Irony Subjectivity, Supersession:

Explorations of a Modal System of Comedy in the Works of VS Naipul and Mario Vargas Llosa

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I. Polemical (Re-)Introduction

“If ontology were possible at all, it would be possible in an ironic sense, as the epitome of negativity.”

Although he remains a consistently polarizing public figure, vacillating from a celebrated Nobel Prize winner in 2001 to the subject of recent international scandal regarding blatantly sexist remarks, VS Naipaul remains one of the masters of 20th century comedic literature. Particularly in the novels from the first stage of his career—from his first published novel, The Mystic Masseur, up to A House for Mr. Biswas—one is ample proof of his stunning ability to generate humor from memorable characters, well-crafted plot turns, and through his characteristic wit and nuance. But these works also testify to Naipaul’s unique manner of representing the fundamentally real aspects of social life, from the colorful particularity of a local culture to the depths of its material suffering and poverty, as well as the social relations that sustain such conditions. Such social and political content, however, is expressed through the innovative functioning of the comedy and its singular formal, technical method—rather than in spite of these comic elements. Naipaulian comedy is distinct from tragicomedy, in which humor “sugars the pill” of what is otherwise more profound, horrifying social substance; rather than relying on any aesthetic division of labor, the comedic as such is the very means by which its own social substance is realized. Through a carefully structured and, as we will see, ironic, narrative standpoint his comedy functions in a sophisticated, yet wholly systematic manner, which will form the substance of my analysis. The idiosyncratic, ironic equilibrium that is Naipaulian comedy allows for a polymorphous, highly memorable representation of Trinidadian society in a period of tremendous social change, between the years following the colonial practice of indentured servitude (roughly 1917) through the post-World War II nationalist-independence movements. His development as a writer was remarkably swift within the space of
these works, culminating in a genuine comic masterwork that truly encapsulates this historical epoch, through the life of Mohun Biswas.

The relative neglect that these works have recently fallen into owes in large part to the fact that critics have long read Naipaul’s fiction through the filter of the author’s notorious ideological affinities as a public figure. His numerous controversial commentaries, ranging from reactionary elitism to blatantly sexist remarks, though justly deserving critical attention, have resulted in a critical bias that is predisposed to dismiss Naipaul’s fiction *en masse* as “neo-colonialist”, chauvinistic, or even to pathologize his perceived colonized false-consciousness². His ridicule of the culture of Trinidad Indians is viewed as being purely pessimistic and dehumanizing, and his skepticism of nationalist, identity-based movements has earned him a reputation for conservatism. While there is certainly truth to both of these general characterizations, I argue that such claims, which constitute much of contemporary analysis pertaining to Naipaul, are critical *a priori* that must be, to a large extent, bracketed out if the quite complex, objective workings of Naipaulian comedy are to be properly understood. Otherwise such analysis risks failing to account for Naipaul’s nuanced, realist insights and their actual subversive potential, since more often than not, the content of these works resist the claims of conservatism and cynicism laid against him. This is to say nothing of the fact that any reading of literature that falls into this “ideological fallacy” tends to ignore, *tout court*, the remarkable ability of these novels simply to generate humor, let alone account for the structure and function by which the comedies work. Reading Naipaul through his explicit, extra-aesthetic ideologies is a symptom of a more general failure to take his comedic form properly into account. Although an adequate polemic against such claims is outside the territory of this essay, I
hope to illustrate the critical depths of Naipaul’s work, even if the central object of analysis remains, *ultima instantia*, one of *form*.3

The lack of scholarship concerning Naipaul’s work also reflects a general lack of rigorous theory concerning comedy *sui generis*, which remains relatively undervalued within the hierarchy of the *belles lettres*. Although this essay has no such grandiose aspirations, it will present, in germ form, one possible avenue for engaging with comedy in such a manner. This will draw from the valuable insights of Northrop Frye’s *The Anatomy of Criticism* as a theoretical basis, attempting to refine, extend, or complicate Frye’s principles as necessary in the application of them to Naipaul’s body of work. His “Theory of Modes”, its formulations concerning the “power of action” and the ironic mode of comedy in particular, will serve as a crucial starting point for understanding Naipaul’s sophisticated comedic form. This will be further developed through a psychoanalytic, particularly a Lacanian, lens, to explain the formal method of these novels, which, in short, posits a superior narrative vantage point in relation to the society it represents and functions by affirming this superior standpoint (an implicit, aesthetic form of subjectivity) through a symbolic mastery of this society as Other. This concept is based on Frye’s notion that the aesthetic sacrifice of *pharmakos* constitutes the core function of ironic comedy, and is in my formulation referred to as the “desire” of the ironic text, the symbolic mastery over that which is different and inferior from the standpoint of the self. I argue that Naipaul’s comedy functions through three “sub-modes” of this relation of self to Other—the comedy of manners, the social satire, and comedic *jouissance*—which establish, expand, and contradict the function of this ironic comedy, as a mode, and compose the disparate, complex formal unity of Naipaul’s fiction.4
The case of VS Naipaul has an affinity with another Latin American literary master, Mario Vargas Llosa. In a similar manner to Naipaul, the latter has attracted notoriety for his increasing conservative politics, particularly in the past two decades, which even, in the early 1990’s led to his infamous presidential bid on a neo-liberal platform in his home country. The parallels extend beyond the ideological, however, as Vargas Llosa’s comedic novels—particularly *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service* and the massively popular *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* but also later works such as *In Praise of the Stepmother*—are clearly structured using an ironic narrative standpoint, to say nothing of their tremendous success in generating humor or their popular appeal. But despite the fact that Vargas Llosa has been the subject of much critical attention, and (along with Naipaul) a Nobel Prize notwithstanding, these novels have received sparse attention in respect to the remarkable comedic form at the heart of their success. Rather they are, at best, critically mined for the innovative facets of the narrative structure or, more commonly, used as evidence against the controversial author-cum-ideologue. My analysis of Naipaul’s comedic method—in terms of the tripartite structural division into three sub-modes and how they function (their “desire-relation”)—will thus be followed by a comparison to that of Vargas Llosa within the same theoretical parameters. The purpose of this will be, in addition to contributing a different perspective on the opus of another Latin American author, will be to further develop the basis for a theory of comedy, which, unfortunately, this essay can only begin to trace. Vargas Llosian comedy, as we will see, follows several of the comedic tendencies of its predecessor, but differs significantly in the terms in which they are expressed.
I. Frye’s “Theory of Modes” or Quasi-“Historical Criticism”

In *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye delineates a system for classifying types of fiction based upon the “different elevations of the characters within them” (Frye 33). Different elevations are understood as the relative relationship of the “hero” to “us”, the readers; whether the protagonist is cast as superior, equivalent, or inferior in status to “other men and to the environment of other men” (Ibid). Frye measures this relationship through his concept of the hero’s “power of action,” the specific status of the hero differentiated by five separate modes, which correspond to specific historical periods: myth, romance, high mimetic, low mimetic and the ironic. Each mode describes the power of action relationship as it corresponds to these dominant categories of fiction from the Classical age to the contemporary period. In each successive mode the hero’s power of action decreases, as the “superior” heroes of the Greek epics (often gods or mythic figures) give way to the relatively inferior subjects of more modern fiction, such as the protagonists of Kafka’s oeuvre. Within this framework of successive modes, the ironic mode represents the culmination, in which the status differential is reversed and the reader is positioned as superior to the hero. The ironic mode creates for the reader an emboldened distance, a relatively detached and critical standpoint in relation to the protagonist, as well as the larger social body to which the protagonist may or may not belong.

The fictional mode is said to be comic, as opposed to tragic, when its underlying meta-narrative concerns the process of the “integration of society” (Frye 43). Traditionally this takes the form of incorporating a central character into a social space, such as the homeland in *The Odyssey*, or that of matrimony and social reproduction within the high-mimetic romance. The diegesis, then, is essentially composed of a series of obstacles and “reversals” that restrict this ultimate, restorative telos. However, in its more modern, ironic form, integration is often
achieved through an exclusion of sorts, via the sacrifice of *pharmakos*, the scapegoat figure. In this approach, society “purges” itself of the mores, practices, and other social elements that the *pharmakos* is supposed to embody. Frye explains that this representation of ritualized sacrifice in comedy represents a kind of “play” that separates the comedic diegesis from bare descriptions of sheer violence, and imbues it with humor. The situation becomes funny when it is aestheticized: “the element of play is the barrier that separates art from savagery” (46). Play is that which guides this ritualistic functioning of comedy, that is, the sacrifice of the pharmakos, towards emotions of “ridicule and sympathy”, away from its more explicitly violent, “savage” core; laughter serves as a “deliverance from something unpleasant, even horrible” by sublimating our violent, ritualistic impulses into a more civilized form of repudiation: mockery (Ibid). The overlapping of Frye’s theory of comedy and psychoanalysis is convenient to my analysis, and as such his modal typology and the terms of his analysis will serve as my theoretical foundation and point of departure.

Although a full summary and explanation of all terms is impossible here, the key Aristotelian comedic stock characters, diegetic properties (such as “recognition”), and structural tendencies laid out by Frye are employed throughout this essay. Of particular note are the three dominant narrative paradigms that contemporary forms follow concerning the standpoint of *pharmakos* in relation to its society and thus express how the narrative functions. The first results in the prevalence of society as it is, *qua* sacrifice of the *pharmakos*, whose exclusion results in the “purification” and thus integration of society. The *alazon* stock character, the impostor who deceives or exploits the social collective, such as a Molière’s Tartuffe, often embodies the scapegoat in these situations. The ritual of *pharmakos* becomes comical only insofar as it is “playing” at sacrifice, a pure aestheticization of a social preoccupation. The second paradigm
involves upsetting the established conventions and moral prescriptions of melodramatic fiction (that most prosaic of literary genres that manifests the key mores and conventions of bourgeois society) by “ridicule[ing] and scold[ing] the audience”, attacking their norms and “approved moral standards” (Frye 48); thus, typical melodramatic intrigues surrounding violent misdeeds and moral vices are not seen as exceptional or isolated phenomena (as they are depicted within the melodrama), but viewed as “symptoms of the society’s own viciousness” and in this way turning conventions of classical realism on their head (Ibid; this paradigm will be returned to in our analysis of Vargas Llosa). The third, final paradigm is what Frye terms the “comedy of manners”, which is the extreme inversion of the initial tendency, amounting to a “pharmakos in reverse” in which the hero rejects an inferior society or is ironically excluded from it owing to his or her superiority, resulting in a moralistic indictment of the “absurdity” of society as such (Ibid). These diegetic paradigms elaborate the functioning of the comedy, as fundamentally structured by the ironic power of action relationship. These conventions in plot structure are supplemented by features of the narrative that solely contribute to the comic mood, often through the minor stock characters of bomolochos (the clown) and agroikos (the “straight man” figure).

Although such hoary, traditional critical concepts may be met with apprehension or skepticism today, Frye’s Theory of Modes provides an important basis for understanding how comedy functions— in terms of generating humor and aspects of an aesthetic experience, as well as mediating deeper levels of social substance. To fully realize such an understanding, however, requires a development of Frye’s analysis and categories, which in the end are partially limited by unmediated, formalist tendencies and a somewhat parochial conception of history. As we will see, while Naipaul’s fiction certainly structures the audience in a superior power of action (or narrative vantage point), and employs liberal amounts of ridicule, there is no way to account
for the many melancholy, even piteous moments within Naipaul’s comedies. Quite contrary to Frye’s structural prescriptions, these moments would seem to contradict the inclusion of, for instance, *The Mystic Masseur* within the category of the comic; the evocation of pity is, in theory, only a quality of tragedy. Similarly, the functioning of the novel’s comedic diegesis cannot be fully explained using any of Frye’s three plot paradigms, nor can the humor be accounted for through simple recourse to those characters whose role it is to set the “comic mood.” Finally, despite the subtitle of Frye’s essay as “Historical Criticism”, his modal system fails to present genuine formal insight beyond the purely aesthetic, or, in other words, to historicize and theorize the important differences and means by which formal properties mediate social, historical content.

II. The “Desire” of the Ironic Mode of Comedy

“This desire reveals [that]... man's route to the integration of self is a complicated one” (Lacan, Seminar VII)

My expansion of Frye’s ironic mode of comedy, foremost as it applies to Naipaulian fiction, begins with the assertion that the functioning of these novels cannot be understood with recourse to a single, monolithic mode of irony. Instead, a differentiation will be made among three separate but interrelated sub-modes—the Comedy of Manners, the Social Satire, and *Comedic Jouissance*—based upon a more explicitly psychoanalytic rethinking of “power of action” concept within a primarily Lacanian framework. Each sub-mode corresponds to a particular valence of the power of action relationship, all within the general category of the ironic. In other words, the “superior” vantage point of the reader is maintained throughout, but in three qualitatively different fashions, which in turn dictate the specific functioning of each. These sub-modes are not mutually exclusive and I argue that their interaction and co-existence accounts in no small way for the unique formal brilliance of Naipaul’s early novels. This formal
analysis will ultimately reveal more profound implications for comprehending, in both psychological and political terms, the formal properties of literature as a concrete representation, as well as the transformative/subversive possibilities of a supersession of representation itself.

Before explaining the composition of each sub-mode, I must first preface by explaining the Lacanian reformulation that underpins the triadic restructuring of the ironic mode, differentiating the structural and functional properties implicit within them. Fundamental to Frye’s concept of the “power of action”, which expresses the relationship of the reader to the narrative content, is the structuring of the boundaries of “self” and “Other.” The superiority embedded in the standpoint of the ironic mode can only function insofar as it creates adequate distance from an external object, insofar as its narrative object is explicitly rendered “non-self.” With this in mind, Frye’s thesis concerning the paradigmatic functioning of ironic comedy, the dominant contemporary mode operating through the sacrifice of the pharmakos—the purging of the “undesirable” element or symbol as a form of social integration—has strong affinities with psychoanalytic processes of ego formation, constituting the imputed “self” or the particular I that assumes the narrative standpoint. This sacrifice is an act of affirmation, positing the subject through the domination of the Other, whose “inferior” difference is negated and purged as it embodies the “impure.”

To explain the phenomenon of subject formation and the diegetic processes of affirmation requires a conceptual framework that accounts for how this self is structured, as it precedes and determines the external negation of difference (i.e. ritual sacrifice qua comedy). I argue that the former, the “self-relation” of the ironic mode, can be explained with recourse to Lacan’s concept regarding the “Imaginary order”, while the function of ironic comedy presupposes a distinctive, “Symbolic” functioning. A comprehensive summary of the Imaginary
and Symbolic orders, both of which manifest drastic discontinuities in centrality and significance in different stages of Lacan’s theoretical oeuvre, is beyond the terrain of this essay; however, I will frame the ways in which each becomes relevant to my analysis of comedic irony, making modifications when necessary. Positing the subjectivity implicit in the narrative mode (the superior “I”) stages, or enacts aesthetically, the process of ego formation Lacan famously represents in his Mirror Stage of development: “insofar as he [the subject’s own image] gives the subject his unity, and the first encounter with the object is with the object as object of the other's desire…The beginning of this dialectic… [is] alienation in the other.” This dialectic of desire is the presupposition and *sine qua non* of ironic comedy, as it determines the superior, ironic, vantage point assumed in the narrative through an imputed form of “identification” with this standpoint. This structural *a priori* becomes a quasi-ontological core, the imaginary object around which a unified, singular narration becomes possible and which is continuously returned to (re-posited) within the unconscious of the narrative. The ego, as an aggregate unity of the unconscious libidinal drives, constitutes a fundamental lack that as, Lacan continues, “he will never be able to grasp as his own desire, because…it is himself whom he pursues. Therein lies the *drama* of this jealous passion…a form of the *imaginary intersubjective relation*… which subtends perverse desire…only sustained by the *annihilation* either of the desire of the other, or of the desire of the subject.” This “drama” and violence of the falsely intersubjective (rather, a rifted *intra*-subjective) “desire” is characterized by a narcissistic self-relation, which for Lacan entails not only self-eroticization (and concomitant forms of self-aggrandizement) but also fundamental destructive violence vis-à-vis the “suicidal aggression of narcissism.” It deceptively appears as a relationship between subjects (within the self-Other relationship), one that masks the destructive projections of the imaginary selfhood that the narrative standpoint precipitates. It is
the violent content of these narcissistic projections that determines narrative function vis-à-vis the relation of this artificial self to the actual “Other”, as represented within the diegetic space.

The *pharmakos* paradigm—the modal *repetition* that affirms this singular, “superior” position of selfhood—suggests that the formal, comedic method has entered a new space entirely. Obviously, such violence itself cannot account for the humor of the “comic mood”—according to Frye it requires an aesthetic mediation. It is upon the threshold of actual barbarism that Frye’s concept of “play” should intercede, to transform horror into humor. Comedic mediation presents the *pharmakos* function in a way that distorts its narcissistic aggression, the violent dialectic of affirmation-domination, by directing it externally in a non-material form of “ritual.” Sacrifice is not carried out literally, but rather in a symbolic manner that makes its violent content—the domination of the Other, the denial of difference—pleasurable and humorous, as it serves its psycho-symbolic function. This affirmation of the subjective standpoint constitutes an imperative (or better, *drive*) within the ironic mode, and as such constitutes a qualitative shift: the egotistic projection, a non-self around which the unity of the subject is built, expands into a “scene” or fantasy, which allows the pursuit of these violent drives in a mediated form, i.e. *representation*, the unconscious “drama” staged in symbolic terms\(^{14}\). This new significance presupposes integration into the social plane, where image shifts into representation vis-à-vis the symbolic nexus of language. For my purposes I will think of play in terms of symbolic fantasy, a psychic as well as an aesthetic mediation, analogous to the “dream work” that, in an effort to direct narcissistic aggressivity, distorts the *jouissance* of the subject, the force of its unconscious libidinal drives, into a conscious form of representation\(^{15}\). The object of sacrifice becomes the object of mockery, the debased, comical Other, consecrating the mastery and unity of the egoistic subject.
By categorizing this self-Other relationship as a form of desire we emphasize two factors: its mediating role in fantasmatic, symbolic terms of both the violent drives (i.e. *jouissance*) and its egotistic aggressivity, as well as the fundamental fact that such domination can never truly be complete in such terms (this desire can never be “satisfied”\(^\text{16}\)). The constitution of this selfhood is not a site of static or transcendental finality, but one of fundamental lack, where the Imaginary center, continuously carved out by Symbolic desire (self-integration *qua* mastery of the Other), is repetitiously returned to as the fantasy is re-inflicted. The key proviso of fantasy is that it structurally excludes contact with that which is Real—both the profound sadism of the unmediated drive for violent mastery and the material *implications* of this desire within the Real, uncomical suffering of the Other. Thus, the mastery of Other becomes a comedic fantasy that distorts mastery into symbolic forms that can become comical; *pharmakos* is transposed into the Aristotelian stock character of *bomolochus*, the figure of the clown whom “we” can laugh at and degrade from our “superior” standpoint. Affirmation of selfhood in this fantasmatic manner allows for the creation and sustenance of the familiar “comic mood” that we experience as humor. I will explore the two primary ways in which this is articulated in Naipaulian comedy, through the process of “ridicule” and its burlesque mood in the Comedy of Manners and the acerbic satirizations of the Social Satire. The specific content of the subject-Object relationships qualitatively differs in terms of the specific “self” it affirms: the former sub-mode signifies a more individual, “private” cultural oddness whereas the latter pertains to a broadly-social, “public”, political ego.

Those familiar with psychoanalysis will notice that a paradox has emerged: specifically in that the symbolic realm, supposedly the means by which narcissistic egoism is controlled and the violent potential of the drives contained, actually expresses these very same forms of
violence in a more sophisticated and intensified manner. This aggressivity is precisely what should be overcome through Symbolic “castration” (which “splits” the subject into a symbolic signifier), dramatized through the Oedipal scene: “From then on, the desire of the other, which is man's desire, enters into the mediation of language. It is in the other, by \(\text{par}\) the other, that desire is named. It enters into the symbolic relation of I and you, in a relation of mutual recognition and transcendence, into the order of a law.”\textsuperscript{17} However, just as Freud’s later works witness a skeptical reassessment of the affirmative function assigned to the ego, so too does Lacan’s work begin to detail the tendency of the Law (the Symbolic order of the social) to become a deterministic, closed circuit. Such a system, realizing perhaps the worst implications of representation, denies the possibility of the new in its domination of the “non-self,” leading to an epistemological hegemony of sorts. What’s more, such an oppressive tendency to impute signification onto the subject calls into question the ability of the Symbolic to adequately manage the violent capabilities of the unconscious drives in the first place.\textsuperscript{18}

In a parallel to Freud, Lacan recognizes the dangerous possibilities within the “fantasy of totality-knowledge”: as Flower MacCannell informs us, this “dream of finalizing, quantifying and adding up all ‘meaning’” is in fact a hidden “variant of the death drive.”\textsuperscript{19} The compulsion of domination implicit to such rationalist fantasy reflects in psycho-epistemological terms the large-scale political and economic historical events of the early twentieth century, such as fascism, polarized Cold War hegemonies, imperialist wars and the severe, protracted capitalist crisis that began in the 1970’s (though certainly not the first or last)\textsuperscript{20}. The implication of this is that historical “progress” effectively threatens to turn language, and its function as knowledge and representation, into a closed “treasury of signifiers.” This imposed scarcity and careful regulation transforms language into a hegemonic instrument of the “rigidifying socioeconomic order” that
functions by “neutralizing or voiding jouissance.”^21 Paradoxically, the jouissance, which initially needed to be controlled, becomes the only avenue left for challenging this hegemony, as within it we find potential political agency for breaching the incarceration of socio-psychical ideology^22. It is precisely this ideology (though Lacan never used the word), that threatens to reify difference as such—naturalizing Otherness in such a way as to occlude consciousness of socially mediated signification. In its closed, (pseudo-)totalized form, the Law itself becomes the reified network that dominates its subjects through the collective internalization of this hollowing abstraction, which constitutes, in social terms, another form of imputed egotistic identification.

However, literature has, at the very least, a more complex relationship to the threat of such a deterministic circuit of representation, if for no other reason than it is an aesthetic, rather than “purely” scientific or ostensibly transparent, form. This important distinction is contingent upon the understanding of literature, and art more generally, as the vector where the plane of representation merges with that which cannot be fully represented by the mediation of language as such.^23 Thus, in addition to its function of “staging” unconscious drives and aspects of the psyche (neuroses, complexes, etc), a function that has largely been claimed by literary critics who employ psychoanalysis, the aesthetic also retains a meta-representational quality (similar to the “first utterance” before the transcription of sentiment into the lingual network) as affect, the expression of a jouissance that escapes its symbolic filter^24. On the one hand, comedic literature represents its object in an attempt to master these unconscious drives, as it attempts to master its object, in socially-symbolic terms; on the other hand, as affect, it is precisely those unconscious elements that escape symbolic representation, and are instead experienced as a form of non-symbolic “praxis” “which escapes” both the egotistic self-projections of the Imaginary and the potentially- oppressive, rationalist strictures of the Symbolic order^25. Thus, since language has
“failed to remain a shelter against the Real and has even become the instrument or bearer of threat and danger itself” in its Symbolic hegemony, affect provides a form that “permit[s] language to engage its signifiers against drive energy (jouissance), but…without repressing it, while not being destroyed by it.” The only adequate means of escaping the violence of egotistical aggression in the progressively “threatening”, narcissistic capacity it has acquired within the Symbolic order, is through recourse to that which we initially intended to control: confronting the Real, our jouissance.

One of the most innovative formal accomplishments of Naipaulian comedy is the ability to supersede the symbolic limits of representation, while not negating representation tout court. Although the potentially oppressive effects of a closed system of representation and knowledge must be recognized, the opposite tendency to deny difference and presume a transparent intersubjective relation risks an egotistical ambush, with equally dangerous political and material consequences. Naipaul’s comedy avoids both extremities, the symbolic reification of difference or mendacious formal equivalence, through the manipulation, and targeted rupture, of the formal barrier that separates the Symbolic from the Real. Through moments that approximate mastery of the Real—in which the clown suffers explicit and material aggression—we begin to reconcile the violent ends of unconscious drives, our jouissance, through the seemingly contradictory method of permitting it. The significance of this recognition of the domination of the clown as Other, vis-à-vis the affective moment of what I term Comedic Jouissance, is two-fold: the self-consciousness that comes from witnessing the unmediated cruelty of the sacrifice of pharmakos causes the symbolic-fantasy to cease, resulting in affective anxiety, the sensation experienced as a result of the loss of our object of desire; this anxiety, in turn, precipitates the crucial moment of “transference” in which the traumatic vacuum of Symbolic representation can lead to true
recognition of the Other. Comedic Jouissance is an affective phenomenon manifested in the
dour, melancholy moments of Naipaulian fiction, which serve as traumatic breaks in the
otherwise more typical paradigm of comedic irony. I argue that the jouissant moment (somewhat
akin to tragic pity) results in the supersession—if only fleeting—of self-Other boundaries,
leading to a true intersubjective relation that functions through this recognition, rather than
violent suppression, of difference. The negative implications of this form of ironic comedy, as
we will see, give new meaning to the term “crisis of representation”, providing a supra-
representation prism through which Other-ness itself can be seen as a socially mediated,
historically produced phenomenon.

III. The Three Valences of Naipaulian Comedic Form: The Comedy of Manners

The early novels of VS Naipaul evidence a comedic form whose rich functioning and
social implications can be fleshed out with recourse to the expanded modal system I have traced.
The quite sophisticated psychic and aesthetic method of Naipaulian fiction will challenge
assumptions concerning the simplistic function of the comedic and the derisive contemporary
critical opinion of Naipaul’s work more generally. I will now briefly summarize the first two
perhaps more familiar, ironic forms before moving into a more thorough treatment of each of the
three sub-modes of ironic comedy as they emerge in Naipaul’s novels before (and including) A
House for Mr. Biswas.

The three qualitatively different forms of the desire-relation correspond to the three sub-
modes of ironic comedy. The first, the re-christened “comedy of manners,” functions as an
affirmation of mastery over Trinidadian culture and its conventions, as represented through
Naipaul’s localized stock characters (the clowns), which function as the pharmakos, or Other,
within the desire-relation. I reserve the verb “ridicule” to reference the specific form of Symbolic affirmation pursued, one that is characterized by a richly burlesque comic mood. Ridicule pertains to the cultural, “private” sphere of social relations and in Naipaul’s comedy is expressed through the lavish elements of cultural life, such as peculiar customs, local patterns of speech and so forth. The second form, the social satire, functions similarly, but affirms a political selfhood, the standpoint of a modern, Western citizen. The role of _pharmakos_ is not filled by clowns, but by those who symbolize the larger, abstract social relations and institutions of Trinidad as a state, targeting politicized matters such as a corrupt electorate system, institutional racism, the servile colonial elite, etc. The noun and verb form of “satire” designate the affirmation of the political self of the citizen over the malfunctioning, “backwards” orientation of Trinidad’s “public sphere.” Its comic mood is characterized by scathing, ironic representations, usually with heavily critical implications. Both sub-modes posit selfhood negatively, through the affirmation of difference, both in an immediate (private) and abstract (public) fashion, thus re-inscribing the superior vantage point structured by the ironic mode in relation to Trinidadian society.

The first sub-mode, the “comedy of manners,” pertains to the cultural particularity of Trinidad, which is used to affirm the superior narrative standpoint as structured by the ironic mode. Within the space of this sub-mode, the clown, Aristotle’s _bomolochus_ stock character, becomes the primary object of Naipaul’s nuanced wit and sharp ridicule. The role of the clown is constituted by a Dickensian cast of diverse characters, memorable for their eccentricities, buffoonish behavior, or strange crudeness; in most cases they are defined by their ironic shortcomings, in that they fail to embody that which is expected of them, or else act in ways opposed to such expectation. For instance, B. Wordsworth (short for “Black”), the self-
proclaimed neighborhood poet of *Miguel Street*, although convinced of his demiurgic creative affinity with Romantic art, has never sold a single poem and can only write a single word per month\(^{28}\). Ridicule is here articulated through the representation of the poet vis-à-vis his flaws that make his self-identity as poet false despite initial appearances, and thus ironic\(^{29}\). Naipaul’s comedic irony inverts traditional comedic paradigms in which the *eiron*, the unlikely, self-deprecating hero, “appearing to be less than one is,” struggles against and eventually overcomes the antagonistic *alazon*, the impostor who pretends to be more than he or she is, who serves as the classical *pharmakos* (Frye 40); rather, the Naipaulian Comedy of Manners is predicated upon unselfconscious clowns who brazenly believe themselves to be what they are not, or else are wholly unaware of their more fundamental strangeness, shortcomings, or baseness. The comic mood of this sub-mode, and its operative form as ridicule, is thus quintessentially burlesque in nature, developing lavish portraits of localized, Trinidadian stock characters through nuanced insight into the manners, customs, and cultural practices of the social landscape\(^{30}\).

The production of humor and the comic mood resulting from ridicule is here inseparable from the affirmation of their relative inferiority as narrative objects. Visual aspects of manners as well as physical typifications are emphasized with no small amount of exaggeration to supplement Naipaul’s richly textured characterizations. This lends a certain playful, fantastic edge to his comedy of manners, which blunts its edge as a form of domination and subjective realization\(^{31}\). Mrs. Bhakcu in *Miguel Street* is not merely a large woman but has “so much flesh...that when she held her arms at her sides they looked like marks of parenthesis” (*MS* 153). Such larger-than-life detail, serves in the construction of her as a caricature, punctuating, as it were, the ridicule of her husband, whose physical ineptitude as an incapable mechanic constitutes the chapter’s central arc: “In the end [following an argument] Bhacku had to beat his
wife…This wasn’t as easy as it sounds…[Mr.] Hat suggested that he use a cricket bat…[he] said, ‘Is the only thing she could really feel, I think’” (Ibid). Thus, her caricaturized construction as a clown allows for the ridicule of what would otherwise be considered quite cruel, owing to the distanced, burlesque manner in which she is represented: Mrs. Bhacku, as the object of ridicule can hardly “feel” the blows, as if she were an ox rather than human, because they function in purely symbolic terms and represent her husband’s physical impotence, just as it ironically mocks spousal abuse as a symptom of Trinidad’s backwardness. More often than not such appearances serve as physiognomy, in addition to supplementing Naipaul’s nuanced, witty prose. Ramlogan, the ironically unthreatening, buffoonish senex iratus (the would-be “heavy father”), has his sleazy, conniving personality reflected in an unctuous appearance that seems to literally emanate grease and oil, as representing a failed, personally disgusting patriarch allows Naipaul to degrade the cultural conditions of such patriarchy.

Language, particularly the Trinidadian dialect, serves as a kind of semiotic physiognomy, foregrounding the clowns’ oddness and “backwardness” in literal, grammatical terms. Using Ramlogan again as an example, his much exhorted “cha'acter and sensa values” is contradicted in a dual sense: directly, through his very lack of such values and in an indirect, linguistic sense, as the malformed “character” of his actual speech ironically and involuntarily reveals the unflattering aspects it had intended to conceal. When one reads Leela’s absurdly over-punctuated writing (as she associates sheer volume of colons and hyphens with writerly sophistication) her shortcomings are comical: the ego (self is structured by narrative standpoint32) recognizes her ignorance as it is ridiculed through Naipaul’s unsparingly objective reproductions of them. This in turn affirms the superior standpoint in relation to the Other. The identical standpoint this sub-mode skillfully imputes is affirmed in a purely affective manner that eschews direct narrative
exhortation to do so, resulting in an amplified, ironic effect. The comic mood produced in these moments of effusive foolishness and cultural backwardness are dependent upon the utter lack any self-awareness on the part of our clowns; the more brazen their unselfconsciousness, the richer the humor evoked. It follows that Leela’s haughtiness regarding her semi-literate, ungrammatical ability to write makes such elements all the more humorous and their shortcomings more sharply emboldened: when she leaves Ganesh, his recognition of her authorship of the unsigned note by its telltale hyper-punctuations gives a burlesque comic effect to what might have been a melodramatic apogee.

The equally outrageous situations that emerge within the diegesis develop these dominant eccentricities, as the plot unfolds idiosyncratic, finely crafted situations and reversals in rapid succession. A young Mr. Biswas, caught pilfering bananas from Jairam, the stern Hindu mystic training him to become a pundit, is forced to eat an entire bunch. The result is “stomach trouble” that causes his belly to inflate “until it was taut with pain” at the slightest change in emotion, as well as interminable constipation (Biswa 53). The contraction of this cartoonish physiological malady, which seems to mirror the pitiful fragility and incompetence of Biswas’s character, is immediately followed by a more outrageous incident: his new condition causes a crisis of incontinence in the middle of the night, forcing Biswas to “relieve himself in his room” with a handkerchief, which he surreptitiously tries to dispose of out of the window (Biswa 54). To make matters infinitely worse, the contents, unbeknownst to Biswas, spilled onto the holy man’s “cherished oleander tree,” defiling the sacred flowers meant for the Puja ceremony (Ibid). It is almost a rule for actions to culminate in the opposite result of the expected, as Naipaul’s remarkable ability to sustain the element of surprise often turns diegetic conventions on their head. For instance, Biswas’s engagement is not the result of elaborate courtship or traditional
Hindu arrangement, but occurs almost by accident and without his awareness of the commitment, following his botched attempt to flirt with his future bride, Shama. Similarly, in Miguel Street, Man-Man, the neighborhood lunatic and consummate miscreant, unexpectedly “turns good,” proclaiming himself a messiah and spearheading his own public crucifixion (MS 50). The diegesis weaves together the disparate eccentricities, misunderstandings, and ironic shortcomings into a unity of action—one that details a collective foolishly reveling in its (unselfconscious) social regression.

These characters have cultural significance, insofar as they represent aspects of what is “Trinidadian.” For instance, B. Wordsworth as a clown becomes a symbol that mocks the inept, imitative quality of the island’s literary culture. Naipaul’s relentless lampooning ranges from etiquette standards and illiteracy to graver matters of corporal punishment and arranged marriage. Such substance is necessarily local and provincial by Western standards, dictated by the peculiarity of Trinidad’s historical circumstances. For instance, the relative temporal proximity of the Indian transplantation to Trinidad as indentured labor, which occurred until 1917, helps account for themes such as the degradation of traditional Indian mores within the alien context of a Caribbean cash-crop colony. One example of this historical dimension the “Trinidadian” Naipaul returns to often is the arranged marriage trope: in Mr. Biswas, this institution is twisted into a mechanism allowing the matriarch of the Tulsi family to frivolously pawn off her numerous daughters, so as to absorb male dependents to labor for the wealth of the intra-filial oligarchy (as long as they are Brahmin, of course). Mrs. Tulsi acquires significance beyond her own actions, becoming a representative of the “private,” cultural life of Trinidad, which is ridiculed in toto from the superior standpoint posited by the narrative mode.
From the ironic standpoint, the compulsory, derisive ridicule of Trinidadian culture, which literally cannot be taken seriously—and must not, in order for the fantasy to function—has two important implications. On the one hand, the Naipaulian clowns do allow for the positive (not in the affirmative sense) representation of a key aspect of social reality: the narrative subject can comprehend a non-self, as it exists in the social environs of Trinidad; on the other hand the terms of this cognition are structured through a symbolic mediation (here representation and its burlesque mood), such that it facilitates the affirmation of its own superiority in relation to its object, qua the Symbolic domination of the Other. Again, this representation negatively reaffirms selfhood, the I or implicit ego, presupposed by the ironic mode. Turning the matter from its general function back to the desire-relation, it can thus be said that the clown, as pharmakos, is sacrificed insofar as he or she is “punished” vis-à-vis ridicule. As a representative of Trinidadian-ness, their particular eccentricity or shortcoming acquires symbolic significance, though not one that is necessarily commensurable with society as a whole. A form of integration has taken place, but not in the diegetic space itself; one which pivots on the affirmation of “self” over the clown and the reflexive bolstering of a superior, unified ego imputed by the ironic narrative standpoint.

In this case, marriage in Trinidad is seen, at least among the Indian community, as opportunistic human trafficking; its treatment in Mystic Masseur, though less affirmative in its assertion, confirms this as well. “Weightier” topics such as these retain the ridiculous, lavish tenor of the burlesque, as their increased proximity to the Real gives it an outrageousness, which in small doses provides an especially effective form of ridicule. For this reason the “consummation” of Ganesh and Leela’s marriage—his inaugural “beating” of her, a “precious” milestone of their marriage—can serve as outrageous, dark humor that references brutish
provincial stereotypes. But this is contingent on the retention of a distanced, ironic standpoint, never verging into purely detached sadism, lest the Symbolic fantasy which mediates desire, the affirmation of a superior selfhood *qua* ridicule, degenerate into overt cruelty and violence and thereby lose the object of its desire. However, this limit, which inscribes in Symbolic terms the self-Other relationship and the false “intersubjective” presupposition that fails to represent the Other as a subject, is precisely what is intentionally transgressed with crucial consequences, as we will see later in the Comedic *Jouissance* sub-mode. Taken as a whole, the Comedy of Manners corresponds to what we may refer to as the “private” sphere of the narrative: the apolitical realm where the “Trinidadian” *ethos* is demarcated, one which signifies fundamental difference, through its individual representatives, and the larger conventions, mores and practices they embody. A certain cultural convention can enter into the position of *pharmakos* abstractly, through means of directly narrated discourse (as the incompetent Trinidadian doctors do in *Mystic Masseur*), but such narrative intrusions are rare in the ironic mode of comedy: as Frye explains, the ironic mode operates through “objectivity and suppression of all explicit moral judgments,” as the latter are not “raised in ironic art” but rather reflected to the reader from the art; although the ironic mode has “no object but [its] subject”, this subject is necessarily objectified. This permits the desire-relation to flourish along with the subjective affirmation that produces the comic mood, as the burlesque, ridiculous clowns, in their immediate Otherness, serve as concise, negative metaphors for the narrative self.

**Social Satire: (Abstract) Social Reality**

The social satire constitutes a qualitatively different form of comedic irony than the comedy of manners, one that functions according to the same paradigm of desire. The key difference lies in the shifting of its object from what is essentially “Trinidadian” (i.e. cultural), to
“Trinidad” as an abstract, political entity. Whereas the former sub-mode functions by offering stock characters as the comedic pharmakos for outrageous forms of ridicule, this form of irony posits abstract bodies as objects of (equally ritualized) satire. Here, characters acquire a metonymic function, though still a negative one, as individual symbols of the larger social relations and political institutions of the nation. These metonyms, far from being mere clowns, more often than not correspond to the stock character of the alazon, the impostor convinced of his/her own (false) superiority. One such example would be the archetypical Mr. Simon, the black legislator dressed to the nines (so as to resemble a “penguin”) at the Governor’s dinner when an “unoriginal disaster befell” him, as his monocle falls into his soup (MM 194). This scene satirizes the false consciousness of its character, as a self-deceiving alazon who tries but humorously fails to actually be British. The socially symbolic relevance of this bitterly funny portrait of failed mimicry skewers a servile political elite whose interests lie in abetting—or indeed desiring to become—the colonial power.

The metonymic significance of this satire, like the cultural particularity of the previous sub-mode, is historically determined. Trinidad of the epoch most represented in Naipaul’s early novels, the first half of the 20th century, was one of tremendous change—one too dynamic to be fully explained here. Nevertheless, it is important to note its status as a British colony since the 18th century, and three of its most crucial social developments: the shift from a cash-crop-producing colony (sugar) to natural resources harvest and manufacturing (oil and refineries), the U.S. occupation during the Second World War, and the subsequent nationalist-independence movements which followed during the early 1950’s (See: Van der Veer; Mulchansingh). Naipaul’s early fiction abounds with acerbic, critical depictions of these developments, among many others. For instance, Mr. Biswas is made foreman by Seth, the estate manager for his
much-reviled family of in-laws, despite his pitiful incompetence and physical frailty. This position is undoubtedly contrived to make Biswas the scapegoat for the anger of “dispossessed labourers” evicted from their land, from which Biswas, ironically, doesn’t even benefit (*HFMB* 219). The theme of landowners manipulating wretchedly-impoverished field labor is also touched on in *Mystic Masseur*, as Ganesh unwittingly endorses a labor strike that had been deceptively contrived by the sugar company in order to cut down labor costs “during the slack seasons” (*MM* 205). This last instance dovetails with Naipaul’s relentless castigation of the empty politics and reformist rhetoric of populist-nationalist movements, of which Ganesh becomes a figurehead. Like Biswas, Ganesh becomes a mistaken *pharmakos* within the diegesis itself, as the weary strikers, refusing to be pacified by a Hindu-nationalist diatribe, become suspicious and turn on him violently.39

This form of comedic irony pertains solely to the “public sphere” of Trinidad, focusing on its social relations in abstract terms as it structures political life. These above summarized scenes witness a re-signification of sorts, as the personae acquire a metonymical relevance as parts who abstractly symbolize the political and civil relations of the social whole; they tend to be represented by positions of direct political or economic import, such as politicians, government bureaucrats, wealthy landowners and petite bourgeoisie, and so forth. As negative metonyms, their altered function as Other presupposes a shift in the symbolic composition of the narrative subjectivity as well: from the individual who understands his/her “self” through the immediate difference embodied by the Trinidadian clown, to that of an abstract collective that imagines itself as a national identity.40 For instance, with Seth, the Tulsi estate-manager, we can conceive the landed-property class as an abstract system of relations designed to perpetuate social inequity (through expropriation) and to cunningly displace class tensions produced
through a third-party mediator; the corrupt strike-leader who dupes Ganesh may be seen as a supplement to this theme, as well as the degree to which the institution of organized labor can itself be appropriated by the ruling class and turned against the interests of labor. The cultural ridiculousness and eccentricity represented gives way to a kind of political backwardness and social malfunction, embodied by certain characters who fill the role of *alazon*, the deceptive impostor, or are otherwise simply antagonists. The corresponding process of “ridicule” in the former sub-mode thus gives way to Naipaul’s biting, venomous form of mockery, for which I exclusively reserve my use of the noun and verb form of “satire”.

“Satire” is usefully described by Frye, though in a more genre-specific sense, as containing a “militant irony” that retains an “implicit moral standard,” as it critically inveighs against its object of attack⁴¹. This accounts, on one level, for the particular “comic mood” of the sub-mode, which is by turns scathing and outrageous in its tone and on another, subtler one, re-asserts the “implicit” persistence of the desire-relation as it structures our interpretation as readers. To use another example from *Mystic Masseur*, the onset of the social satire begins with Ganesh’s extortion of the national party’s presidency, essentially through an explicit buy-out of the party’s voting bloc, which he ostensibly does “only for the sake of Hindu unity in Trinidad” (174). The full import of this scathing satirical representation resonates with profound ironies—such as the corruption behind the democratic process and the deceptive emptiness of nationalist-populist movements—and it *undoubtedly* does create outrage. But for such outrage to occur, there must first exist the “standard” by which to approximate it in the first place, the certitude in a frame of reference for what “real democracy” looks like, even if it—and here it undoubtedly *is*—an abstract moral fantasy, the projection of a metropolitan ego gotten away from itself. These projections in turn are negatively affirmed through satire’s function, which mercilessly indscts
Trinidad’s outrageously corrupted and thus inadequate public sphere. The ironic preface of *The Mystic Masseur*, a novel that presents itself as a political pseudo-history of a “hero of the people,” sarcastically quips, “although its politicians have taken to calling it a country, Trinidad is a small island…no actual holder of office is portrayed. The strike mentioned in Chapter twelve has no basis in fact.”

Thus, if the Comedy of Manners affirmed a selfhood mediated by localized cultural terms, the Social Satire affirms the abstracted form of the social self: the metropolitan citizen and its political ego. In this sense, the citizen affirms its selfhood *qua* mastery over the colonial subject, as “backwards” customs and cultural mores are transposed onto equally “backwards” social relations and institutions. This sub-mode is structured with a similar Symbolic asymptote, insofar as the social content remains abstract in character, cordonning off the reality of its own material implications. There is little on the level of the suffering of “Old Stephen” from *Hard Times*, characteristic of classical realism, as, in Frye’s words, “satire, breaks down when its content is too oppressively real” (Frye 224) Thus the Real, in its “oppressive” immediacy is off limits for the Social Satire, which instead maintains a more comfortable critical distance, viewing abstract problems in simplified, objective terms. As the Comedy of Manners captures aspects of the cultural particularity of Trinidad and the Social Satire deals with broad “social issues,” it becomes evident that the failure to formally surpass the rigid separation of the “private” and “public” within the Other, as object of narrative desire, implies an antinomized representation (the “Trinidian” and “Trinidad”), which is at the same time an extension of the contradictions implied by the reification of difference by which representation functions in its socially-symbolic role. As an aesthetic form, the Symbolic fantasy of the ironic mode mediates the domination characteristic of the self-Other relationship as it has historically emerged (i.e. as
either “private” individual subject or the abstract national “public”); at the same time, its objectification of the Other, its symbolic “desire” insofar as it affirms self, becomes problematic and dangerous when it posits such relationships as a static component of a closed Symbolic system. Lost, then, is the very possibility of superseding what appears to be “essential” difference and at the same time the larger social objectification that reifies social relations to the point at which they appear to exist beyond the limits of social agency and thus beyond historical determination. The recovery of such possibility can only exist in a representation that is at the same time outside of representation as such; that neither abstractly equates nor reifies difference of the self-Other relation, or its twin manifestation as the private/public schism between representational “objects.” The manner in which to do so, however, appears beyond the structural limits of ironic comedy as delineated by Frye; but it is precisely within this transgressive space that we discover the most innovative characteristic of Naipaul’s formal method.

**Comedic Jouissance: Recognition and Supersession**

In the sub-mode of comedic jouissance, we find one of Naipaul’s most memorable and unique formal qualities. It begins very much in the realm of the Comedy of Manners, along the familiar premise of affirming Otherness qua ridicule of our clown. But in such moments the expected reproduction of the comic mood does not take place: on the contrary, it seems that the Naipaulian weapons of choice—his trenchant mockery, ironic plot turns, and eccentric detail—have, in an instant, transgressed their implicit structural limits. This phenomenon occurs following a sudden, often shocking reversal of fortune in which the plot twist we have almost come to expect appears more like a jarring accident; ridicule as we know it gives way to the wholly un-comedic emotions of melancholy or sullenness. For instance, in *Miguel Street*, the figure of Laura serves, in the first instance, as the ridiculed Other: a neighborhood woman with a
face like a “motor-car battery” who “holds a world record” for children born out of wedlock by different fathers. Despite this, she remains the “most vivacious…person in the street,” always singing—even retaining a propensity to bully and dominate the men she stays with (MS 108). The familiar stage is set to ridicule our clown for the promiscuous baseness and flawed social mores she brazenly represents, seemingly with a strident sense of pride. However, in a sudden moment of heartbreaking anagnorisis (Aristotelian “discovery”), Laura’s oldest daughter, who had ostensibly been receiving typing lessons and an education, suddenly announces “Ma, I going to make a baby” (115). The effect upon Laura, contrary to what might be expected of the purported “record holder,” is truly devastating: “...for the first time I heard Laura crying...crying all the cry she had saved up since she was born...”; she becomes “ashamed now to show herself” and even seems to instantly age into decrepitude (Ibid).

The burlesque mood dies in medias res, jarring the comedic atmosphere into a state of melancholy. In spite of her vivacity and admirable self-reliance, the jouissant moment simultaneously reveals and realizes her worst nightmare: that her daughter will have to suffer the same life as her, the same poverty, perilous existence, and abuse that Laura has “cover[ed] up with her laughter” (Ibid) for so many years. Social reality, the Real, in its full material implications—the seemingly inescapable, cyclical conditions that reproduce poverty—and its doubly-unequal burden upon women as mothers, is articulated through our clown with horrifying immediacy. Any potentiality for her character to devolve into a Trinidadian twist on the fecund “mammy” is thus firmly avoided; the perhaps otherwise amusing colloquialism “make a baby” loses any vestige of humor. Following the discovery of the Real, in which Laura becomes painfully aware of her own situation (a rare self-awareness whose underside is always suffering or else helpless rage), the lavish, burlesque dimension dissolves into a fundamentally broken
condition. Even their physiognomy reflects their bathos, as our clowns begin to appear physically diminished, even upon the verge of death—as literally befalls the romantic buffoon B. Wordsworth. The “semiotic physiognomy” is also transformed, as can be seen by Laura’s response to the news of her daughter’s death (a probable suicide): “It good. It good. It better that way” (117). The quaint, silly “backwardness” of the dialect acquires a doleful character in stark disharmony with its initial verve and eccentricity. The melancholic sense of restraint we infer from such laconic, repetitive dialogue acquires a dour affect, as witnessed with Elias, the “scholar” of Miguel Street who, ironically, following his failure at the scholarship exams, is forced to become a street-sweeper; his coda “I really like the work” (repeated at every stage of his progressive downfall) reveals his tacit submission to the improbability of social mobility within his society. This affective dissonance seems to reflect our own guilt at having ever laughed; its repetitive inarticulateness, as a lack of adequate diegetic expression, seems to hide something we suspect to be inexpressible, limited at the very level of language—and representation. As the disturbing moment crystallizes around the objects of ridicule, our Symbolic mastery becomes actualized; and the cruelty of such mastery in the realm of the Real renders abstract ridicule painfully unfunny.

Returning to our psychoanalytic model, we have seen that desire, the affirmation of selfhood, is pursued through a mastery of the Other, the clown or alazon as pharmakos, in two distinctive symbolic manners: ridicule and satire, respectively. These are both structured to fundamentally exclude certain aspects of social reality (as Real), while focusing more exclusively on others—the cultural “private” and the abstract, political “public” which can each be made laughable in their respective forms of representation and dichotomized exclusivity. Comedic Jouissance, then, forms a juncture between the two sub-modes, whereby darker, painful
features of social reality are articulated through stock characters (the clowns), rather than being abstracted *en masse* and projected onto socially symbolic individuals. The distance necessarily implied by the ironic mode of comedy is partially negated, as our clown becomes a familiar locus wherein the social malady detailed by the satire moves abruptly into the foreground. The result is akin to a dialectical inversion of the ironic mode itself, as it implodes the rigid boundaries of the public/private, whereby reified “social issues” burst into individual lives; as is seen within our example of Laura, the sheer weight of the social contradiction upon the individual cannot be contained by that individual, tending towards their destruction. It is thus no accident that these moments bear witness to the physical transformation of clowns into decrepit, gutted shells of their prior selves: it is no less the intrusion of Real, actual time, which sweeps away objectified space indiscriminately. The full import of this can only be grasped with recourse to history in its objective processes, in understanding Miguel Street as a heavily impoverished “slum” in an already marginal corner of the British Empire (and during the novel in the midst of wartime housing and food shortages as detailed in *Biswas*) where “one of the miracles of life…was that no one starved” (114-115). What becomes equally unsettling in this last instance is that these events can no longer be seen either as surprising or as reversals, but as the oppressively logical forms of social reality; we perceive the contours of the Real within the act of its continuous repression, reinscribing the conditions of the Symbolic void *ad nauseam*. The lack of tragic *peripeteia* and the objective distance constructed between the clowns make tragic catharsis a structural impossibility.

As a form of *jouissance*, we specify the exact manner in which the Symbolic structuring of the comedy’s desire-relation is temporarily shattered by the intrusion of social reality. But paradoxically, in “satisfying” this desire, affirming mastery in the fullest, *Real* sense, the reader
is not moved towards an ultimate pleasure and secure selfhood, but instead experiences its opposite: anxiety, in the symptomatic sense, as the loss of its own object. This affective experience inverts the ironic mode itself, through the dialectical engagement of the first two sub-modes, proceeding to collapse the elevated, superior narrative standpoint and bringing the reader into proximity with heretofore “inferior” narrative content. The exclusion and repudiation of the pharmakos, which results in the re-affirmation of “us”, the selfhood inscribed by the ironic mode, loses its operative axis, engendering the anxiety that manifests itself in the melancholic, doleful affect we experience in the jouissant moments. As the Symbolically mediated fantasy of the first two sub-modes ceases, the reader seems to be brought into the alien space of comedy’s Other, tragedy. These moments of anxiety are therefore characterized by pity, even allowing pangs of guilt to penetrate the sadism of our initial desire.

The totality of this affective experience of Comedic Jouissance, the shift from Other-ing ridicule to affective pity, is contained in the brief but powerful arc of Mr. Bissoon from Mystic Masseur. Ganesh, the protagonist and an aspiring writer, initially encounters Bissoon while he is still struggling to distribute his first modest publication effort. At first glance, Bissoon appears as simply another Trinidadian eccentric: an independent book distributor whose acute grandiloquence and pomposity is belied by his odd uniform, a full three-piece suit with no shoes; illustrating his marginal illiteracy and typically “backwards” local dialect, he is initially dismissive of Ganesh’s religious excursus43, calling it a collection of mere “kyatechisms” and considering it a “hard book to sell”, and only begrudgingly acquiescing to work on its distribution (97). The next we hear of him is during Ganesh’s early literary success as a “mystic” masseur and cultural icon, when it is revealed that Bissoon has been having troubles: his wife left him and “he just start drinking” (110); this strange detail, seemingly out of place, leaves the
reader unprepared for what comes next. After Ganesh’s meteoric rise to fame, Bissoon re-emerges and tries to rekindle their business relationship; Ganesh declines and instead offers him money, surprised by Bissoon’s wretched, tatterdemalion appearance, as the latter has aged into decrepitude, his suit degraded into mere rags. Assuming his former loftiness, Bissoon spurns his “charity” and flounces away. This unexpected reversal of fortune is the last we see of Bissoon, until he is spotted, financially ruined and confined to the Poor House of Port of Spain. The reader is thus left in a paradoxical situation, as the hitherto burlesque mood has broken down, inspiring a melancholic sentiment rather than humor. The object of our unbridled ridicule unexpectedly shifts into a position of suffering and a strange ambivalence obscures the exuberant superiority through which we had understood our clown. Such a moment is no less than the encroachment of the Real upon hitherto Symbolic domination: rather than indulging in ridiculing his blatant, obstinate buffoonery, we not only see the effects of a shifting historical circumstance that make his livelihood (traveling book salesman) obsolete, but sense the Real forms of social domination—poverty, imprisonment and social marginalization—he now suffers. The Symbolic fantasy dissipates, as the imaginary center cannot hold; the moment of anxiety forms a crisis in which the aggressive ego loses its object of affirmation.

But these last points require more precise qualification, the first being that Comedic Jouissance is not properly tragic. Although it may share certain affinities with catharsis, this sub-mode does not result in “identification” with its object, as what had been detached ridicule has simply shifted to a still-detached pity that is more accurately called sympathy. For although the functioning of ironic comedy in its repudiatory affirmation may be suspended, the objective structuring of it as a form of representation remains, at least partially, insurmountable; we cannot, in the end, properly “know” Laura. Such a conclusion would be illusory, as clowns
remain, even in the end, at a certain narrative distance; it would be most precise to say that we have sensed, rather than assumed or been equated with, the subjectivity of a narrative object vis-à-vis jouissant trauma. Furthermore, its shock results precisely from the lack of dramatic tension in its build-up: rather than reveling in the “enduring” of suffering, as characteristic of the tragic mode (Frye 45), Naipaul’s readers simply know it is endured. It is not possible, in the end, to “get inside” a stock character (i.e. a clown), to structure his “self” or the contours of her subjectivity, even when they are inverted or function as symbols. But this admission in no way detracts from the relevance or truth gained by the experience of the Real, as a kind of supra-representation, qua Comedic Jouissance; on the contrary, it reveals how every formal unit of Naipaul’s functioning technique is saturated with objective content and fails to be misled by the purely Imaginary intersubjective relation.

Thus, even the comparatively lucid, richly sensuous descriptions of *A House for Mr. Biswas* maintain this distance, emphasizing the external, the objective, rather than representing a particular subjectivity. We see the traumatizing effects of Anand’s near-death experience through his reaction to the shocking insensitivity of Mr. Biswas, his father, which moves the teenager from a near-hysteric fit to melancholic resignation (*Biswas* 341). In terms of its particular symbolic significance, the episode underscores the larger theme of parental neglect and abuse, as Biswas’s desire to impress his wealthy, socially superior brothers-in-law comes at the dear expense of Anand’s mental health. Anand’s sullen, unadorned words to Biswas and his in-laws “I am never going to come out with any of you again” foreshadow his future abandonment not only of his father, but Trinidad itself and the painful childhood memories forever associated with it (Ibid; 557). However, Naipaul does not even dignify our surprise or outrage with significant emotional detail, nor does he bother to explicitly remind us that this incident itself is a “double”,
a repetition of an event of Biswas’s own youth that lead to the death of his father: we are merely left to our own reconciliation of both the event and the dour emotions it evokes. But precisely in this unfamiliar objectivity, the external becomes, in the *jouissant* moment, the bridge to the internal—but one that remains necessarily objective, insofar as it remains an *affection*, capable of transmitting a subjective experience as a kind of trauma.

In its objective transmission of the traumatic, and thus the Real, Comedic *Jouissance* allows for a moment whereby the impossibility of unmediated intersubjective identification—owing to the persistence of the ego in its propensity towards narcissistic projection—is overcome through its form as psycho-aesthetic *transference*. The route we have taken from ridicule, and through satire, has brought us (in a novel fashion) to the other pole of “comic emotion”, sympathy. The reduction of the superior vantage point of the ironic-comedic mode, within the vacuum-like collapse resulting from anxiety, allows not for an identification with what had been our object of desire, but of a recognition, a moment of “discovery” in which an *approximation* is made vis-à-vis a moment of “transference”. The jarring trauma of Laura or Anans “discovery” becomes the substance of this approximation, transmitted affectively from neurotic instances of Comedic *Jouissance* (compared to the “normal” affirmative functioning of manners and satire) and crystallizing in the melancholy, sullen instances when cruelty appears to transgress its own Symbolic boundaries.

That such a reversal should occur to our clown, so characterized by the humor of ridicule or satire, not only further emphasizes the affect of these *jouissant* moments, but also illustrates the especially negative quality of this form. In these instances one wonders whether the clown ever initially laughed in the first place, such is the power of its negativity. This is self-reflexively gestured at, with typical, brilliant irony, in *Biswa* by the dour black painter: “‘That’s me boy.”
Laughing on the outside, crying on the inside.’ Yet he had never laughed or smiled” (Biswas 551). The critical function thus produced differs qualitatively from the sub-mode designated “social satire,” insofar as its socially-subversive negativity stems not from the more comfortable standpoint of abstract repudiation, but rather in the transferring of a subjective experience, in a powerful, immediate form. This immediacy is not separate from the ridicule of the pharmakos as Other; it is inextricably bound up with and itself mediated by the former process, which is its functional point of departure and frame of reference. It establishes a distance in relation to its object, which it relates to as Other, as difference itself, in the form of Symbolic domination, which is negated. Difference as such, however, has not been negated, but our relationship to it is transformed by the intrusion of the Real, the traumatic transference. This subversion precipitates a new recognition: difference is itself socially mediated, even exposed as a product of larger relations. Laura is here not an object with which we affirm an implicit selfhood against the Trinidadian, but a non-self, whose unbearable despair over the recognition that the future appears to hold the same wretched content as her past (seeing her daughter as her own double) we can sympathize with her; moreover, we can see, through the prism of trauma, the larger social relations which determine, and perpetuate, her condition.

This allows for a relation of self to Other that is not founded on compulsory domination (a repudiation) or a formal equality (a false identification), but on an implicit, if not conscious, understanding of how difference works within that particular moment of the diegesis. The potential of the traumatic affect is not the telos of Naipaulian comedy, in the sense that it restores through subversive aesthetic praxis what was lost in the ridiculing of the Comedy of Manners; rather, this praxis, the jouissant affect, functions in a unity with ridicule and satire, extending the inherent limits of representational possibility by “unclosing” the heretofore closed system of
language and knowledge (of the clown’s Otherness), through extra-lingual transference. This crucial “crisis in representation” negatively qualifies the self-Other desire-relations immanent to ironic comedy, but remains wholly dependent on the latter for the success of its sophisticated functioning: if the narrative vantage point is structured, as much ironic comedy is, using an egoistic basis that posits an implicit superiority and self-unity, Comedic Jouissance presents a formal solution to its tendency to either reify objective difference or universalize a purely formal equality that masks real inequality and structural violence. Through reconciling the comedic with the traumatic (or extra-comedic), Naipaulian comedy presents a representation that remains negative and subversive.

Thus the melancholic affect of this sub-mode, which initially seemed to contradict the ironic mode of comedy as theorized by Frye, can now be seen to belong firmly within its theoretical boundaries. To illustrate this point with reference to Naipaul’s magnum opus Mr. Biswas, if one were to extrapolate only the barest, most essential diegetic detail from the fictional biography, it seems utterly beyond laughter: born onto a wretched colonial sugar plantation, he inadvertently causes the death of his father and ruin of his family as a child; he marries out of pure poverty into a dehumanizing family structure which he hates but remains wholly dependent upon; his wife more or less loathes him and his children are indifferent at best; and so on. But it is precisely these features, given the proper distance and illuminated by a certain comic mood (in particular the ultimately doomed efforts of Biswas to un-integrate himself from the Tulsi family or material immiseration) that constitutes both the comedic substance and the jouissant transgressions of these boundaries. Understanding systematically the function of Naipaul’s formal method, which oscillates between the ridicule of cultural baseness, the satire of social
relations, and the subsequent *jouissant* recognition, functions to provide a unique, encompassing representation almost ideally suited to such seemingly uncomedic substance.

By the time we return to the image of a decrepit, macabre Mr. Biswas dying within his final home, the same image that opens the novel, the epical range of experiences converge, imbuing the familiar image with a heterogeneous signification—at once a clown finding self-deceiving contentedness in his squalid infirmity, an individual whose economic autonomy is mere appearance (he escapes the Tulsis by going into insane amounts of debt and is thus only formally free), and, after all, a man who has suffered tremendously, in manifold fashions, throughout his entire life. The many subjective experiences, at least within *Biswas*, are integrated within the collective landscape, each articulating a facet of the totality, in both a narrative and social sense that refuses ultimate objectification; this whole, mediated through the range of experiences of its hero, becomes a more textured, expansive reality with the inclusion of each disparate, but every vitally necessary, subjective moment. The co-existence and interdependency of these sub-modes, within the larger formal framework, a continuous pulsation among three sub-modes (repudiation, satire and transference) traces Naipaul’s formal logic as it develops across his early fiction.

**IV. Vargas Llosa: The Primacy of the (Contradictory) Social Object**

Vargas Llosian comedy presents a formal structure that can be explained with recourse to the triadic modal system we have developed, albeit with several divergent modifications. Whereas Naipaul’s early novels function through the affirmation of mastery over a society which is Other-ed in two distinct symbolic ways, Vargas Llosa’s superior narrative vantage point, the *sine qua non* of the ironic mode, is not structured against Peruvian society, but rather structures
society against itself. This is another way of saying that the central paradigm of the desire-relation has shifted from the sacrifice of \textit{pharmakos} to a generalized form of the Social Satire, that which Frye characterizes as an attack upon the “melodramatic spirit itself”—the “sentiment, solemnity, and the triumph of fidelity and approved moral standards” of the Western bourgeois culture and social mores which find their fullest realization in the melodramatic novel\textsuperscript{44}. Taking our cue from Frye, the need to purge \textit{pharmakos} as a “malignant individual”, difference incarnate, becomes less of the structural imperative than the exposition of the key contradiction as a “symptom of that society's own viciousness” (Frye 48). The comedic method of Vargas Llosa is an “intellectualized parody” of a society that is at once “ridiculing and scorning” its own arbitrary “approved moral standards” and destructive social norms. The manner in which it accomplishes this is a sophisticated, critical satire, beginning with the fragmenting of the narrative into compartmentalized, opposing spheres or strands, one of which represents a dominant social position or norm that attempts to subordinate its “repressed” counterpart. The central contradiction is contingent upon the initial, reified splintering of social strands in such a manner that each is blind to their unified social immanence; the resulting narrative is no less than the dialectical resolution of this social fragmentation, in such a way as to negate the artificial conditions of its initial separation.

This formal paradigm presupposes a tendency within the narrative subjectivity to align itself with the collective, quasi-national ego (the “we”)—a position that contrasts with Naipaul’s more brazen narrative distance, in that the former is only disconnected from its social object to the extent that it can become critical of its central, contradictory component. This drives the diegesis in that the “self” is able to observe a familiar, rifted social condition that finds articulation through characters such as the delusional, martial sycophant Captain Pantoja or Don
Rigoberto, the ridiculous, bourgeois Il Capitano; this “political ego” remains continuous with Peruvian “civil society” that serves as its object, remaining inscribed within its social realm. This distinction can be more plainly understood in the larger context of the literary oeuvre of the respective authors: Naipaul, the ironist *par excellence*, assumes a method disposed to the detached mockery characteristic of his extreme comedic irony, whereas Vargas Llosa’s fiction is actually rooted in the aesthetic of the low-mimetic mode, presenting innovative variations of *realist* fiction. Frye explains that the irony characteristic of modern comedic literature “descends from the low mimetic: it begins in realism and dispassionate observation”45. The functioning of these comedic novels can thus be characterized as a form of immanent Social Satire, assuming a proximate relationship with their social object so as to be better able to capture the dialectical self-implosion represented through two opposing spheres of narrative action; such a relationship is reflected on the largest formal (that is, modal) level, as Vargas Llosian comedy is not ironic comedy in the sense exemplified by Naipaul. Rather, it is a composite, produced by unique, liminal position between a realism that posits a parity between the status of self and Other and the brazenly unequal relationality of ironic comedy. This unique orientation does not structure Peru *en masse* as an inferior society but instead centers on a fundamental, rifting contradiction from an immanent social vantage point. For this reason, all other modal aspects—including burlesque elements of the Comedy of Manners and even moments of Comedic *Jouissance*—are subordinate to the complex, multi-layered functioning of the Social Satire.

Vargas Llosas’s two most explicitly comical works, *Captain Pantoja* and *Aunt Julia*, are on the one hand, strongly connected with the low-mimetic mode of his non-comedic fiction and on the other hand ironically detail a social paradox that expresses itself through the fragmentation of the narrative into particular spheres and is realized on the most concrete,
structural level through this splintering of the narrative. In *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service*, libidinal desire is counter-posed to the sexually-repressive, “civilized” social institution of the armed forces, as the latter employs its most assiduous individual, Captain Pantaleón Pantoja, to try to regulate, and thus subordinate, the sexual desire of their corps through rationalist organization. *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* recounts the memoir of Marito Varguitas, a young law student who desires to be a writer, struggling against the strictures of taboo and mores of conservative Lima society of the 1950’s; these latter principles are opposed to the aesthetic, as the social relations of bourgeois society, which attempt to subsume art *sui generis* to the vitiating culture industry and thereby subordinate its transformative potential to generate profit and as a psycho-social outlet that helps uphold the status quo through its function as a form of mass distraction.

The contradiction details the efforts of the dominant sphere of society to subordinate (or as it were, “master”) the Other, “repressed” sphere, which emerges as the facet of society that is repeatedly denied existence. This paradoxical scenario of society acting against itself, whether through absurd efforts to subordinate its own sexuality to disciplined rationality or that of aesthetic possibility to the accumulation of capital, becomes the basis for its ironic, modal detachment. The formal mirroring of this contradictory social schism that divides the narrative into separate but mutually dependent spheres, and thus illuminates the narrative content, is in this way a reflection of the *alienation* of the ego-formation itself, that which allows the “I” and the collectivized “we” to speak of themselves as such. In this epistemological headstand, the process of affirming the Other is the separation and disavowal of the self from the self: in *Aunt Julia* this occurs within the antagonistic relationship between the transformative potential of art and the its attempted subordination at the hands of bourgeois society (*qua* its integration into the process of
Capital, which looks to denature this potential). This split is actualized in the two respective narrative spheres, the first of which details the memoir of the young bourgeoisie who longs to forsake the professional future his family has planned for the arts, whereas the second is a series of radio soap operas written by the “supposed one man ‘industry’ in the world of radio” Pedro Camacho. The latter, despite Camacho’s delusional, romantic pretensions about creative virility and the power of genius, remains wholly subservient to (and dominated by) the financial interests of the station owners. Thus in a single historical contemporaneity, the artist’s domination is bifurcated, juxtaposing the bourgeois young adulthood that, conventionally, should lead to his “maturation” and rejection of art itself, with the career artist who is a veritable factory for the “contagious vice” of the mass-produced melodrama.

In splitting the two ends of the contradiction into abutting formal strands, Vargas Llosa is able to achieve an ironic standpoint that sustains heterogeneous comedic spheres while simultaneously developing the larger, unified satire that results from their initial compartmentalization. Vargas Llosa’s meticulous drawing out of this very fragmentation, in terms of form and content, results in an ultimate integration that realizes the full breadth and unity of disparate elements implied by the novel-form. For instance, the narrative form of Captain Pantoja encompasses multiple epistolary perspectives, the subjective dreams of the protagonist, reproductions of military memoranda and newspaper articles in addition to omniscient narration—all with an encompassing, disparate scope which, in the words of Lukács, unifies “[a]ll the fissures and rents which are inherent in the historical situation” as they become manifest through their narrative integration. Thus, just as Naipaul’s tripartite ironic form finds its narrative objects (its Others) furnished with a subjective dimension qua Comedic Jouissance, so too does Vargas Llosa’s multifaceted narrative serve “the fundamental form-determining
intention of the novel” which is “objectivized as the psychology of the novel’s heroes: they are seekers.” In other words, the standpoint assumed by the narrative witnesses the ironic unfolding of the psyches of its “inferior” heroes, who are the social products that immediately confront the results of the central contradiction. The reader experiences the effects (and affect) of Pantoja’s impossible mission of reconciling sexual desire with martial discipline and control within his grotesque, outrageous nightmares as well as through witnessing the progressively-precarious facades he must adopt to placate the suspicions of his wife.

The “repressed” sphere, which the dominant strand tries to subordinate, serves as a parody that satirically undermines the latter within the framework of the central thematic contradiction. Elements of the burlesque abound in this repressed strand—as if not “serious” enough for consideration within the space of the more acerbic dominant sphere of straight-ahead satire—where they act as symbolic, occluded affronts to the stilted standards and decency of “civilized” society. In Captain Pantoja, the hyper-dogmatic, compulsively-scrupulous military officer is ordered to erect a brothel service, thus forcing him into contact with an array of eccentrics and social outcasts who represent the instituciones prohibidas of the conservative Peruvian village of Iquitos, its repressed side that continues to live a denied existence on the margins. The clowns range from the voluptuous, middle-aged Madame Chuchupe and her boyfriend and protector (a dwarf nicknamed Chupito or “freckle”) to the outrageous head pimp, “Chino” Porfirio Wong, a character whose vulgar sense of humor is underscored by his comical (if stereotypical) mispronunciations, owing to his Chinese accent. Although these clowns still function, to a certain extent, as negative metaphors that affirm an implicit inferiority, their very existence within the symbolic space of the narrative is a direct, satiric, response to the arbitrary strictures of social institutions; these latter elements, represented by the prudish, hostile General
Scavino and the sententious priest, Padre Beltrán, ultimately prefer the pandemic of sexual violence and aggression than its solution vis-à-vis Pantoja’s “special service.” Equally remarkable is Vargas Llosa’s ability to develop each opposing narrative sphere separately, while simultaneously extending the larger social critique that is the pre-supposition of their antagonistic, but unified coexistence. This is notably evidenced by the formal structure of *In Praise of the Stepmother*, in which Vargas Llosa manages to construct a truly erotic, sensual narrative *directly alongside* the caustic, lavish parody of erotic fiction that is dominated by the repressed male ego of Don Rigoberto. In contrast to Naipaul’s ironic comedy, Vargas Llosa’s comedies can be said to have a textual “desire” insofar as they pursue a liberation from within. This occurs through an immanent subversion of social stricture and dogma by the very elements they intends to dominate; this is no less than the inexorable resistance of an Other, which, as if itself an irrepressible libidinal drive, refuses to renounce its claim to existence.

Burlesque elements become integrated into the Social Satire insofar as they serve to skewer the rigid conventions and precepts of modern middle-class Peruvian society, which, in a way, satirically undermines itself as the diegesis progresses. What results from the progressive tension between the two opposing spheres is the dialectical process of their mutual transformation. The repressed strand negates the formerly dominant position and elements of one become displaced into the other, as the contradictory, quasi-ontological thematic center collapses. For instance, in *Captain Pantoja* gratification of sexual desire becomes the central tenet of the military institution. *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* offers an even more compelling example of this formal inversion. The *bildungsroman* of the dominant strand that, conventionally, *should* result in a rite of passage into adulthood and a bourgeois profession, instead becomes a *folletín*, whereas Pedro Camacho’s radio soap operas, whose task it is to be
“diverting” and “set a person dreaming” (90) turn into anarchic orgies of surreal, fantastic destruction\(^5\). Thus, real life is exalted to the impossible level of the aesthetic, just as art, under a radio industry that attempts to subordinate it to advertisements and market shares, ceases to serve its systematized function \textit{qua} Adornian “ensoñación” (i.e. mass distraction). The radical inversions of the respective narrative spheres reach such a fever pitch that this central contradiction threatens to consume the novel as a whole.

This consummation occurs in a climactic moment at which point the narrative strands can no longer sustain their fragmentation, and is subsequently “telescoped” back into a single sphere. This Vargas Llosian version of Comedic \textit{Jouissance}, much like his burlesque, has a very different significance than that of his Caribbean counterpart. The instances of the former are rare in Vargas Llosa’s comic novels and do not carry the negative function of transference as in Naipaulian comedy. The qualitative differences within the desire-relation structurally preclude such a possibility: since “Other” is actually two reified, splintered spheres within a single social totality, it cannot “supersede” itself. Rather, moments of Comedic \textit{Jouissance} offer jarring “reversals” and climaxes that precipitate the re-unification of the narrative into a whole—though not in a way that necessarily resolves its underlying contradiction. For Captain Pantoja, his compulsive, obsessive dedication to perfecting and expanding his brothel service becomes a problem for a Peruvian Army when it becomes progressively impossible to deny the existence of the “unspeakable act of immorality” that is the “special service.”\(^5\) The “repressed” sphere represented by the salacious low-lifes (the prostitutes and pimps, such as Chino Porfirio), threatens to completely overtake the dominant strand as the stolid soldier-cum-pimp and procurer becomes more of the latter than his superiors can tolerate.
Et fine la commedia when, following the surprising murder of Olga (the Brazilian), Pantoja’s beloved mistress and most popular “visitor”, he transgresses the limits of his precarious, contradictory situation by giving the renowned prostitute a lavish funeral with full military honors. The jouissant moment, which occurs when we learn that the members of a religious cult have raped the group of the semi-official military sex workers, could not be described as a tragic Aristotelian peripeteia. In terms of its form and content, the scene (culled from a newspaper article) is not cathartic, but rather journalistically detached and thorough, detailing Olga’s murder with a dearth of dramatic flair. This climax, however, is no less than a sort of diegetic symmetry, in that the sexual aggression of the cult—the populist social organ that violently “displaces” the effects of its hyper-repressive social dogma onto violent rituals—mirrors the pandemic of rape among the soldiers that precipitated the creation of the Pantoja’s special service in the first place. Thus, the trauma of Comedic Jouissance, far from creating anxiety and the possibility of intersubjective transference between the object represented and the subjective standpoint, amalgamates its reified, aliquot strands into a singular whole. Whereas the moment of recognition in Naipaulian Jouissance finds its form as affective melancholy, Vargas Llosa’s comedies merely shift back into the low-mimetic, realist mode, which acquires its jouissant character insofar as it is in total disharmony with the more acerbic bits of satire, farce and parody.

The climactic events of Comedic Jouissance are usually followed by a comedic denouement or one final, ironic turn of the screw: in Aunt Julia, following the realization of the hero’s legal marriage to his Aunt (which by bildungsroman standards should never have taken place), Varguitas, now an accomplished writer, returns years later to Lima to find that the eccentric one-man-industry underwent the exact opposite reversal of fortune. The grandiloquent
folletinista, following the death of the radio serial and the rise of television, is reduced to a groveling, servile copy boy, whose status is even lower than that with which Varguitas began. While the social opposition set up between the aesthetic and its questionable place in modern bourgeois society is not truly resolved, Camacho, the miles gloriosus dominated by the accumulative desire of the culture industry, loses his place as the aesthetic division of labor coldly passes him by, leaving a mere “caricature of the caricature he had been twelve years before.”\textsuperscript{53} Thus there cannot be said to be a “victory” for art as such, nor its ultimate defeat, but rather the displacement of the social contradiction into a new context vis-à-vis the objective movement of history; as the foolish artist-as-industry falls into the abyss of historical obsolescence, the possibility of an oppositional auteur, critical of the dictatorship of General Odría, is posited within the space of the closing pages\textsuperscript{54}. However, within Varguitas the artist, we see this transformative potential in direct juxtaposition to less subversive qualities, foremost within his sexist narrative discourse concerning Aunt Julia and his subsequent wife. In this way the closing pages open up a new thread, in which these two abutting elements, political transformation and sexism, paradoxically struggle against each other, rather than the oppressive social determinants—(neo)imperialism, social convention, wage labor—which should unify their collective efforts.

These final observations encapsulate the fundamental formal difference between the ironic comedy of VS Naipaul and that of Vargas Llosa: while the latter begins with an immanent standpoint that acquires objective distance in the process of satire, the former supersedes its rigid, presupposed self-Other difference in favor of a mediated recognition of the Other, a unity between the immanent and the exterior. To briefly recapitulate the results of the preceding
analysis, Naipaulian comedy structures a “superior” subjectivity presumed by the reader, one whose “desire” is the pursuit of mastery over its narrative objects—Trinidadian culture vis-à-vis its localized clowns and Trinidad the state, as represented by socially-symbolic individuals; the functioning of this desire occurs through the mediation of Symbolic narrative fantasy, particularly in the forms of the burlesque ridicule of the Comedy of Manners and the scathing commentary of the Social Satire. However, the fixity of these representations of the “inferior,” self-affirming Other is transcended in the instances of Comedic Jouissance: the intrusion of the Real into the space of Symbolic mastery that precipitates the transference of a narrative trauma qua affective experience; the latter phenomenon occurs within the narrative as a melancholy, piteous affect, distinct from what generally constitutes the “comic mood” of the burlesque and satirical elements. Vargas Llosian comedic irony by contrast takes quite a different approach, assuming a narrative vantage point continuous with Peruvian society, but that develops ironic detachedness in relation to a central social contradiction. This feature is articulated within the formal structure itself, splitting the main narrative into two separate yet linked strands, each of which, as the diegesis progresses, undergoes a mutual transformation, thereby reflecting the satirical, critical content in its unfolding of the narrative contradiction. All other sub-modal elements remain subordinate to this fundamental Social Satire, which is complemented by burlesque elements (which acquire a subversive resignification) and capped by a jouissant turn of the screw, which re-unifies the narrative while displacing (or re-placing) the central conflict, rather than resolving it.

This essay has only begun to trace the formal systems by which these two unique articulations of comedic irony function. As we have hitherto theorized these systems in an admittedly formalist manner, a more profound comparison must proceed with recourse to the
social and historical contexts of which these novels serve as representational literary forms (in the expanded manner I have laid out). Although I must conclude my analysis at the threshold of such insights, such an undertaking would begin by examining one of the most glaring historical differences between Caribbean societies and those of the Andean region of Latin America (here Trinidad and Peru): the relative degree of linkage to, and historical distance from, the former colonizing power. The discrepancies of this complex social relationship and its legacy within these ex-colonies, something this theoretical survey has merely attempted to intimate, inform many layers of social life, from national identity to forms of both economic and political oppression or (relative) autonomy. Such an extension could do worse than to begin with theorizing the ways in which Naipaul’s geo-political region has historically been (and economically remains) more closely tied to its Western, ex-imperial authorities than more southern, mainland regions of the continent. Naipaul’s vivid, critical portraits of post-colonial “mimicry” and the irreconcilable aims of nationalist, reformist politics and a truly autonomous society contrast in illuminating ways with Vargas Llosa’s epical works of historical fiction, which provide lucid immanent critiques of a disjointed “modern” society in the very process of representing them. Despite ending at such a beginning, we can see the richness gained by this critical inquiry into a specific type of comedy and, more generally, the nature of form itself; but once again, the full significance of this formal insight—pertaining to matters such as representation, affect, and subjectivity—are only realizable through its critical unification with its historical, fundamentally Latin American, content.

1 Theodor W. Adorno. *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (Taylor and Francis E-library, 2004), 121. At the risk of vitiating its original meaning, I purposely “misplace” this quote of Adorno’s (which inveighs against the possibility of ontology as such). In doing so, I hope to reproduce the formal experience of the ironic on the theoretical level and gesture at the subversive underlying effects and possibilities of ironic comedy as a literary mode.
forms of oppression. Thus the argument, as advanced by Flower MacCannell in her brilliant monograph to its “political tendency,” as determined by the historical moment. “The Artist as Producer,” in early 19th century novelists such as Balzac were able, not despite but because of (among other factors) their reactionary pessimism, to represent the historical contours and social developments in more compelling, real terms than novelists with more seemingly “progressive” outlooks. A similar case could easily be made for the expansive, dark realism of A House for Mr. Biswas. For an insightful analysis of Vargas Llosa qua the Balzacian paradox, see Neil Larsen’s “Mario Vargas Llosa: The Realist as Neo-Liberal” in Determinations (New York: Verso, 2001).

Benjamin provides a useful category for discussing issues of form with his concept of “technique.” This dialectical concept refers directly to formal function “within the literary relationships of production of a period”, i.e. form that exists only insofar as it is embedded within its particular social context and whose function is articulated according to its “political tendency,” as determined by the historical moment. “The Artist as Producer,” in Illuminations Trans. Harry Zohn, (New York, Random House, 2007), 84. This concept is useful insofar as it supersedes a static, binary understanding of the form-content relation. However, given the purely formalistic connotation of “technique,” I substitute the term “method” or “comedic method” to refer to form, pace Benjamin, as it serves to aesthetically mediate and represent social content.

The mode of analysis through which this essay seeks to theorize the objective structure, function, and significance of ironic comedy will “confirm the suspicions” of many of Naipaul’s most vociferous detractors. This is, regrettably, inevitable in an epoch in which the academic trends represented prominently by what is now called “postcolonial” studies associates terms such as “difference” and “Other” as, ipso facto, forms of “epistemological violence,” which bolster the discursive hegemony of the West while condemning the helpless subaltern to a representational citadel. The self-evident idealism that posits social domination as discursive shackles (rather than as products of historical developments and material relations) aside, this view presents a crude, undialectical reduction of psychoanalysis; the latter seeks to explain the basic structure and workings of human subjectivity as forms of social existence “Difference” as such is not necessarily violence against a particular race, gender, or other social grouping, but a fundamental process by which the subject knows (and thereby establishes) his/her own self.

Ironically, the notion of “equivalence,” of formal equality, is a necessary form of appearance for the most insidious forms of oppression. Thus the argument, as advanced by Flower MacCannell in her brilliant monograph Regime of the Brother: After the Patriarchy (New York: Routledge, 1992), that the oppressiveness of modern democracy, in its androcentric, as well as economic and political disparities is founded on the denial of difference (sexual difference being the primal example) and the unconscious, ideological delusion of formal equality; this takes the form of the collective ego, which is, of course, that of the white male citizen (i.e. the political agent with the means to express his will). Flower MacCannell’s methodology, which offers innovative, Lacanian advancements within the critical-theoretical tradition, informs my arguments throughout and will be returned to explicitly when appropriate.

Mario Vargas Llosa: The Realist as Neo-Liberal” offers insight into this real-life political farce, which ended with the author’s humiliating loss in the 1990 Peruvian presidential elections, resulting in an (presumably) un-selfconscious, unintentionally comical attempt to tell his side of the story vis-à-vis his familiar blend of fiction and memoir, in A Fish in Water (Larsen 2001).

“Of all of Mario Vargas Llosa’s probably the most popular is his novel, Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter” (01:45) from “World Book Club: Mario Vargas Llosa, Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter.” BBC. April 2007 http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/specials/133_wbc_archive_new/page4.shtml

Vargas Llosa scholar Raymond L. Williams offers an example of the more affirmative critical attention with his deconstructive analysis of Aunt Julia, focusing on the ways in which the novel blurs the lines between reader and text, as well as those which separate the text itself from Vargas Llosa's actual, non-fictional life. The work is said to serve as a polyvalent “discursive text” of sorts that, in Williams’s opinion, resolves the ostensibly problematic binary separation of fiction from history and reality (“La tía Julia y el escribido: Escritores y lectores” Texto Crítico, abril-junio 1979, no. 13, p. 197-209). We find an example of the second, more critical posture towards Vargas Llosa’s fiction vis-à-vis his “real life” ideological shift as a public figure in Balmiro Omaña’s “Ideology and Text in Vargas Llosa: Different Stages”, which juxtaposes the innovative technical and philosophical brilliance of
his first three novels with the “new political positions and ideologies” of his later comedic fiction from the 1970’s: “If in Pantaleón, Vargas Llosa had begun…his efforts to realize a popular novel, it is in his next novel, Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter that he definitively achieved this aspiration” (145; 146 translation mine). Thus, the conservative shift in Vargas Llosa’s politics is said to be reflected in his allegedly more commercial, artistically-inferior comedic novels. It goes without saying that both such approaches are deeply problematic. Omaña, Balmiro “Ideología y texto en Vargas Llosa: sus diferentes etapas.” Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana, Año 13 Vol. 26 (1987).

8 Northrop Frye states that “One pole of ironic comedy is the recognition of the absurdity of naive melodrama, or, at least, of the absurdity of its attempt to define the enemy of society as a person outside that society. From there it develops toward the opposite pole, which is true comic irony or satire, and which defines the enemy of society as a spirit within that society.” The Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton University Press, 2000), 47.

9 For instance, Frye advances the claim that historical literary shifts are not primarily effected by the given relations and material developments (either technological or the forms of social organization) of a particular society, but rather function according to a cyclical logic, constituting a kind of meta-historical unconscious: “Reading forward in history, therefore, we may think of our romantic, high mimetic and low mimetic modes as a series of displaced myths, mythoi or plot-formulas progressively moving over towards the opposite pole of verisimilitude, and then, with irony, beginning to move back” (Anatomy of Criticism 52).

10 Frye, Anatomy of Criticism 46: “…we are now in an ironic phase of literature…”


12 This identification with the one’s alienated self-image gives rise to the ego, the unification of the subject from the “inchoate desires” and drives of the pre-Oedipal psyche; this primal selfhood is structured by negotiating the boundaries of self and “other”, but with the deceptive proviso that other is actually self, distinct from the Other (Ibid.) This imputed form of identification determined by the act of narration might in fact be what accounts for, or at least supplements, the reader’s seemingly “automatic” assumption of the narrative standpoint; he or she is abstracted into “we” through a subjective conscription into the “artificial group” (to use Freud’s term). This latter is no more than the deceptive, illusory totality, as it is actually a singular, pseudo-collectivized ego, which members of modern society are forced to identify with. Flower MacCannell discusses this in the context of the rise of the modern democratic state (Regime of the Brother 11-15).


14 This is no less than the death drive—the violent jouissance at the end of every drive—externalized and exacted upon the Other. The process in which this is accomplished echoes Lacan’s famous re-interpretation of Hegel’s “master/slave dialectic” in which the master only recognizes his self through the suffering and domination of the slave, his Other; this formal relationship represents the egotistical aggressivity that underpins the “intersubjective” relationship, as it is revealed to be an projection of the ego onto an external object. This moment of recognition is actually one of imaginary identification, as the Other is a reflection of the self, a negative image that affirms the subjectivity presupposed by the narrative mode.

However, this “image” is also a representation, a “signifier” operating within a nexus of symbolic meaning: the mastered Other, the domination of difference, symbolizes and affirms the unified, superior “I.” Or using Lacan’s denser linguistic terminology “grafting a signifier substituted for another signifier into the signifying chain – [i]s the source and origin of all meaning (Lacan, Seminar 14, unpublished translation). The “signifying chain” being the symbolic plane of representation that gives objects their social-significance, or their “meaning.”

15 “Desires…here are the only things that bind them [referring to “jouissances encountered in life”]… desire is propped up by a fantasy, at least one foot of which is in the Other” (Lacan, Ecrits, 780). This implication might have been what Frye had in mind when he writes of how “Ironic comedy brings us to the figure of the scape-goat ritual and the nightmare dream, the human symbol that concentrates our fears and hates” (Anatomy of Criticism pg. 45, emphasis mine). Zizek explains the relationship of fantasy to the symbolic, as well as its role as mediation for the
Real: “The form of knowledge of the subject's "fundamental fantasy," the specific formula which regulates his or her access to jouissance. That is to say, desire and jouissance are inherently antagonistic, exclusive even: desire's raison d'être (or "utility function," to use Richard Dawkins's term) is not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire” (Desire: Drive = Truth: Knowledge, in Umbr(a), 1997).

Also, it is important to note is that while jouissance is the result of the paradoxical "enjoyment" of the unconscious libidinal drives, narcissism (and its associated forms of violence) is not essential but rather a form of expression of these drives that is historically specific insofar as it becomes articulated through the symbolic order, the social means designed to contain it. What’s more, it is masochism, the experience of the death drive, that is behind the narcissistic violence of the ego, rather than its counterpart: “sadism is not a primary feature of the unconscious drives” Dylan Evans, An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis (New York: Routledge, 1996), 171.

16 See previous note

Lacan, Seminar I, 177. Entering into the symbolic realm of the Other, of the pre-existent social nexus represented by the chain of signifiers and whose sum total forms the Name-of-the-Father, involves “exchang[ing] his ego for this desire which he sees in the other [sic, “Other”].” in a manner modeled on Freud’s concept of sublimation (Ibid). The entry into the symbolic is predicated upon repressing the libidinal drives vis-à-vis the ultimately inadequate mediation of language, the signifier; as the fundamental form of representation through which “demand always under- or overshoots itself… because it articulates itself through the signifier, it always demands something else; that in every satisfaction of a need, it insists on something else…” (Lacan, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: Seminar VII, 294) Desire is thus the essential lack that results from the attempted transformation of the drives into the symbolic nexus of language, of the incapability to fully master our fundamental jouissance.

18The notion of a particular subjectivity concordant with the narrative standpoint is indebted to Lukacs’s theory of an “imputed class consciousness” as the link between the “objective economic totality” and the “real, psychological thoughts of men about their lives” (i.e. the concrete totality and its subjective, immediate appearance). This useful, though controversial term, which is used to posit the proletariat as the ultimate historical agent, is in my analysis mediated by the Lacanian notion of the ego and its formation so as to explain the notion of an “imputed” vantage point within the structure of a particular aesthetic mode. Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971) passim; 71; 51.

19 Lacan, Seminar XVII, 33, cited in Flower MacCannell, “The Real Imaginary”, 50-51. In addition to the obvious parallel between Lacan’s rejection of the closed totality of knowledge and Adorno’s famous rejection of Hegel’s teleological, idealist totality (“The whole is untrue”), Lacan senses, as Freud did in “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” that the progress offered by the rationalizing, totalizing tendency of modern society as a form of “progress” may conceal a deeper, primal destructiveness. This notion reveals an affinity, albeit an implicit one which does not begin until Lacan’s later work, with the Adornian notion that “[p]rogress as domination [the means by which “civilization” historically advances]…is therefore inextricable from domination as regression…the choiceless return to what was never solved in the first place: the struggle for self-preservation. The connections between both thinkers on the potentially transformative role of the aesthetic will come to bear on my analysis as well. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Things Beyond Resemblance (New York: Columbia Press, 2006), 54.

20 Flower MacCannell explains that “Lacan realize[d] that the crucial task of mediating between the real and the imaginary for the subject could no longer be shouldered exclusively by a symbolic whose failings were increasingly (and alarmingly) apparent” as evidenced by the “rancid politics of [his] time.” Juliet Flower MacCannell “The Real Imaginary: Lacan’s Joyce” in S: The Journal of The Jan Van Eck Circle for Lacanian Ideological Critique Vol 1 (2008), 46.

21 Ibid. Citing herself, Flower MacCannell expands Lacan’s analysis of the inimical “discourse of the university” to include the “ethos of capitalism” as its historically-determined underside; she incisively draws a connection between the “amassing of ‘total knowledge’” which drives many fields of dominant academic discourse, and the onset of a kind of rationalist “‘accumulation’” as the “discursive agent [or subject] of contemporary discourse” (51).

In recent years, the signifier, which should be the object through which subjects relate to other subjects (the mediation of the Other, the symbolic order and function of language), has effectively turned the speaker into the
object of a reified, “accumulated” knowledge bank as it serves to buttress the dominant order of social relations. This destructive positivism has been exacerbated by the subsumption of the dwindling sites of intellectual freedom, the universities, into the monopolistic social relations structured by capital. This is evident within the changing role of education, which is now seen as providing the living, intellectual “raw material” for Capital, as well as the fact that the student debt bubble has transformed the university itself into a site for the accumulation process, and furnished other lucrative auxiliary areas for the extraction of surplus value (i.e. exploitative forms of labor, both in its traditional wage-based form as well as more intellectual forms of work).

22 Ibid. Lacan, in his seminar on Joyce and “le sinthome” described the affect of Joyce’s prose as a precise, formal reconstruction of his own jouissance, imparting a resonance and “inwit” (a kind of smarting sensation, the underside of lingual puns and wit), that allows for the recognition of the new within the symbolic by precipitating an open-ended expansion. Lacan, Seminar 23, trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished)

23 For Lacan, the key distinction comes with the introduction of lalangue; although the reader will be spared the full explanation of yet another Lacanian neologism, this term in short, is the parts of language that is “not yet a ‘meaning’” as it preexists the “chain of signifiers”, the socially-constituted symbolic order of language, and thus retains the fundamental expression of jouissance that is excluded from the written word or symbolic representation. Paradoxically, it is only this extra-lingual quality of lalangue, its feel, intonation, or acoustic resonance, that allows new meanings to be translated (or mediated symbolically) into language in its systemic, social ordering: “it’s function entails that something comes and strikes it from without, otherwise nothing will ever emerge from it” (Lacan, Seminar XVIII, cited in The Real Imaginary, pg 51). Thus, “Only its resonating provides an opening out of (and for) the [symbolic] Order” (Ibid, 50).

24 I believe affect is what becomes central for Lacan following his turn towards both lalangue and his concept of the sinthome, which breaks with the concept of the “symptom” (which is a message from the unconscious, a symbolic metaphor) by defining itself as the “surplus” jouissance left over from the transcription of the jouissance of the unconscious drives into symbolical that constitute the “Law.” This extrapolation is informed by Flower MacCannell’s notion of the sinthome as a key innovation in Lacan’s later re-consideration of the relationship between the Imaginary and the Real, as well as Lacan’s analysis of Joyce, from the seminar in which the sinthome originates: “psychology is nothing other than that, namely, this confused image we have of our own body, but this confused image does not fail to include, let us call them what they are called, affects. Namely, that, in imagining precisely that, this psychic relationship, one has, there is something psychic that is affected, that reacts, which is not detached” Lacan, Seminar 23, trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished), I-10.


27 Examples of the atrocities committed under the guise of a universalizing equivalency, which posits a false identification with the Other as a means of unleashing the worst sorts of narcissistic violence, have become numerous in recent years. For instance, Roksana Bahramitash notes in her critique of Azar Nafisi the oblique tactics of “feminist Orientalism” Nafisi uses as a means of justifying imperialism qua equivalence: “very personal accounts of the lives of women in Iran as an insider [become] a confirmation of...[the] outsider portrayal of Muslim women as the victims of religious dogma... it reinforces what many North Americans want to believe about the ‘oppression’ of Iranian women while the United States is at the height of its war on terror.” Roksana Bahramitash, “The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism: Case Studies of Two North American Bestsellers” in Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 14, No. 2. (Summer 2005) 230.

Here too we find a point of convergence between Lacan and Adorno, in that it is only through the recognition and subsequent reconciling of subjects in their full differences that true social emancipation becomes possible: “An emancipated society...would not be a unitary state, but the realization of universality in the reconciliation of differences. Politics that are seriously concerned with such a society ought not, therefore [to] propound the abstract quality of men as an idea...The melting pot was introduced by unbridled industrial capitalism.” Theodore Adorno, Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life, cited in Flower MacCannell, “Adorno: the Riddle of Femininity,” in Adorno: Culture and Feminism Ed. Maggie O’Neil (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999), 142.
“Irony” as a specific comedic mode—the structure and function of type of comedic fiction—is here used alongside more commonplace understandings of irony as a disjuncture between appearance and essence, the expected state and the actual state, etc, as well as, referring back to Frye, that which “turns away from direct statement or its own obvious meaning” (40). This last connotation also alludes to the diegetic surprises and “reversals” that are so characteristic of ironic comedy more generally, in that they are the manifestations in action of irony as a concept, as unexpected results which “turn away” from their expected outcome.

It should be noted that in Naipaul’s fiction, despite how fanciful his characterizations become they rarely verge on mere fantasy. In addition to grounding most of his burlesque ridicule in actual customs and a mélange of unique cultural practices, even the seemingly crudest characters retain a significance beyond their immediate, over-the-top baseness. For example, the humor found in Ganesh’s Aunt, referred to in the Mystic Masseur only as the “Great Belcher,” (for self-evident reasons) cannot be reduced to the sum total of her base eccentricities: she is also the impetus for his career in the dubious profession of mysticism and, surprisingly, one of the mentors who helps develop his opportunistic cunning.

This may be seen in an analogous light to the distorting effects of dream work, which function to alter otherwise violent, primal impulses and drives into more acceptable forms of conscious thought: the further the distance from actual domination of Other, the more fantastic the representation. This also hints at the reasons why more outrageous forms of ridicule result in greater humor, but in necessarily smaller doses.

See above note. Robert Hullot-Kentor also refers to an implicit ego (though not on these explicit terms) structured by the Emerson’s ideology of the “exceptional” American ethos vis-à-vis his collectivizing, populist rhetorical strategies: “In the name of we he may now entreat the object...with the authority of the convened assembly to ignore whatever complaints this object might raise...The conjured we is in fact the social reality of the day in its economic solidarity against labor and reform” (18). “Introduction: Origin is the Goal”, in Things Beyond Remembrance. This will be returned to again in the following section.

Selwyn Cudjoe, in VS Naipaul: A Materialist Reading, identifies in A House for Mr. Biswas, a leitmotif common to Trinidadian fiction of Naipaul’s era: an intergenerational rift between more traditional, Hindu mores and their progressive denigration within the Western (and Christian) cultural confines of the Caribbean colony (although Naipaul was one of the first Trinidad Indians to explore this in the novel-form). However, for a “Materialist Reading,” Cudjoe’s argument leaves something to be desired, as it focuses not on linking this trope to the objective historical (i.e. material) circumstances of which it is a cultural product—the economic and political shift away from an agricultural mode of production to a hybrid form reliant on petroleum refinement and manufacture. By the mid twentieth century, oil accounted for 83% of the islands exports, emerging as the “sine qua non of the economy of Trinidad” in the wake of the economic “plight” brought about by global over-production in sugar and cocoa (Mulchasingh 73); this shift away from the plantation historically precipitated the dispersion of what had been an otherwise stratified, rural Indian population, often generations after their initial displacement and bondage qua the indentured servant contract. In addition to the end of this form of labor, which brought peasants from rural India (such as Naipaul’s family) to work sugar plantations, this shift also resulted in the rapid expansion of urban centers, such as Port of Spain, as large amounts of unemployed, displaced Indians flocked to the cities. The economic growth spurred on by the Second World War and the American military occupation of the island (represented in all of Naipaul’s early novels) contributed to the growth of the petroleum industry and the urbanization of many parts of the island.

For Naipaul, this is true despite the fact that many Trinidadians can (and have/do) read his fiction; this is not to say that they inherently misread or are unable to read the texts. Rather, it must be understood that the narrative standpoint is a structural a priori that the reader encounters, which abstracts individual particularities and differences into a single, pseudo-collectivized ego.

This process of Comedic Jouissance—resulting in the moment of traumatic, intersubjective transference I have sketched out—has parallels to the process by which, for Lacan, new meaning intrudes into the existing symbolic order (as signifier): “The existence of the treasury of signifiers as a vast quantity of "ones" is a fantasy because it elides the fact that there is or can be no "one" without "zero." Only the insertion of a zero, a gap, a rupture could
hope to free up or loosen the "meaning" repressed in or under them" (Flower MacCannell “The Real Imaginary: Lacan’s Joyce,” 51). Thus, signification, like the subjective boundaries of the self I analyze, is not merely established in a comparative relation to the Other, of the insertion of a “new” signifier upon a pre-existing totality; the realization of knowledge requires the negative transformation of the established, given structure vis-à-vis the “new” signifier— but only insofar as what is “new” retains something beyond the given symbolic structure, beyond the signifying quality of language, within the realm of the Real (for Lacan the Real refers to the sensuous, non-symbolic aspects of language: its sound, tone, or resonance).

The Real, in expressing the subject’s deeper *Jouissance*, “rupture[s] this chain to recall the full reserve power of that first signifier -- the vocalization that has broken with nature, the animal, jouissance while retaining their echo -- that permits it to break into the vault that holds (fantastically) the wealth of knowledge, power, and capital” (Ibid). It thus follows that that which precipitates *jouissance*, in positing knowledge of the Other by means of transference, retroactively results in the transformation of the symbolic structure as a whole. This negative, mutual transformation of the Other that is brought about by the recognition and surpassing of difference in moments of Comedic *Jouissance*, in this way transforms the narrow, unified way that self is be understood.

36 Naipaul, *Mystic Masseur*, 49.

37 This is precisely the thesis Adorno advances in his famous reproof of Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction” in response to the latter’s affirmative characterization of comedic films: “the laughter of the audience at a cinema… is anything but good and revolutionary; instead, it is full of the worst bourgeois sadism.” Adorno, “Letters to Walter Benjamin: 1935-1938” in *New Left Review*, 1/81, 67(September-October 1973).


39 *Mimic Men* (New York: Vintage, 2000), published six years after *A House for Mr. Biswas* in 1967, provides a dark, vivid, and wholly un-comedic, portrait of the deceptive character of such political agendas, which fail to transform the oppressive economic and political relations that are at the center of popular suffering and unrest. Thus Ralph Singh (born Ranjit Kripalsingh) is the “native-born” political leader and successful venture capitalist who becomes a symbol for the reproduction, *qua* a cruel historical mimesis, of the exploitative, colonial power structure as a homegrown, nationalist reconstruction of sorts.

40 The subtle interplay between the singular I of the Comedy of Manners and the We of the Social Satire is in reality a deceptive appearance: as the “we” invoked by national discourse is not the totality of “I”s it imagines, but a single hegemonic, mirror-staged ego, which all subjects are forced to identify with. Although I have for simplicity’s sake hitherto avoided the question, orthodox Lacanians (if there can be such a thing) will undoubtedly note that the “symbolic” is not a “true” symbolic but an “imaginary” one, a product of the ego. This elaboration is intentional, influenced largely by Flower MacCannell’s thesis that in the post-Oedipal, “modern” democratic state the Brother, rather than the Father, “simulate[s] a symbolic order—imaginarily” as the “paternal metaphor of the modern, artificial collective” who assumes the gender privileges of the old patriarchal order, while failing to serve its more socially-productive function of mediating the intersubjective relationship between self and Other (here articulated in terms of sexual difference). See “The Primal Scene of Modernity” in *Regime of the Brother*, 12.


42 See the chapter “His Chosen Calling” in *Miguel Street*.

43 The deeper irony being that despite Bissoon’s obtuseness, Ganesh’s insipid opus, “101 Questions and Answers on the Hindu Religion,” illustrates how meaningless the intellectual content of his book becomes, paling in comparison to the status conferred upon Ganesh following his attainment of the status of an author (*Mystic Masseur* 91). The fact that “book” signifies in the local dialectic both a specific book and an indeterminate quantity (as in sheer “volume of book”) demonstrates the extent to which, under such social circumstances, knowledge itself becomes a formal abstraction, and symptomatic of Naipaul’s portrait of his society as impulsive and vulnerable to the most spurious prevarication, represented by the political ascension of Ganesh as a cunning *alazon*. Whether the
“democratic ideal” of the political ego the narrative constructs in opposition to this representation has any validity is up to the reader’s discretion.

44 Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, 48.

45 Ibid. 42

46 Vargas Llosa, Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter, 13.

47 With the lucidity and conciseness so typical of his criticism, Lukacs writes, “the very disintegration and inadequacy of the world is the precondition for the existence of art and its becoming conscious.” While, in Lukac’s opinion, the “attempt to forget that art is one sphere among many” risks turning “aesthetics into metaphysics,” Adorno finds in the aesthetic the one sphere capable of “destroying the immediate semblance of wholeness” and thus radicalizing the potential of the whole in the conscious recognition of its own falseness. Both perspectives inform the argument laid out here. Theory of the Novel, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970), 37; Things Beyond Resemblance, 65, passim.

48 Lukacs, Theory of the Novel, 59.

49 Ibid

50 Mario Vargas Llosa, Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter, 240; 90

51 Vargas Llosa, Captain Pantoja, 11

52 In the prescient words of General Victoria in the novel’s opening pages, “Abstinence makes for a hell of a lot of corruption…and demoralization” (8).

53 Vargas Llosa, Aunt Julia, 369. It should also be noted that these rare moments of Comedic Jouissance in Vargas Llosa’s novels fail to evoke the same traumatizing affect characteristic of A House for Mr. Biswas; the function of the Real, as the proceeding lines indicate, is effectively limited to the formal level itself, as the force that telescopes the dual narrative strands. As Vargas Llosa’s narrative liminality situates it between the equality standpoint of realist (low mimetic) fiction and the superiority of the ironic, the intrusion of the Real does not have the same power it does in Naipaul’s novels.

54 At the end of the narrative the adult Varguitas is engaged in research for a novel on life in Peru under the dictatorship of General Manuel Apolinario Odría, in power from 1948-1956 (Aunt Julia, 374).