

Milton Klonsky

The Comic-Strip-Tease of Time

Smollett, Hogarth, and the Yellow Kid

COMIC STRIPS are so intimately bound up with our national life that it seems, somehow, intellectually lewd, almost un-American, to peer and probe beneath their surface appearance. Dick Tracy, Blondie, Li'l Abner, Moon Mullins, and the rest are as well known as Generals and Presidents. Every day, exposed in their boxes of light, their movements are followed by millions of eyes all over the United States. The services they perform and the needs they fulfil are real. For comic strips, like the daily newspapers in which they appear, re-enact a vast and solemn American ritual — the Strip Tease of Time.

This strip tease, of course, has no ending and achieves no final revelation. Just as the newspaper reports events immediately as they occur, without the long teleological view of

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history, so the comic strip portrays action that is never consummated. The formula of the strip is used to provide direction for a plot, continually pared and subplotted, but going nowhere. With each issue, suspense is aroused and discharged in a little climax without relief, anticipating only another climax tomorrow and tomorrow, until, just before the final blackout, Time's overwhelming secret is almost but never revealed — the strip then carrying on from where it left nothing off.

Some successful and famous comics, such as "The Gumps," have survived their authors, and, in rare cases, even the newspapers where they first appeared. Their casts of characters are self-contained, hermetically sealed by formula from any growth or change. Once set in motion, they can go on and on in the same lockstep for years, and it takes a major turn in the American ethos to effect even a slight shift in their direction.

The formula of a comic strip is

always very simple. For a generation, "Little Orphan Annie" has endured all the Perils of Pauline at the hands of foreign villains, having almost been burned alive many times, thrown off cliffs, drowned in whirlpools, split in two by a buzz saw, etc., but always winning through with the help of her dog Sandy and her millionaire stepfather, Daddy Warbucks. "Blondie" has lived for years on the soap-opera myth that the American male may be a sap, but the little woman can hold things together. "Joe Palooka" has been fighting for the heavyweight championship of the comics ever since Dempsey knocked out Firpo; and "Dick Tracy" has been catching and killing a larger assortment of crooks than exist in the Mafia.

When, after many years, a celebrated strip recasts its characters and formula, or expires, it marks the close of an era as definitely as a style of dress or slang going out of fashion. The cocky, sadistic, tough-talking "Yellow Kid" of the late 1890's — from whose name, incidentally, the term "yellow journalism" was derived — has been superseded by the still more violent, sophisticated, and sensational comics of our own time, as the old-fashioned journalism of Pulitzer and Hearst has been streamlined by their successors. "Krazy Kat," "Happy Hooligan," "Mutt and Jeff," and "The Katzenjammer Kids" were products of a more genteel era.

Modern comic books and newspaper strips, read by all classes and age groups with equal fervor, have replaced the old slapstick with realistic depictions of torture, murder, and pathological sex. Those days of innocence when we believed the "funnies" were primarily for children are gone — and with them the old sexual taboos of Puritanism. Comic strips now exhibit women as lush as those in the beer and cigarette ads. Others, such as "Winnie Winkle" or "Joe Palooka," where sex was once a minor display, have had to be revamped to satisfy their public. And in the latest science-fiction comics, a beautiful professor's daughter or an amorous Martian Queen are as essential to the formula as space ships, ray blasters, and thought machines.

OCCASIONALLY, however, a comic strip remains embalmed in the juices of another time, unable to renew itself, yet too valuable a property to be abandoned. "Maggie and Jiggs," for example, a strip burlesquing the social *gaffes* and foibles of the immigrant *nouveaux riches* at the beginning of the century, has lost much of its point now that the upper and middle classes have learned to forget their manners. In any event, none of the really important old-timers are ever forgotten. Their names and typical wisecracks color the daily speech, and their faded pictures merge gradually

into the family album of America where they are preserved.

Most strips in the past repeated the same comic routine each day with only minor changes, like a Tibetan prayer wheel turning its devotions round and round for all occasions. But modern adventure strips, with their realistic dialogue and three-dimensional drawing, resemble old movie cliff-hangers and pulp-fiction serials. The story can go on for months, the main characters forever being lost and saved in little nicks of time. Despite this apparently broader scope, however, their nature is still the same. The rigid daily pattern is repeated in an overall timeless and shapeless continuum; and the strip-action never moves beneath, or removes, the inexhaustible surfaces of appearance.

Like all cultural forms, comic strips have a philosophy, whether they like it or not. They recall nothing so much as the Roman materialist poet Lucretius' theory of vision as a constant shedding by things of rarified films of themselves, solid images which strike upon our eyes. When we come down to it, the materialist reduction of reality to "the concrete" that is observed by the five senses, is also repeated by the comics in their own reduction of reality to a box of immediate sensation. We can even trace the history of the comics to eighteenth-century England, the Age of Enlightenment, when the materialist philoso-

phy of Lucretius, transformed by Newton, held sway again.

IT'S HARD to think of the comic strip as having a shady past in Europe, instead of being born virginally in our own age, like jukeboxes and washing machines. But as a story-in-pictures, it is obviously derived from the novel and from caricature — both of these dominant art forms in the eighteenth century.

England at that time was so powerful and prosperous and sure of its destiny that it felt itself, like America today, to be the first-born heir of all the ages. Behind were centuries of so-called Gothic darkness and superstition, and ahead could be only more enlightenment and further progress toward the New.

The middle classes at that time, once considered *canaille*, now were citizens with a stake in Parliament and even an interest in the arts. Naturally, they were little concerned about poetry or oil painting, which were in the expensive domain of the aristocracy. But novels, by their rootedness in the common daily life, won an audience for literature greater than any before. The serial form of these novels still had an immense appeal as late as the nineteenth century, even across the Atlantic, where crowds of people in New York and Boston are reported to have waited at the pier for the steamer bringing new chapters of Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*.

The five great comic novelists of England, Smollett, Fielding, Stern, Richardson, and Defoe, appeared almost in a group. All of them had an intimate connection with early journalism. They shared its materialist notion of matter as the body of reality, and also — the heart of the matter — its sense of time. The scenes and actions of Smollett's novels, especially, frequently resemble detached anecdotes taken from a newspaper or magazine of the period. His books, sporting such comic-strip titles as *Peregrine Pickle*, *Roderick Random*, *Humphrey Clinker*, followed their own unpredictable wills from chapter to chapter and could have gone on indefinitely. With their tortuous plots unwinding upon the spool of a forgone conclusion; their crude characterizations drawn almost to the point of caricature; and their uncertain structure wavering between the narrative and the informal essay (just as the journals of the time wavered between reporting and editorializing) — yet with everything drawn in bright primary color, full of slapstick vigor and spiked with climaxes — these early novels were hardly regarded as literature. But they were read passionately by millions who had never read Milton or Dryden or Pope.

During the same period, this new mass audience was shared by the cartoon art of Hogarth and his successors. And in the fusion of the two — the serialized novels of Smol-

lett and the cartoons of Hogarth — the style of the comic strip was conceived.

WHAT HOGARTH ACCOMPLISHED for the first time in his famous series of engravings — *The Rake's Progress*, *Marriage à la Mode*, *The Harlot's Progress*, etc. — was a translation of novelistic situations and types into cartoons. He aimed primarily, he said, "to treat [his] subjects as a dramatic writer." His highly moralistic depiction of the evils of drink, lechery, gambling, and sloth, with the evildoers coming to a bad end at the bottom of "Gin Lane," was of course in accord with middle-class piety and righteousness.

As an artist, Hogarth's ambition was not to abstract and idealize nature, but to see her in all her literalness and materiality. He wanted to strip the ideal of Renaissance painting of its mysticism and reduce it to a physical average. In his work, the knobs, twists, and bulges of flesh of ordinary mankind superseded the perfect forms of Venus and Apollo. As he came to realize later on, however, the concept of the Average was an ideal as abstract as that of the Beautiful.

Hogarth served to widen the split between "high" and "low" art, which now extends from *Finnegans Wake* to *True Confessions*. For those "high" artists surrounding the official court painter Joshua Reynolds, and for the "connoisseurs," so-

called, who admired the Italian schools exclusively, he could never restrain his contempt. There was, unmistakably, the bray of the true philistine horselaugh in the way he ridiculed these artists' claims to "divine inspiration" and to the indefinable quality — "*Je ne sais quoi*" — or Grace.

His own compositions were often cramped with detail and unbalanced; and his line was coarse, enclosing rather than revealing form, so that his pictures actually improve when they are reduced in size for publication. All his immense inventive genius was restricted by default to the depiction of a literary subject matter — caricatures of London daily life, both high and low, as seen from the inside.

Hogarth's successors and imitators gradually abandoned his moralistic tone as well as his hopeless battle with the "connoisseurs." His cartoon art was endowed to the daily newspaper rather than to the museum. The development of illustration and caricature by Rowlandson, Cruikshank, Gilray, Seymour and the rest coincided with the growth of modern journalism in Europe and America. By the time Outcalt's "Yellow Kid" appeared in the *New York World* in 1896 — generally considered the first of its kind — an embryo comic strip art was already gestating which, upon the consolidation of mass newspapers and syndicates by Pulitzer and

Hearst, emerged at last full-grown in the way we know.

THE REASON why comic strips have flourished here, and not at all in Europe, is a measure of the difference between the Old and New Worlds. European populations are largely homogeneous, their cultures rooted in traditional values; while in America, since the Civil War, the original and predominantly Anglo-Saxon society, with its cultural enclaves in New England and the South, began to break up under the impact of millions of immigrants of every nationality. Many of the earliest comics, such as "The Yellow Kid" himself, "Maggie and Jiggs," "The Katzenjammer Kids," "Abe Kabibble," etc., based their formulae on the efforts of immigrants to adjust to the new time and place. The fathers still retained many of their old-world habits, and some spoke with a vaudeville dialect; but their children made a complete break with the past. And the mass arts, with their immense democratic base, could serve to reconcile differences of class and caste, nationality and religion.

America has been recognized in Europe as representing a new ethos ever since Benjamin Franklin went abroad. For his many native qualities, but, especially, for having made a fetish of time, which is money, everyman's commodity, the stuff of life, Franklin was called the

First American. During his lifetime, of course, the main outlines of this ethos were still obscure. But by now the American fetishism of time has exposed itself through many nerves of anxiety — the obsessive dread of growing older without “having lived” (Rip Van Winkle), the dread of losing one’s youth or virility, the fear of missing one’s chance or “golden opportunity,” etc. It is no contradiction, however, that Progress is conceived to be as steady, irresistible, and cumulative a process as the ticking of a clock. The new *must* be better, for the same reason that the go-getter *must* come out ahead, or else something is radically wrong. The comic strip “Moon Mullins” provides a negative sort of testimony for this credo — Moon, a character in the old picaresque tradition, never does any work, sleeps too much, chases after women, wastes his money, and never thinks of tomorrow. But to balance Moon, at the other end of the evolutionary scale there is “Buck Rogers,” “Flash Gordon,” and, of course, “Superman,” Tarzan’s city-bred and more neurotic cousin who can hear a dripping faucet miles away.

THE CIRCULATION of comic books today is as fantastic, and yet accepted as casually, as a Buck Rogers’ flight to Mars — more than 18 billion each year! Their variety is prodigious, ranging from sexy and realistically drawn “confessions” to

animal fables, of which the newspapers only display a limited selection.

The hard-cover books of a previous generation, such as *Tom Swift*, *Bomba the Jungle Boy*, *Don Sturdy* and others, have been replaced by the comics, and few are read today. They belong to an era when kids used to cheer airplanes when they appeared and chase down the street to keep them in sight. Now a squadron of jets drones by and hardly stirs one of them to look up from his comic book. Can Tom Swift’s motorcycle be taken seriously against an atom-powered space ship?

Recently, however, such classic works of literature as *Crime and Punishment*, *Huckleberry Finn* and even the plays of Shakespeare have been translated into strip form. Only a small percentage of their readers would have been tempted by these books in the original, but their great popularity is not merely a desire for cultural “uplift.” More likely, the demand for comics is so great and incessant nowadays, that publishers have had to “lift” the classics for new material.

Enclosing Shakespeare’s characters in boxes, where, occasionally, his ectoplasmic words can issue from their mouths in balloons, does not make these comics any more high-brow than their peers. Of course, there are some strips, notably “Krazy Kat” in the twenties and “Li’l Abner” and “Pogo” today, which have been adopted by Ameri-

can intellectuals who never read any others. But these are often too sophisticated for the great audience which prefers its comics straight.

Europe, which has taken the stars of American movies into their own day dreams, and has even shown enthusiasm for jazz, has never adopted our comics. Our comic strips have a native quality which can't be exported, like the movies, to more traditionally rooted cultures. They resemble the cartoons in, say, *Punch*, as a wisecrack resembles an anecdote.

Even in America, the charge is often made against the comics that their overemphasis on sex and violence may have dangerous effects on the young. This may be so for those who already have criminal tendencies. "No girl was ever ruined by a book," said Mayor Walker. Fairy tales and myths of all times and all cultures have depicted evil beings who burn, baste, stew, boil, and disembowel their innocent little victims.

The age-level of those who follow the strips has steadily risen, until today the adult audience may be even greater than the juvenile. For workers who perform the same limited mechanical operations every day on the endless belt of an assembly line, the comics and the other mass arts are more congenial than traditional literature and painting. Their time is not the same. To a large extent, the career of these mass arts is bound

up with the future of American technology.

THE STRIP-TEASE-OF-TIME which the comics display is based on the clocklike rhythm of the machine rather than the organic changes of nature. For this reason, not only the comics, but the movies, jazz, radio and pulp serials, etc., which move to the same tempo, seem closer to artifacts than to art. Jazz, for example, from blues to bebop, must serve out its time constricted behind the thirty-two bars of the average record, although during a performance there is no limit to the number of new rides and choruses. As for the movies, the stars play their same selves in whatever roles they are cast. The conventions of the movies are so rigid that the continuum of feature to newsreel to double feature can be breached at any point by the audience, which arrives and departs in the same darkness. Finally, in soap opera and serialized pulp fiction, the device of the Strip Tease in Time is used to provide suspense and direction in a plot going nowhere.

But it is in the comics that this Strip reappears faithfully every day, and in the same way, immortal and grand, though we ourselves grow old and die. While the papers carry headlines of war, inflation, and atomic explosions, nothing can affect them in their inviolate boxes of purposeless energy. The ritual goes on and on, on a stage as wide as America.

BOOKS

William Phillips

Love As A Career

Rereading Colette

WHATEVER else might be said about this period in the future, it is a good bet that it will be known as the age of literary revival. In the last decade alone, there has been a Henry James boom, a Melville revival, a rediscovery of the twenties, and, generally, there has been a tendency to resurrect the heroes and moods of the past. The latest candidate for revival is Colette, the celebrated French writer, who once had a vogue in this country, but then was neglected for many years, until the publication recently of two volumes of her fiction.*

One can only speculate about the meaning of the revivalist spirit, which, incidentally, seems to be stronger in literature than in the other arts. Several different explanations have been advanced, none of

* *Gigi, Chance Acquaintances, Julie de Carneilhan*. By Colette. Farrar, Straus and Young. 315 pp. \$3.50.

Short Novels of Colette. Dial Press. 733 pp. \$5.00.

them entirely convincing, and some of them in contradiction with each other. It has been suggested that the revivals have been publishers' plots, which fails to explain why anybody else should have been taken in. Another theory is that the lack of contemporary talent has made it necessary to reclaim authors of the past, but many writers feel this theory is a disguised attack on modern literature. On the other hand, some people believe that each case of revival is unique and accidental — which is another way of saying that there is no explanation.

My own feeling is that, whatever truth there may be in any of the current theories, they all make the mistake of assuming that the phenomenon of revival is a new one. The fact is that it is an old one. Most of the Greek culture was at one time rediscovered, and figures like Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, among others, have been revived at