INTRODUCTION

Trying to get at the humour in a story and analysing and understanding it part by part is like tearing apart a beautiful flower, labelling each pistil, every petal before putting it all together again. The aftermath is never quite the same. Analysing poetry is bad enough, analysing humour is more Humpty Dumptyish, for all the literary soldiers can never put it back again. The original story will never be the same, for the penalty of all knowledge indeed is the loss of surprise.

It may appear a contradiction in terms, but humour is serious business. Like speech and mathematics, humour is also a specific human characteristic. The seriousness of humour is not generally recognised, leave alone accepted. Comedy has always been considered inferior to Tragedy, perhaps because of the human tendency to equate gravity with importance.

A simple examination of any library shelf would reveal how much more time and effort is invested in attempting to analyse and study Tragedy than Comedy. Louis D. Rubin Jr. rightly remarks, "Thalia, the Muse of Comedy, has always been something of a wallflower in critical circles, and the
attention has gone principally to Melpomene and her more glamorous celebrants of Tragedy.¹

It is unfortunate that, in seeking to appreciate humour, critics tend to justify their stand by trying to 'elevate' humour: they try to analyse the 'basic human condition' behind the amusement, make tremendous efforts to get at the tragedy behind the humour, the vision above it, the message within it, and so on ad infinitum. All these, one cannot but feel, are escapist efforts - to escape from humour as a reality.

For the tragic mode in itself cannot comprehend the whole of the human condition. While one's experience involves sorrow, disappointment, failure and even despair, it has also involved joy, hope and the pride of achievement. In indulging in this lopsidedness of emphasising only the tragic mode, we have neglected valuable insights into the understanding of human society as a whole. Even following Jonson's dictum that the design of humour is to expose the follies of mankind, we must grant the value of humour in prising out shortcomings of individuals and defects of institutions.

Today, the word 'Humour' is so loosely used that it cannot stake its claim to even a fair degree of precision; it connotes everything from clowning to the bizarre to the philosophical.

This thesis does not attempt to analyse the different 'kinds' of humour, or to differentiate between Comedy, wit, burlesque, etc. To define comedy, for example, as that which causes laughter, is as foolish as defining Tragedy as that which causes tears. We can, however, identify some constituents of humour; such as originality, observation of oddities, and relativity of thinking.

Originality can be defined as something where the "data of experience assumes the aspect of paradoxes." Originality lies in the subject, the antecedents leading to the humour, the style of narration, etc. The humourist also has a sharper eye for the oddities and contrasts of human experience - an eye for 'suggestive significance'. Relativity or the habit of thinking from more than one point of view involves detachment and objectivity on the part of the humourist.

This could best be illustrated with an example. In Mark Twain's The Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn, the episode
of the enactment of 'The Royal Nonesuch' makes us have a hearty laugh at the ignorant townspeople duped by the two old rascals. But we could not laugh if we had been the audience involved in the situation. Mark Twain puts us, the real audience, into a position of complacency, with a tinge of self approval that we haven't been duped so.

This insulation is the strategy of humour followed by Twain. If the insulation and therefore the distance is destroyed, the very nature of humour is threatened. Yet, it is this very threat that is necessary for humour. If there is no threat, the humour becomes more 'safe' and therefore more predictable, and our laughter will be less spontaneous.

Humour has meandered through a host of associations: from the trivial and farcical the funny and laughter-arousing; the kindly and good natured; to the dark and macabre. This last, also known as black humour\(^2\), violates sacred taboos, discovering cause for laughter in what has traditionally been regarded as too serious for frivolous treatment—anguish, disintegration of social institutions, mental and physical deformities, suffering and death.

Why then is black humour popular? Or at least, not

\(^2\) Black here is no reference to race or colour.
rejected outright? Let us examine an example.

"Little Willie, from the mirror,
Licked the mercury right off,
Thinking in his childish error,
It would cure the whooping cough.
At the funeral, his mother
Smartly quipped to Mr. Brown,

"'Twas a chilly day for Willie
When the mercury went down."³

How can these stanzas, with such an apparently callous mother
and flippant treatment of death, amuse? A knowledge of the
background of the joke would help:

1. Child mortality was high in Victorian times; consequently
we find a large number of sorrowful poems and ballads
about dead or dying children.

2. 'Little Willie' was the contemptuous manner with which
the British soldiers referred to Prince Wilhelm of Germany.

Thus the target is not the social fact of children
dying, but the literary form of ballads and elegies. Humour
nearly always presupposes some piece of factual knowledge shared
by the humourist and his audience.

3. Quoted by Walter Nash, The Language of Humour : Style and
Technique in comic discourse, (Title No.16, English
Humour, therefore, is a method of protesting against the inequality of the struggle to live, raising pertinent questions and criticising established methods, atonement and reconciliation, in short, a teflon defence from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

The humourous episodes are linked to the narrative; that is, they are anecdotes, but they are also paradigms of a total theme that encompasses the story or sometimes a sequence of stories. A complex work of humour involves relationships between the overt text and the covert context.

Thus, to fully comprehend the humour in a piece of literature, we should know the cultural and social facts of the region and country beliefs, attitudes and modes of communication. There should exist a fund of common knowledge and recollection from which the joke draws its sustenance; we share our humour with those who understand our way of interpreting experience. "Humour is not for babes, Martians or congenital idiots."

Yet we cannot altogether rule out differences in interpretation of experience between individuals, regions.

and countries. That is, because our experiences are different, there will certainly be differences in our insight into a work of foreign literature. Sir James Plimsoll justifiably observes "In view of the many differences between Indian and Australian experience and problems, the illumination they throw on each other in literature are frequently those of a cartoon, not of a self-portrait."5

Australian writing, like Indian English writing, is part of the whole stream of writing in the English language, which includes the vast quantities of English (not necessarily British) writing up to the present century. Since we find similarities in the histories of the two nations: such as both being under the British thumb, (Australian citizens still have to swear allegiance to the British throne), both depend primarily on farming, and both wage battle against the elements of Nature such as fire, flood and drought. Common problems such as these should lead to common themes, or at least familiar ones.

Australian writing can thus have a special reference to Indians and vice versa, in that they face similar problems: though sometimes an understanding may be achieved through contrast rather than similarity. For example, although both

peoples have to bow to the vagaries of Nature, there is a considerable difference in standards of living, which would in turn colour their attitude. And a profitable way to understand mutual attitudes is through their humour. Hence the study of the short stories of R.K. Narayan and Henry Lawson, representatives of the two literatures, and their finest humourists.

IV

Humour, then, is not the privilege of any country or any time. Rather it is an aspect of thought in time, and forms the mental progress of a people. One might say that it is through the humour - whether of theme, situation or character- of the works of literature that one can gain a deeper understanding into a country: more so if the author is representative of the country.

That a writer is representative is seen in the truthfulness of his subjects and observation of a phase of life either of contemporary value or one destined to pass into the annals of history, yet relevant to his people; it can be summed up in one word - 'typical'. As Plimsoll puts it, "A reason for reading a good Australian novel, and a reason why it is good, is that it is Australian, though it is part of the whole corpus of literature in the English language - just as an essential element in an Indian work
being good is that it is Indian, though it might be written in English and dealing with universal values and forces. 6

Henry Lawson started writing at a time when Australia was just coming into its own; he writes of the rigours, the isolation and the peace of the bush; of pioneering and of bush life. His stories reflect the problems of meaning and existence in a society that was being reordered, and former distinctions of class being rearranged in accordance with the realities of a changing community; in other words, a society caught in the process of formation.

R.K. Narayan focuses on the middle class home, the joint family, and the customs and traditions of the Indian sub-continent. His unerring instinct in portraying human traits and qualities and acutely observed details of people and places give his work a dimension of realism. His vision of life is coloured by a comic spirit best defined as anonymous and pervasive.

Both these writers wrote for an audience that was not so completely dependent on T.V., radio or the cinema for popular entertainment as today; their audience looked only to the theatre or the lighter products of book publication for good entertainment.

In any country, a capacity for self-criticism, which begins from the perception of incongruities, is essential if it were to progress at all, and this surely is one of the responsibilities of its writers. And what better way to self-criticism than humour?

Thus, when we consider how necessary it is to help a country maintain its balance and flexibility, we turn to humour. The works of R.K. Narayan and Henry Lawson, in addition to their other intrinsic merits, make us realise the fragility of human relationships, alert us to the natural folly of rushing headlong into conclusions, and in short, help maintain national sanity.