly interpreted as a command, an advice, a humorous hyperbole, etc. (Levinson, 1983). Utterances, further, have a *perlocutionary* effect, that is, an effect on the hearers that is only relevant or operative in the *particular special circumstances* of the social situation (was the hearer being frightened or bribed into shooting?). To sum up, for our purposes, the notion that there is a standard non-contextual or abstract meaning *of* an expression is called into question: there is, rather, meaning *by* expression, operating through the conventional intended and unintended forces of a given utterance and the circumstances of its use.

Under the influence of Austin and his former student, John Searle, a certain strand of the intellectual culture of the 1960s (which introduced to the academy that slogan that "truth is performative") belatedly came to realize what Marx and Perelman had intuited decades earlier: it is not the purpose of a great many speech *acts* to assert something that may be determined to be true or false, and this in any case is often not nearly as significant or informative as (1) what an utterance is intended to accomplish, and (2) how it ' plays out' in a given social context. An important consequence of this paradigm is that, as in Grice's theory, the *semantic features* of nearly any word or sentential form in ordinary language are not only highly susceptible to cultural convention, but may vary wildly in an enveloping framework of communicative behavior.

The common intellectual thread of pragmatics I want to emphasize *is the effective context-dependence of meaning in ordinary language use*. In the earlier 20th century, such a view would have been interpreted as unconventional at the very least, and in certain social contexts would become radically anti-establishment: for many styles of political and institutional rhetoric undoubtedly trade on the naïve belief that verbal signifiers have the same weight, value, and meaning across multiple temporal, cultural, and ideological contexts.[4] The theoretical innovations that rejected this view cohere with the fundamental insight that I attribute to the pragmatic, outsider's view of the language

of Jewish-American humor. A thing is not a thing. *A thing is a sign, and that sign must be understood*, as Peirce writes, *not according to semi-permanent qualities, but according to its practical consequences in the arena of social action*. By the 1970s, Beckett, Pinter, and Shepard, among others, had been named as literary apostles of performative truth, but, as Beckett well knew, there was a rich Vaudeville tradition that had preceded them. What was at stake, much earlier, for Marx and Perelman was a stance of social non-conformism towards a more entrenched and institutionalized world-view which we may refer to, broadly, as 'classic bourgeois realism', which is both parodied and flouted with every offhand quip, for instance in Marx (2000): "Get me a bologna sandwich. Never mind the bologna, never mind the bread. Just get me the check" (p. 6). Note the ever-present (abstract) language of exchange value, that which gives the lie to the 'naturalist' posture of the *bourgeoisie*. The basis of Marx and Perelman's intuitive hostility to this world-view is fundamentally semiotic, however: what each recognizes, working in different media, is what philosophical hermeneutics would later declare: that all so-called objectivity that humans can ever be aware of is mediated by relations of symbolic (i.e. semiotic) representation (Ramberg & Gjesdal, 2005).

The possibility of literature being an outsider's semiotic practice, one which worked against a culture's established linguistic structures, dominant ideologies, and harmful illusions, is explored in Deleuze and Felix Guattari's (1986) concept of 'minor literature'. Developed out of a reading of Kafka, Deleuze's thinking along these lines was concerned to re-establish the radical potential of literature (and aesthetic practice generally), which had been seemingly neutralized by the dominant French structuralist approach to language, semiotics, and mind, most notoriously by Lacan's and Barthes' appropriation of Saussure. Convinced that both *semiology* and Lacan were fundamentally misled,[5] Deleuze turned to a highly creative synthesis of "Peirce's 'semeiotics' but also…the works of Hjemslev, Austin, Searle…[and] his lifelong study of Spinoza" (Colombat, 2000, p. 14). For Deleuze, "Peirce's strength was to conceive of signs on the basis of images and their combinations, and not as the function of determinants that were already linguistic" (Deleuze, 1989, p. 30). Deleuze distinguishes between *linguistic signs* (the entrapping *mots d'ordre* or 'word-commandments' which are all that exist for theology, semiology, psychoanalysis, structuralism) and *expressions*. 'Expressions', here, are primarily pre-linguistic signs related to the differentiation of matter itself as humans initially perceive it: as when "a cabinet maker must first become sensitive to the 'signs' of wood….Such signs are an expression of what one can do with a specific piece of wood within a specific arrangement….*They 'mean' nothing*" (Colombat, 2000, p.19). Unlike signs, an expression does not *represent*, but is "inseparable from the differentiating processes that unfold it. It never resembles what it expresses" (p. 19). Deleuze is here talking about 'intensities', 'shapes,' and 'powers' perceived in an initial semiotic encounter. An expression is an 'unfolding' or 'becoming' of the powers of a substance and its arrangement (p. 19).

Deleuze's central point is that *literary language and other forms of expression seek to find an escape, a 'line of flight' from trapped, oppressive signifying hierarchies, whether*

they be discourses of established power, or the oppressive organization of the Oedipal. The modern literature of Melville, Joyce, Kafka, the Surrealists and others (for example, the famous evocations of sensation in Proust) decomposes the linguistic signs and structures of representation and narrative to forge a minor, revolutionary literature that has the following character:

> …We find ourselves not in front of a structural correspondence between two sorts of forms, forms of content and forms of expression, but rather in front of an *expression machine* capable of disorganizing its own forms...in order to liberate pure contents that mix with expressions in a single *intense* matter. A major, or established literature, follows the vector that goes from content to expression. But a minor or revolutionary literature begins by expressing itself and doesn't conceptualize until afterwards. (Kafka: "I do not see the world at all. I invent it.") Expression must break forms, encourage ruptures and new sproutings. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 28)

In assuming the burden of such a task, literature fulfills its mandate of originality and social impact: hence the genuine scandal and liberation that greeted Joyce and the Surrealists in the 1920s—a vein into which, we shall see, the seemingly mild and resigned Perelman comfortably falls.

3. Perelman and His *Feuilletons*: Context and Style

Unlike Groucho Marx, who grew up in what was sometimes called the 'Jewish ghetto' of Manhattan's Upper East Side, S. J. Perelman was raised by his parents in the more provincial and 'middle-class-aspirational' New England capital of Providence, Rhode Island. Attending Brown University from 1922, Perelman was already a prolific writer of short, humorous subjects.[6] He found a like-minded class-mate in Nathanael West, who allegedly "with Perelman's encouragement renounced the psychological approach to fiction…to approach the form of a comic strip. He stressed externals, caricatured people and actions, terse speech, jokes and wisecracks" (Ward, 1992, p. 52). What tradition were these students reacting against? The psychological realism of Henry James, Theodore Dreiser, and Eugene O'Neill (as diverse as these may have been). It was Joyce, "the *great* comic writer of our time" according to Perelman (Hasley, 1992, p. 88), who raised the banner for modernism to which Perelman and West flocked, at virtually the same moment as Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald. Outside of Vaudeville and the Yiddish theater with which he would have grown up, Perelman had other literary influences, notably the prose stylist Max Beerbohm.

Perelman's first book, *Dawn Ginsberg's Revenge* (1929), attracted few sales or attentions, but it did attract the eye of Groucho Marx, who read and endorsed it. Marx invited Perelman to Hollywood, where the younger man was the principal writer for two of The Marx Brothers' finest pictures, *Monkey Business* (1931) and *Horse Feathers* (1932).

It was a collaboration that was neither pleasant nor long-lasting. Perelman considered Marx a megalomaniac (Ward, 1992); Marx considered Perelman an aspiring snob. But in Hollywood, Perelman entered an elite circle of transplanted New York writers for hire, notably Dorothy Parker. Returning to New York, as one invariably did, he slowly became a dominant voice in humor for the major literary magazines, principally the *New Yorker*, to which he contributed for nearly 50 years. Actually Perelman had three literary careers: first, as occasional (often uncredited) playwright and screenwriter on Broadway and in Hollywood; second, with more notoriety, as a (humorous) travel writer chronicling misadventures and misunderstandings in India, Africa and China; and third, perhaps most importantly, as a writer of short, semi-fictional humorous pieces for the magazines, which were eventually collected into more than a dozen books.

Perelman's short pieces, or *feuilletons* as he called them, lie at the nebulous boundaries of first-person fiction, anecdote, and review column. Perelman himself, like Chaucer the Pilgrim, is normatively the protagonist of these 'fictions', recounting his reaction to life, to what he is reading, or both at once. A few of the stories are obviously anecdotal, while others are highly dubious as to veracity; many are clearly fictitious and still others are fantastic. But the Perelman persona is usually the same: an artist, yes, but also an impulsive consumer and hapless naïf in a world of commodities controlled by hucksters: an "outward, exterior world, all surface" (Hasley, 1993, p. 88) in which the lost Perelman "wants to succeed" in some minor ordinary endeavor (a transaction, etc.), but "in his gullibility is defeated by conscienceless frauds who rule whatever papier-mâché empire" he has entered (Ward, 1993, p. 143).

If Groucho Marx seemed the American embodiment of Wilde's cutting wit and self-fashioned hedonist persona (forever on the verge of social ostracism), it was in fact Perelman (also a playwright) who was the more profound inheritor of Wildean dandyism. With typical self-deprecation, Perelman referred to himself as '*boulevardier manqué*' (de Vries, 1992). The principal subjects of Perelman's magazine pieces, apart from, crucially, the habit of reading itself, are clothes and fashion; cultural acquisitions; non-committal or self-defeating flirtations; the social life and drinking; and finally, in a concession to the life of the dandy under advanced capitalism, *advertising*. In the New York-based world of the professional humorist, Perelman's two major 'competitors' were James Thurber and Robert Benchley, both of white, middle class origin; neither were dandys in person or in prose. It was Perelman alone—urbane sophisticate yet first-generation Jewish-American—who both mimicked and mocked the life of the dandy and its early 20th century equivalent, "the largely male tradition of the urban literary *flâneur*—the man in the crowd who self-consciously moved across the spaces of the modern city relating his exterior observations to an interior narrative. This is the perceptual mode discussed by Walter Benjamin who considered that Paris taught him 'the art of straying.' It is a mode of looking and being that suits the…outsider" (Phillips, 2004, p. 113). In New York, one such 'outsider' (from a certain point-of-view) was the upwardly mobile Jew.[7] Demographically, and in the popular consciousness of the period (c. 1890 – 1930), American Jews were a

people, an ethnicity, that belonged only to the city.

Beginning in the 1930s, Perelman single-handedly did for the magazine what George S. Kaufman had done for the stage. He took Jewish humor 'out of the ghetto' and placed it within a mainstream literary tradition by describing, yet also problematizing, the life of the dandy in a contemporary American context with which millions of readers could now identify as a *life wherein consumption becomes an expresser of personal style and identity*. Here was a cultural map and a stylistic idiom that, in charting the humorous maladjustments of the dandy to modern America, managed to capture the new urban lifestyle of leisure spending as experienced by millions of city dwellers.

Our focus here is on the significance of Perelman's literary language, a style that developed perhaps as a result of Perelman's updating of dandyism but ultimately bearing greater fruit: the intellectual embodiment of a deep, central, American anxiety about being a consumer.

Paul Theroux (1981) correctly observes that the lynchpin of Perelman's comic prose was a matter of "odd words" and "unlikely locutions and slang and precise descriptions" (pp. 10, 14): that is to say, a matter of *diction* (usually nouns). Perelman obsessively incorporates obscure, unusual, or somewhat inappropriate words into his descriptive prose.[8]

A few examples will do. In a hostile exchange of letters with his dry-cleaner (a typical Perelman scenario based on commodity acquisition or management), Perelman (2014) writes, "You are unable to say unequivocally, without tergiversating, that you *saw* my suit put into cold storage." Of course, the humble dry cleaner has no hope of understanding what Perelman is saying. Or, on encountering an ostentatious Hollywood insider or 'nabob', Perelman (2014) finds that "from his perky velvet dicer to the tips of his English brogues, he was as brash a highbinder as ever scurried out of Sardi's." Or, when Perelman (1981) is unable to remember a show business reference, "stap my vitals if I could pin it down" (p. 28). When Perelman parodies the Hammett detective story and goes after an eccentric shoplifter dressed like Abraham Lincoln, he fears that "if he lamped a Dunhill in my mitt instead of a police special, the jig was up" (p. 38): for Perelman, here, is passing off a concealed pipe as a gun.

I will attempt to further specify this stylistic practice and explore the conceptual significance of unconventional language use. To begin with, beyond the notorious obsession with clothing, Perelman's diction has a systematic (or symptomatic) emphasis on two general classes of words: those that are completely obscure (often long out of the everyday lexicon) and chosen for that purpose, or those that are absurdly and clinically precise. Often the word choice is both at once. Perleman uses, to comic effect, the precise opposite of the writerly *mot juste* (with its connotation of professionalism): the word that for various reasons is most disproportionate or *incommensurate* to his ostensible purpose. These are not, in most cases, simply obscure synonyms of approximate meaning; rather, the word choice has an additional function of pedantic precision ('brogues', 'Dunhill'), as aforesaid; or else it is hyperbolic or otherwise disproportionate in context ('stap my

vitals'). Various kinds of slang words (urban, outdated, borrowed, Yiddish, literary/ generic), for example 'dicer', are also employed, again to obscure or hyperbolic effect. Indeed, it is often only our recognition of the rhetorical *mode* of hyperbole that allows Perelman's language to get its point across, or even have a comic effect: as evident in the description of the Hollywood producer.

4. Perelman's Semiotic Impossibilities: Description, Reflexivity, Representation

I wish to make three distinct points about this style, and subsequently attempt to synthesize them. Firstly, Perelman's unique idiom is (studiously) ineffective, especially to the purpose of literary *description*: that is, ineffective at communicating information (narrative or otherwise) to his popular and non-scholarly readership, even the most educated of whom may wonder, like the dry-cleaner, what on Earth Perelman is saying, unless they have an authoritative dictionary to hand, which, I can attest, is often insufficient. Perelman's descriptions halt narrative progress and, further, turn back on themselves and *erase their own function as descriptions* (by virtue of obscurity or pedantry).

Secondly, there is a very modernist self-reflexivity to this procedure, a determining consciousness of the readerly communities and practices of the magazine.

Thirdly, Perelman's obscurantism is almost always related to the description of a *material thing* (fabric and the like) or *material good* (commodities, brands). I will expand upon this below as that which connects Perelman's literary practice to a view of the nature of signification itself, both as a communicative practice peculiar to our modern (commodity) culture and as a universal problematic of signs and social being.

Perelman's saturation of descriptives becomes, paradoxically, a refusal to describe. In regards to narrative structure, this translates to a refusal to describe events sufficiently to connect them, that is, to *narrate*. Wayward descriptives explode what is already (for aforementioned reasons) a fragile diegetic realm, not simply impeding narrative progress, but maximizing ambiguity in a post-Joycean fashion (recall Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, which is more overtly comprehensible to the reader as being akin to a series of dreams). For example, when Perelman (1972) is trying to somehow get rid of his Pennsylvania farmhouse, he comments:

> …I even tried desertion. Lowering a dory…I began sculling away rapidly. Unfortunately, I had forgotten to remove the flowers that grew in the boat, and nightfall found me still on the lawn with a backache and…head cold. (p. 14)

A 'dory' is a boat, which only helps comprehension so much. The comic core of this is the oft-used device of *literalism*, the confusing of the abstract with the concrete: as if Perelman could escape the legal entanglements of a leased property by physically drifting away. But the style goes farther than the device requires. Did the dory have flowers because it is merely a decorative flower boat? Did Perelman ever get near water (if not,

why the head cold?) or did he simply plummet to the lawn? How does the character perceive (or imagine) his situation before nightfall? A set of concrete actions, taken together, lead to a contradictory, impossible, or non-existent event.

Here we may be authorized to risk a literary correlation to Grice's conversational *Maxim of Quantity*: Perelman strategically gives us too much, or too little, description to produce what would otherwise be an effective (ordinary) communication. But the point to be made is principally literary: a literal understanding of the events that he *purports* to describe becomes impossible and therefore irrelevant, forcing us to select from a variety of potential metaphorical or figural readings to divine a signifying intention (whether conceptual or purely comic) behind such obfuscation. This rather desperate resort to metaphor, I stress, is not authorized or anchored by the text itself: rather, the reader creates such metaphors as might provide an intellectual analogy. Textually, a deceptively, *materially* precise description of cause and effect only invokes something that could not exist outside prose itself; that is, it cannot be a *representation* of something that could be actual, or something outside of symbols (playfully disarranged).

Elsewhere, we are more directly confronted with literary ambiguity, a hedging between the literal and metaphoric, as when Perelman (2014) attends a party but is determined to remain sober despite the enticement of the host:

> The host...linked arms with me. He proposed indistinctly… "Come on kitchen." I rashly extricated myself and backed away. As I did, he reached down the vicinity of his tibia and came up with a haymaker that caught me flush on the button. I melted into the parquet.

A haymaker is a punch. Did the host intend to hit the narrator? (There is no later indication of this). Or are we to take 'haymaker' metaphorically, as something that *virtually* knocks Perelman out, like a drink? The literal, indeed bodily provenance of the diction ('tibia', 'button') suggests not. But later, when the narrator 'wakes', his wife tells him that he has been drinking and misbehaving with the hostess. Is she an eyewitness or a gossip? Perelman himself can neither believe nor confidently deny the accusation. Here, dysfunctional narration blatantly invokes the harrowing philosophic threat of an indecipherable actuality; or, better, the terrifying gap between a postulated actuality and an individual consciousness attempting to verify it through communication with others.

These examples demonstrate Perelman's highly reflexive, perhaps antagonistic, consciousness of his medium, extending not just to fiction generally, but to the magazine, its readers and its purposes, which are often subject to (a comic) decomposition. In my favorite piece, Perelman encounters the magazines *Corset and Underwear Review* and *American Bee Journal* at a local newsstand. After extolling at length the sensuous, titillating images and descriptions of the underwear magazine, Perelman (2014) compares it to the beekeeping journal and heaps scorn on the latter: "sex is whittled down to a nubbin…everything is dull as a hoe…the bee is the *petit bourgeois* of the insect world." Humorously, Perelman pretends to misunderstand publishing conventions whereby

specialist magazines are not perceived as in competition with each other in terms of intended readership. But Perelman's satirical sting is the realization that they *are*, ultimately, competing with each other as pure forms of the market commodity. Perelman's attitude, if it were serious, might eliminate the commercial availability of specialist literature altogether.

The emphasis on literary discourse as a commodity connects reflexivity to my third point, the 'fetishism' of the material in Perelman's diction. Generally, in modern fiction, a saturation of material description serves the purpose of the sensual, enabling prosthetic memories, that is, sense-memories and imaginations. But in Perelman's cold prose the sensual is carefully suppressed in favor of the comic. (If we suspect a textural fetishism in Perelman, the eroticism of this is repressed on the level of style: *except* when this forms the crux of the comedy, as when Perelman (1981), in one superb tale, is lulled into associating female eroticism with stationery).

What, then, could be its function? One could argue, with some justice, that Perelman's diction creates a narrative universe of *things*, not so much in the Beckettian sense of the individual's debilitating encounter with inscrutable objects, but in a culturally situated way in which all encounters with things are ideologically structured by potential acquisition (including the failure to acquire). Succumbing to the desire to *appear* to belong to a higher economic stratum of society, Perelman is often shamed into unnecessary purchases; thus the dandy, which resides in us all, becomes a comic figure.

But textually speaking, not all of Perelman's oblique descriptives function as "goods". I think that we can claim a deeper resonance here between 'material words' and 'commodity words', and one that is less categorical. Commodity words are simply the best examples of the way that that Perelman's broader materialist diction seems to function, *which is to make us conscious of the replacement of material things with their signs*. This is most clear in Perelman's constant and reflexive (mis)use of the language of advertising. In one experimental piece (2014), a wife writes letters to her illicit lover, but in the language of advertising: "I love the upstairs of your lair, the way…you've treated the walls and ceilings. Ken-tone, isn't it? … Contractors no less than homeowners swear by its durability."

Perelman's point about advertising (and the basis of his comic relish) is that rather than the sign leading to the product (the material good itself), the signs of advertising tend to replace the product. Indeed the sign threatens to replaces any conception of material reality, generally, for a fictive universe of pure cliché whose formulae can infect and take over as the primary means of reporting experience…with disastrous results.

It is a commonplace that advertising sells not things, but desire. But desire for what? The advertiser aims at a halfway point wherein the customer's 'conceptual fantasy' about his/her social identity becomes impossible without a certain material totem. But in Perelman's *reduction* the 'consumer' is often sated with the signs itself: with sign fetishism. Do our modern lives not, for the most part, reside in a state of pure, suspended fantasy of linguistic or imagistic evocation? The wife's (exaggerated) love affair takes place largely within her pure fantasies of wish-fulfillment: the real presence of a vengeful,

violent cuckold makes only the barest dent in her consciousness. Do not Perelman's textures and fabrics operate similarly on his own persona?

Such perceived sign fetishism is the source of Perelman's oft-remarked revulsion/ fascination with classical Hollywood,[9] the cultural/economic center of American media. Hollywood's corpulent, overpaid hucksters employ the fantasy world of advertising not to sell material things; rather, signs (posters, etc.) are employed to sell signs (in the case of movies); words (in the case of radio) sell 'air' and other words. Often, the Hollywood poster both promises and *gives* more pleasure than the actual 'product'. Further, what is a Hollywood 'star' (or screen 'goddess') but an emitter of fetishistic signs alluding to something other, something *unattainable*? Thus, we must revise our earlier formulation: signs seem to replace things, but more properly, *signs haphazardly replace other signs at the expense of material reality but also semantic conventions*.

By oversaturating the discourses of advanced capitalism, Perelman seems to repurpose and undercut them. Fragmented and taken to extremes, Perelman's use of advertising clichés, brand names, commodities, fabrics approximate an experimental sign practice, like collage, at the expense of representation. Let us be clear: as Langer (1956) argues, all aesthetic symbolism is, *when compared to the devices of ordinary communication*, more 'presentational' than 'representational'. Within art, this distinction is a question of degree, and art history encompasses radical shifts thereof. Vaudeville, wherein the jokes and puns call attention to their own semiotic function, is highly presentational. But modern fictional narrative (especially before 1920) has an overwhelmingly representational bias, as, indeed, does the philosophy of language. Deleuze (1989) enables us to appreciate how modernism challenged this when he characterizes the modernist cinema as a practice of 'crystal signs,' which may be contrasted to an (earlier) aesthetic of realism in which "the setting described is presented as independent of the description which the camera gives of it and stands for a supposedly pre-existing reality." However:

> What we call a crystalline description stands for its subject, replaces it…both creates and erases it….It is now the description itself which constitutes the sole decomposed and multiplied object….Those pure descriptions…develop a creative and destructive function. In fact, [such] descriptions, which constitute their own object, refer to purely optical and sonic situations… (p. 127)

We should properly beware of conflating image practices and literary practices. What would be the literary sign's equivalent of "pure optic situations"? Nevertheless, I am convinced that Perelman's verbiage is a stylistic tendency at least parallel to Deleuze's 'crystal signs,' wherein 'pure description' replaces its object and stands for itself. One notices, for instance, Perelman's taste for 'substantive' character names like 'Petroleum Nasbe,' for in Perelman's (2014) language, people *are*, in terms of verbal predication, the things that are associated with them: "I realized that the spiny coiffure was…a home permanent and the bulging expanse of gingham below it the rest of Mrs. Kozlich."

5. Solipsism or Semiotic Play?

J. A. Ward (1992, p. 156) interprets Perelman, pessimistically, as illustrating that "there can be no such thing as honest verbal communication because there is no honest community". This is not inaccurate, although it forces the bleak visions of Nathanael West too much on his urbane colleague. Rather, what Perelman has to say about communication relates more directly to incommensurate diction and stylistic allusion. "Honest communication is impossible," yes, but that is for more than sociological reasons. Ward is closer to the mark in observing that Perelman's "pathetic narrator attempts to give a verbal order to his befuddling experience…but the only language available is that of associated artificial cultures….there is no non-artificial culture" (p. 149). But the issue of culture, the unconscious recourse to misleading clichés, is subsumed to a more basic semiotic insight, perhaps more basic even than the defining role of social interaction in determining the forces (*à la* Austin) that attend our speech acts.

Honest communication is not possible because words do not represent us: that is, they do not reach to the concrete particularity of our actual experience of the world, and of each other. The problem is the gap not so much between mind and world, as some philosophers have it, but between life as lived and as represented in linguistic description. This is why, reading Perelman, Louis Hasley (1992, p. 93) "gets the paradoxical idea that reality itself is illusory". Ward (1992, p. 143) writes, "The Perelman hero's sole defense is language…a composite of irrelevant erudition....Perelman's language entraps him…it calls attention to its own falsity."

There are, of course, literary precedents for this problematic. Shakespearean comedy obsesses over the difference between the 'feeling' of love and the stiff, conventionalized expression of it in verse (Shapiro, 2006, p. 207). Correspondingly, Perelman's comedy illustrates, reflexively and narratively, the terrifyingly frequent experience of language breakdown: knowing not what to say, we either speak inadequately, or turn our speech to an entirely different purpose—humor, ruefulness, semiotic play, perhaps all at once.

The realm of signs and sign relations is a social, inter-subjective realm—it is structured by normative convention and requires learning to enter. Therein lies the gap between the individual mind's encounter with other things and beings and the learned sign-practice that, far from achieving ideal description, is inadequate to even some small parts of experience. Is it not, then, universal that this social register of signification can seem alienated and alienating to any sensitive individual? (Do any of my learned categories of feelings adequately identify what *I feel at this moment?*)

Up to this point, Perelman's semiotic intuitions, wherein words represent other words rather than things (hence the overuse of synonyms and idioms), seems both solipsistic and strongly Saussurean. We are reminded of the closed circle of the French Structuralist school of semiotics which led, eventually, to the pernicious cultures of semiotic entrapment in such thinkers as Barthes and Baudrillard. And this may well be a certain anticipatory tendency of Perelman's thought. Yet, I would argue that there is more to

Perelman than either entrapment or the comedian's 'resigned acceptance' of a disparate world (e.g. Heilman, 1978). Perelman, unlike Barthes or Baudrillard, derives a certain renegade positivity from the aesthetic pleasures of the world of words, which seem the more amusing the more they drift out of proportion to concrete experience. Perelman takes a certain delight in "some idiotic phrase in the full garishness of its ramification" leading to a style of "instant externalization, instant metamorphosis" (Hollander in French, 1992, p. 103). This playful 'metamorphosis' of language clearly functions by de-anchoring language as representation (as in puns, for example).

Perhaps in proportion to their ultimate inefficiency, our 'alien' linguistic signs take on an independent, in a sense autonomous, life. Perhaps communication exists not so much for the receiver, as theory assumes, but for the writer/speaker to 'hear' himself, whose own words come back to him, estranged, insufficient, but possessing a certain interest, a certain life apart from the triadic relation, the attempt to represent, in which they originated. In the midst of incomprehension and the threat of semiotic nothingness, unexpected encounters still occur in Perelman's world of the quotidian and clichéd: even dry-cleaning can become a passionate struggle of wills in a romantic idiom. Such a recognition of the separate life of words seems to me to revise Emerson: "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain *alienated majesty*." Perelman seems to say, more universally, that all semiotic transactions, and especially those that originate with us, bring our originary thoughts back to us with alienated majesty. Literary 'genius' may reside primarily in the sensitivity required to profitably overhear ourselves in prose.[10] "Writing stands against psychology, against interiority, by giving the author the possibility of something more…" (Polan, 1986, p. xxiii).

Theroux recalls that Perelman once crashed his car in India but was able, in his mind, to compensate for the disappointment by being able to use the word 'totaled,' as in, "I *totaled* it". The point is not that Perelman has adequately described the experience—quite the opposite. Rather, as *per* a romantic conception of writing, experience has furnished raw material for the writerly use of words. Life can and perhaps must be experienced as the source of *semiotic play*—rather like the repurposing of advertising. Here is a rejoining of the semiotic community via a differential, non-conformist route;[11] does this point to a general theory of comedy? Perelman's positivity is, perhaps, a somewhat Pater-esque and dandified one in a chaotic and coercive world—but a dandyism that has come to grips, under capitalism, with a perhaps despairing recognition of the failure of all modern social systems to achieve 'undistorted communication' (Habermas, 1979).

6. A Minor Literature?

Perelman's writerly sense of the liberating play of signs, both prior to and after the (compromised) attempt to represent, resonates with Deleuze's 'minor literature': a decomposing arrangement of language into 'intensities' of expression that cannot conform

to conventional literary structures: first, the binary structure of form and content, and second, the formal semantic quest for 'fixity' of representation. The question I now pose is this: does Perelman's incommensurate style amount to a minor literature? Do the signs of his literary descriptions (really non-descriptions) provide, by their very oversaturation, a 'line of escape' from the tyranny of linguistic signs as representations and as embedded commandments (*mots d'ordre*)?

Deleuze and Guattari (1986) 'discover' the innovation of a 'minor' literary practice in Kafka's linguistic evocation of non-linguistic signs or expressions: photos, pictures, memories, and music. He begins with a distinction between representation-forms (e.g. photos) which in Kafka lead to oppressed, blocked desires, and sound, which opens out desires. But Deleuze then rejects this approach as too simple: "it isn't a question of liberty against submission, but only a question of a line of escape, a way out" (p. 6). Kafka emphasizes sounds that are "unformed material[s] of expression…a cry that escapes signification, composition…to be less and less formalized." The key is to escape as far as possible the 'chain' of signification… "to be as little signifying as possible" until "intensity alone matters" (p. 6).

So far, these evocations of "non-signifying signs" (p. 13) seem antithetical to Perelman's accumulation of material descriptives, which do not escape the verbal so much as wallow in it; except that his unique style, like Kafka's use of sound, "is always connected to its own abolition." In this, Deleuze finds another potential line of flight: "the firmest and most resistant formalization will themselves lose their rigidity in order to proliferate or prepare an upheaval in which they fall into new lines of intensity" (p. 6). In just this way, Perelman's 'over-formalized' diction seems to proliferate until collapsing into semiotic play. For Deleuze, Kafka's stories use this stratagem to escape the Oedipal organization (of psyche and of narrative) by "comic amplification" (p. 10), a grotesque exaggeration of Oedipal relations "enlarged to the point of absurdity, comedy", which explodes them (p. 10). As Kafka wrote, "…tragedies are written about it, yet...it is material for comedy" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 13). In a parallel manner, another 'marginal Jew,' Perelman, reacts not to Oedipus but to the American regime and discourse of commodity. This, too, for Deleuze, has an affinity with Kafka: "What Kafka immediately anguishes…in is not the father or the superego or some sort of signifier but the American technocratic apparatus…or the machinery of fascism" (p. 13). The common struggle between Kafka and Perelman is that of the immigrant's son, "the father, as a Jew who leaves the country to settle in the city, never stops reterritorializing in his family, in his business, in the system of his submissions and of his authorities" (p. 12).

There remains, in Perelman's Kafkaesque observance of the endless formulae, clichés, and *méconnaissances* of American capitalism, a certain pessimism in Perelman by which the 'drift' of meaning seems to a occasion a crisis of truth (which therefore recedes to the background). Perhaps Perelman went too far in rejecting his mentor Marx (who in turn expressed reservation about Perelman's style). If Perelman seems to approach relativism, Marx begins and ends with pragmatism, wherein what remains true is what works in

practice, the linguistic mode of access to which is not in itself linguistic, but, rather, resides in the context-specific uses of expressions.

7. Outsiders vs. Elites in Marx: The Stakes of Nonsense

It was Deleuze who first tentatively recognized that in Groucho Marx, the rich linguistic resources of Vaudeville had culminated in a humor of modernist, semiotic self-consciousness. Deleuze (1986) sees in the three Marx Brothers a theatrical allegory of Peirce's famous triadic classification of all sign relations (and, hence, modes of being). Harpo, the silent, purely self-involved clown, represents Peirce's Firstness, a sign in its natural mode of existence as pure potentiality, prior to "reference to anything else" (p. 98). Chico, the con artist, who also strives to comprehend and react to Harpo's silent gestures, represented Secondness (the differentiation between two things or signs wherein one phenomenon responds to another). But Groucho, the wit, is Thirdness, or the complete sign *relation* in the union of all three elements, encompassing mental relation, "logical relation…the symbolic elements of law…and intellectual feelings" that arise from relations, "feelings which accompany the use of logical conjunctions: because, although, now, etc." (p. 197). Groucho "pushes the art of interpretation to its final degree, because he is the master of *reasoning*, of arguments and syllogisms which find a pure expression in nonsense" (p. 213).

But what is this nonsense? What is its force in the context of his 'art of interpretation'? The verbal stylings of Groucho reveal the slidings and vacillations of everyday communication by which we, at one time, view utterances as propositional and truth-conditional (a function of language that institutional discourse, in particular, tends to reify), and, in the next moment, as *expressive speech* that only 'makes sense' in particular (performative) contexts of social interaction.

The Marx Brothers were tested specialists in classic comic rhetoric—the Shakespearean pun, the *double entendre*, equivocation, language games between the rube and the affected sophisticate—but it was Groucho's comic innovation to raise 'nonsense' to the level of non-conformism. Let us consider the social settings of this comic 'non-conformism,' settings in which 'expected' behavior is *de rigeur*. In *Horse Feathers* (1932, partly written by Perelman, partly by the team of Marx, Harry Ruby, Bert Kalmar), Groucho wreaks havoc on an ivy league college where he has become the unlikely president. *Animal Crackers* (1930) features Groucho as a social pretender wreaking havoc in polite society, at a lavish estate. *A Night at the Opera* (1935) chronicles the Marxes in the world of New York's *haute couture*. The pattern is obvious: critics (e.g. Mast,1979) univocally agree that the Marx Brothers are comic anarchists who use lowbrow Vaudeville routines as an impudent, hostile challenge to society's ruling elites: the Upper Class, bankers, art patrons, and mandarins of the elite universities.

A social institution is linguistically and hence normatively considered as a substantive or thing: permanence is both its self-image and its aspiration. I am often struck by the

speeches of university hierarchs: they never tire of stating what they *still are* despite a century or more of changes. These structures of discourse tend towards qualitative description as proof of unchanging persistence, anchored by concepts that remain self-identical: the comforting semiotic stability of *meaning* and hence value. In institutional discourse (like Deleuze's *mots d'ordre*), it is as if rhetoric itself ensures qualitative permanence. Austin's discovery of speech acts threatened to collapse a house of cards in identifying linguistic communications that depend not at all on the standard meaning of the expression but by the intentions of the speakers in the given situation (Levinson, 1983).Marx's performative and skeptical (mis)use of the resources of the system of discourse—as well as prevailing standards of proper diction—exposes institutional self-reference as the pompous pretense of fixities that evaporate in the moment of utterance. Consider this university president's inaugural speech, from *Horse Feathers*:

> GROUCHO: As I look out over your eager faces I can readily understand why this college is flat on its back. The last college I presided over…*I* was flat on my back.
> PROFESSOR (*cautionary*): Professor Wagstaff, now that you have stepped into my shoes…
> GROUCHO: Oh is that what I stepped in?...If these are your shoes, the least you could do is have them cleaned.
> PROFESSOR: The trustees have a few suggestions that I would like to submit to you.
> GROUCHO: I think you know what the trustees can do with their suggestions.

The outgoing president tries to emphasize continuity; Groucho's jarring rudeness bends the ceremony to his immediate, performative intentions (e.g. skepticism, power). *Social realities* (of which language itself is one) enjoy no semi-permanence in the manner of physical entities and, more controversially, *have no essential properties*. At the level of human experience, what anything *is* is little more than a set of signs comprehensible only in their immediate use and interactions with sign-using subjects. An institution, as Groucho recognizes above, can be (accurately) *said* to be only what its members are engaged in doing at the moment of utterance. As Deleuze concludes, "The questions 'What does such a sign mean? What does it stand for?' are replaced by 'How does it affect me? To which concrete social, political, erotic arrangements is it connected?'" (Colombat, 2000, p. 18). This was the semiotic and consequently social intuition built into Marx's unique comic style, which involves the meeting of the joke or 'wisecrack' with the very conditions of its possibility.

8. Illogic in Context: Three Examples of Marxian Wit

How does such intentional "nonsense" translate to social insight? It is not sufficient to tell 'truth' to power. For the 'ghettoized' Jew, as Marx (1989) opined, "steady and consistent lying was the only road to survival" (p. 71). Dishonesty is a shock to the systems of all major semantic theories, which build upon sincerity. But is lying fundamental to our self-

presentation in social interactions?

Yet here, again, Marx is differential from the norm, even the comic norm: his 'illogic' is nebulously situated as neither lie, nor subterfuge, nor sincere cooperation. In terms of the Gricean maxims, such nonsense is *non-cooperative*, dysfunctional communication, and hence relatively uncommon even in aesthetic discourse. The essence of Groucho's performative wit is to refuse what is rightly expected of him: effective speech. This extends even to the discourse of sex. Marx (2000) fearlessly alienates his would-be partners by refusing to obey the linguistic codes or expected rituals of 'the game' (e.g., "Mrs. Rittenhouse, ever since I've met you I've swept you off my feet" (p. 24)).

In this space, three further examples, or varieties, of Marxian logical and semantic subversion must suffice. First, an off-the-cuff remark upon meeting his secretary (and memoirist) Steve Stoliar:

STOLIAR: I'm Steve.
GROUCHO: You don't look like him.

Here, what appears as 'illogic' is partly a manipulation of semantic convention. Names in our culture are not unique identifiers, but Groucho perversely (/humorously) assumes they are (implying, e.g., "I know Steve, and you're not him."). Groucho may be indicating, performatively, that Steve has given too little information, in violation of Grice's *Maxim of Quantity*. And Groucho, typically, refuses to 'balance' Steve's failing with a cooperative response (e.g., "Steve Who?").

A more subtle interpretation is possible. In the performative context of a *physical* meeting, Stoliar's self-introduction is perfectly sufficient to establish his identity. But Marx may be parodying, intuitively, the dominant views of language of his era, which *had* no working concept of implicature or conventional force; they broadly emphasized a set of semantic features associated with words as context-independent structural units. Thus, to apply such theories might be pedantically, perhaps absurdly, to demand from Stoliar a more complete formulation of his greeting.

There is also another level to such discourses regarding the social role of 'comedian'. Stoliar knows that the famous Groucho is expected to 'be funny'. Groucho's uncooperative remarks function perfectly *in the vein* of the licensed 'fool', indeed the 'wise fool' of Renaissance invention. He is expected to some extent to place humor above ordinary styles of communication.[12] However, this rough generalization needs qualification: many comic practices and witticisms *do* function within the boundaries of Grice's maxims; and more importantly, comedians are expected to submit to 'the ordinary' when *outside* of the giving of performances. And this refusal is of the essence of Marx's wit (like Wilde's): his social persona *is* the art. Accepted boundaries (e.g. on-stage and off-stage) are dissolved.

Few comedians operate by extracting the 'illogical' from discourse. Consider a second example from Marx's (1989) 'pseudo-auto-biography': "My father…gave all his old clothes to my grandfather, who had been dead for seven years" (p. 166). I quote this as exemplifying

the rare humor of *pure* nonsense, of which no persuasive 'sense' can be made, metaphorical or otherwise: it simply defies interpretation. Here, neither context nor implicature are helpful: perhaps that is the *point* (as distinct from *sense*), of which more below.

At its best, Marx's wit approaches the limits of verbal comprehension and helps to show where those limits are. Taking a man's pulse, Groucho declares, "Either this man is dead, or my watch has stopped."[13] This locution, too, defies analysis. Perhaps the relevance is that the logic of statements that *appear* to be connected—as in Marx's humor generally—is simply irrelevant. The argumentative structure (either x or y) is readily apparent, but semantically, the two possibilities referenced are not mutually exclusive. Now this much, in itself, is not remarkable. In everyday conversation, useful statements of alternatives that are *not* mutually exclusive are quite common. What, then, is so uncanny about the joke? Is it merely Groucho's non-cooperation in the face of death, and disease?

The nonsensical, here, arises out of a specific context. What makes two reasonable alternatives—(1) the 'patient' has no heartbeat or (2) he does indeed have a heartbeat which Groucho wishes he could measure—so absurd? Because Groucho, who is holding the man's wrist, ought to know better. His 'useless' statement neither obeys nor productively flouts Grice's maxims. Marx's speech act seems to defy the very context that renders it so 'radically unnecessary'. The implication of such defiance (a comic language in and for itself?) resists any conventional, critical understanding. Perhaps a *negative* relation to context paradoxically underscores its centrality: when signs in context cease to work, they pull the rug out from under the notion that there is *anything else* (e.g. the bourgeois-naturalist reification of truth and logic). Or perhaps performance outstrips meaning and intention as a mode of artistic representation and, possibly, of being, that demands recognition.

Generally, I have tried to show how both Perlman's and Marx's self-conscious, modernist play of language parallel key developments in pragmatics, semiotics and semiotically-inspired literary theory. Perelman's self-abnegating diction locates existence in the despairing/liberating space between linguistic signs and their referents. Marxian illogic intuits that utterances, and the people that make them, cannot be sufficiently understood by reference to logical connections and/or a collection of lexical items with certain core semantic features—since neither of these appreciate the implicatures and intentions actualized in pre-given social contexts. Both humorists provided a riposte both to the naive representationalism of an anti-intellectual culture and to then-current academic abstractions and distortions. They might have agreed that truth, as attempted to be conveyed in language, is impossible. Even indubitable essentials, like "boys will be boys," are useless without social, and, hence, historical contexts. For Marx and Perelman there are no essences: for Perelman, only the flow of signifying materials, the endless parade; for Marx, performance and role, the endless charade.

Notes

1   This borrowing and influence between Vaudeville and prose worked in both directions:

Groucho Marx (1989), considerably older than Perelman, confessed that stage comedians started out by "stealing a few jokes from…newspapers and comic magazines" (p. 88).

2   The phrase 'conceptual logic' is relevant here insofar as some forms of logic rely on the assumption that concepts have determinate boundaries.

3   There is some justification for this association of linguistic theory, proper, with literary theory. The first two theories are distinct branches of the *pragmatic* theory of language in that they were developed originally by philosophers of language concerned to criticize certain *earlier* doctrines of their peers: more specifically, the twentieth century programs of the logical positivists and others to *reconstruct* ordinary language, or to extract from it a well-organized rational core, comprising a so-called "logical grammar", suitable for the making of unambiguous empirical, i.e., scientific, reference. Deleuze's theory, though post-structuralist in orientation, appeals to the earlier tradition of linguistic thought embedded in Peirce's philosophy of *pragmaticism*, one of the wellsprings of linguistic pragmatics. Deleuze applied a revision of Peircean semiotics to the purpose of classifying and distinguishing kinds of sign-practices in art and literature.

4   See Ohnuki-Tierney (2000) for concrete illustrations (in the context of Japanese imperial aggression from 1932 – 1945) of how political discourses and especially national symbols operate according to *méconnaissance*, by which whole populations might conflate radically different, even contradictory concepts because each concept has been conventionally associated, over time, with the same symbol (for example, the Japanese flag).

5   In contrast to Peirce, the Saussurean concept of the sign is already linguistic, resulting in "reduction to the dualism signifier/signified, to the syntagmatic, to a narration and ultimately to a reign of the Signifier, the Judgment of God and that of an interpreter" (Colombat, 2000, pp. 21-22). For Deleuze, the problem with linguistic signs, which were the entire basis for French semiotics, is that "command and performance is at the heart of grammar, information, communication" (p. 22). As illocutionary acts, linguistic signs tend to become immediately associated with "the concept of the 'order-word'…the French *mots d'ordre* commonly used to refer to a command for action given by both a concrete and symbolic power structure...to a group…" (p. 15). The Lacanian concept of the signifier, especially, joins with the older Christian, theological linguistic tradition ("the Judgment of God" as signifier) because "the signs of the Freudian family theater of the unconscious can be subsumed under the revelation of the same Signifier, the Phallus and the submission of the subject to…terrifying commandments…" (pp. 17-18).

6   To be precise, Perelman began by drawing humorous cartoons and providing the captions for them. He slowly changed his focus to 'straight' humorous writing.

7   Victorian dandyism was already self-consciously nonconformist and culturally revolutionary, according to the same procedure that Chaplin and The Marx Brothers utilized, in a different era, with their lower-class 'outsider's' comedy—that is, by marking out its difference from the expected forms, manners, appearances and social habits of the ruling class and its associated groups and institutions. Oscar Wilde's outrageous social perceptions ("Patriotism is the virtue of the vicious"; "Work is the curse of the drinking classes") and fashion consciousness

("fashion is a form of ugliness so intolerable that it must be changed every six months") marked an ironic contrast to the accepted discourses and the visual signs, respectively, of an entrenched and largely unchanging upper class and upper *bourgeoisie* intent on giving the appearance of stability. These elite personae and their staunch, stunted habits remained highly visible in the American stage comedy of the 1920s and 1930s. (A slightly later development, the incongruous existence of the *nouveau riche*, or the permeation of 'old money' by people of working class origins *without* the expected habits of discourse and appearance, was the preoccupation of countless comic plays and films of the 1930s as well, not least Perelman/Marx's *Monkey Business* (1931), with Groucho himself frequently taking the part of the upper class 'pretender' or infiltrator of some sort.

8   To be sure, we must be mindful that there are complex structures, beyond diction, particular to Perelman. There is the abrupt 'mixage' of stylistic registers, usually paralleled by juxtaposition of categories of cultural reference. John Hollander would notice that "he would combine in the same sentence and sometimes in the same phrase absolute gutter Yiddish and high elegant 18th century prose…together…they would combine to drive out the middle level of vulgarity" (French, 1992, p. 98). John Wain (1992) also noticed this "lightning juxtaposition of irreconcilables" (p. 79) as an essential Perlman mode, but even this substantially operates *via* the basic emphasis on diction, on the juxtaposition of Victorian and Edwardian 'elevated' diction and contemporary slang or idiomatic expressions.

9   cf. Ward (1992). John Wain (1992) argues that Perelman, despite his professed distaste for both movies and Hollywood, owed his singular style to cinematic montage and juxtaposition: "The Aim is always to create an art which will hold dissimilar elements in some kind of unity" (p. 82). This is apt: however, Wain ignores the prior influence of Vaudeville, which was already an abrupt, fragmented juxtaposition of styles, registers, and ethnic and cultural differences.

10 This is indeed, for Harold Bloom, the source of Shakespeare's literary genius, in particular his innovative talent for personation, the representation of human beings who 'overhear' their own thoughts: see Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1994).

11 This argument, as well as the earlier regarding Perelman's satirical reflections on consumption and reading as consumption, is meant to refute the rather hollow argument of Louis Hasley, full of presupposition as it is, that Perelman as a writer is limited "in the scales of serious literary criticism" because "his social satire is without depth" and suffers from a "relative paucity of positive ideas….What ideals he holds do not emerge from his pages" (p. 94).

12 The social role of the clown and the social-psychological function of laughter, comic statements, and the comic attitude has been so thoroughly investigated by the critical tradition since Bergson (cf. Palmer's anthology, 1983), that I shall not attempt to expand upon this here. I have focused on what might be considered the 'higher-level' implications of certain comedic uses of language.

13 This dialogue appears in The Marx Brother's independently-produced film, *A Night in Casablanca* (1946). Typically with Marx (whose revisions and improvisations were always uncredited), the script has been attributed to his various young protégés, in this case, Roland Kibbee, Joseph Fields, and Frank Tashlin.

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