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Reinhart in Love: Thomas Berger's *Comedy of One-upmanship*

In 1965 Thomas Berger wrote an article on the madcap comedy of Jonathan Winters, praising him for playing many parts yet being trapped in none and comparing him to one of his favorite authors and acknowledged inspirations: "Dickens, especially, comes to mind, with his many voices, his compulsive rhythms, his fascination with cruelty, his fearlessness." Berger's words suggest the sustained improvisations of his own comic art: "comedy is continuous, never finished, never the last word, always another possibility and not a conclusion. If it cannot change actuality, it can offer alternatives, or at least offer mitigating circumstances" (101-3). Berger's fiction also celebrates the on-going possibilities of existence. He sees himself as a kind of realist of the preposterous, waging a fierce battle with life, trying to match its bungling abundance:

Absurdity is a prime characteristic of life. I didn't invent it. It's not my idea. I get damn tired of it. I would say about my work, "I am trying to play down the absurdity of life. I'm trying to put a wet blanket on the real asininity of life. I'm trying to make some sense of it. I'm trying to be banal about absurdity." If the world grew sensible, my career would be finished. I'd have no material. (Interview)

The world is not about to mend its ways, however, as Berger's twenty-three hilarious novels will testify. Of all this distinctive body of work, my favorite remains *Reinhart in Love*. I can think of few novels that give as richly imagined a sense of the incongruities of life in humdrum Middle America, the land of muddling through.

Berger is best known for his inspired Western, *Little Big Man*, which Arthur Penn turned into a film starring Dustin Hoffman, but his neglected quartet of Reinhart novels also deserve serious attention: *Crazy in Berlin*, *Reinhart in Love*, *Vital Parts*, and *Reinhart's Woman*. When Berger returned from World War II, where he had been among the first troops to occupy Berlin, he began a novel based on his experiences. Thus Carlo Reinhart was born. Part fool and part philosopher, Reinhart is finally a surrogate who suffers for us all. "Reinhart and I have a perfect sadomasochistic relationship. I'm his god. I love to torment that poor guy. Have you ever heard of anybody's god giving them a break?" (Interview). Reinhart is Berger's jocose version of what he might have become if he had lacked genius, stayed in Ohio, and married the wrong woman. Yet Reinhart is much more than a projection of the author's private fears and fantasies. In many ways, Reinhart becomes an archetypal American. His innocent ideals and progressive hopes are constantly being met with frustration and failure. Reinhart wants to love, he wants to accept moral responsibility, he wants a better world, but he always seems to have either too much or too little imagination for the situation at hand. For all the robust effort he puts into his existence, he usually ends up botching things.

The emotional feel of the Reinhart books are peculiarly evocative of American life. Reinhart's frustrations are shared by many of us. His quixotic knight-errantry, his muted quest for life's spiritual meaning, his insecurities and self-assertions, his dissatisfaction with himself and unease around strangers are national traits. Berger's novels dramatize the price we pay for being at once arrogant and idealistic, competitive and egalitarian. His novels are not "realistic" in any normal sense of that term; they are a mixture of stylized comedy and zany farce. His chief claim to importance is his ability to create vital and profound novels out of commonplace American life.

What stays in the memory after reading *Reinhart in Love* is Berger's Rabelasian gusto for life and his Dickensian characters that delight us with their misplaced exuberance and insatiable appetite for error. His people act crazy, talk crazy, but in the terms of the wacky, half-world of his fiction, they are completely creditable. They gab, rant, babble, and palaver with marvelous disdain for accepted usage and common sense. Even the minor, walk-on characters have their own cockeyed, quirky say. Yet there is real pain behind his farces, there are gestures of care behind his cut-ups. We come away from his best novels with an excruciating realization that this world is composed mostly of sad, absurd-and-serious, lost and lonely selves; that mankind, in Nietzsche's phrase, is human, all-too human.

Reinhart, like many of Berger's characters, is seeking love, yet his quest for love takes such perverse and unexpected paths that lover's lane becomes a labyrinth. His attempts to become a connoisseur of the commonplace in an inscrutable world are reminiscent of Wallace Stevens' Crispen in "The Comedian as the Letter C." Like Crispen, Reinhart is thwarted in his efforts to conquer the quotidian, but he gains a certain dignity through his perseverance and his penchant for concocting doctrine from the rout. Seeking to celebrate the Renaissance possibilities of the self in a world of diminished things, Reinhart becomes enmeshed in a maze of moral contradictions.

The agony inherent in all interpersonal relationships is at the center of Berger's fiction. With ingenious variations, Berger shows how envy and spite shape human destiny—even when we least expect it, as in falling in love. Berger shares Theodore Reik's insight that love is often "a reaction against original envy, greediness, hostility, possessive lust and the drive to dominate" (132). True love sometimes can transform these negative feelings, but most of us lack the creativity and imagination, the inner resources, to love strongly, intelligently,

and consistently. Instead many couples compulsively engage in games of one-upmanship. Berger sees America as a place where each ego manipulates others through put-ons and put-downs—all to gain a slight edge before the inevitable equality of the grave. Both John Adams and Alexis de Tocqueville perceived that “Americans were more driven by the passion for distinction, by the desire to set themselves from one another, than other peoples” (Wood 214). As Bertrand Russell concluded in his autobiography, “there is a motive which is stronger than self-preservation: it is the desire to get the better of the other fellow.” People want to love but they don’t know how. Lacking love, they turn their envy and spite on each other. Berger, fascinated with the way apparently contradictory values and emotions intermingle, has made this grim pattern of one-upmanship the center of his vision.

From the opening scene in which Reinhart fails to recognize his father, who has come to meet him when he returns from Berlin, to the last scene when Genevieve accepts him back only to start nitpicking again, Reinhart is bamboozled by everyone he cares for. How can Reinhart find the down-home happiness he seeks when his loved ones elude him, normality turns sinister, and success proves to be a sham? *Reinhart in Love* presents ingenious variations on a few basic moral insights. What Berger insists on so persuasively is that all human interactions are competitive; that love, business, family, and race relations are essentially power plays with everybody trying to take advantage of everybody else. Furthermore, people are by nature contrary; they live in reaction to others. Open the novel at random and you will find in progress one of any number of games people play to thwart, incite, shame, or diddle each other.

Reinhart has returned to America determined to love the commonplace. Since most of life is tedious drudgery—“even Churchill exuded more sweat than blood and tears” (152)—it follows in Reinhart’s philosophy that the touchstone

of happiness is learning to love the everyday: "Life is inclined to get pretty dreary.... Perhaps we should try loving even that dreariness and then it wouldn't be so bad, or at least we can see that, in its own way, life is interesting. After all, there it is" (136). Reinhart's baffling relationship with Splendor Mainwaring illustrates the ironic twists that result from his efforts to love the world as he finds it. Splendor is wearing a welding mask when Reinhart first meets him, which is fitting since he proves to be a master of disguise. He is rarely what he seems. Reinhart's efforts to aid and abet his black friend, and Splendor's ruses to ward off any hint of condescension or what is now called profiling, become a kind of comic parody of American race relations in the postwar years.

Although Berger can be unscrupulous in his manipulation of stereotypes to further his comic ends, beneath all the laughter lies an anguished commentary on the breakdown of human brotherhood. It is fitting that Splendor selects "Bartleby the Scrivener" to foist off on Reinhart (after changing the title character's name to Arthur) as his own work. Berger has acknowledged that "Melville is my master, always and everywhere, even in his magnificent disasters like *Pierre*" (Letter). Reinhart's summary of Melville's dark existential parable captures succinctly Berger's own thematic preoccupations:

The moral confusions of the story were marvelous: the employer habitually expresses his grievances against Arthur by rewarding him materially. Arthur, in return, is defiant with a fantastic gentleness; he never says no, but rather "I prefer not to." Astonishing. The most bitter combat is fought under the conventions of a high civilization.... The aim of each, Arthur and the lawyer, is to make the *other* guy the shit (221).

Splendor, like Reinhart, wants a piece of the action. He wants to be a success in business, but his assumptions differ from Reinhart's. While Reinhart is adjusting his romantic temperament to the insipid dailiness of life, Splendor, a futurist and a spiritualist, believes in unlimited possibilities: "One day we will get beyond animal life," he tells Reinhart. "I think it wholly possible that man may in time be able to take off his body as we can now doff a coat, and pursue an existence of sheer thought" (380). Splendor is an opportunist who has learned how to turn society's prejudice to his own advantage. Since the front door is always closed, he knows how to jimmy a window. By his own account, he is "saved from being a failure only by my fecund imagination and my irrepressible audacity," which enables him to succeed in "a social situation in which no one expects anything of me" (382).

From the first time that Splendor slaps Reinhart in the forehead, curing his apathy, to the final debacle of their sewer project, it is Splendor's role to spur Reinhart into action. Usually the results are disastrous, but at least there's life in it. Their relationship, in Berger's ironic psychology, suggests a key to America's racism: "Lucky that Splendor was there. Once again his presence inspired Reinhart to rise above himself—as it always did. Reinhart suddenly understood the significance of the Negro in the human situation" (355). Although Berger's wry, tongue-in-cheek commentary predates our politically correct times, it still contains a grain of truth. As James Baldwin stated, if someone calls him a "nigger" it's because they *need* it to feel one-up on somebody. Splendor's most important function in the novel is to be himself, an intricate and puzzling person who escapes easy categorization. With his active imagination and enigmatic unpredictability, Splendor is gloriously himself.

As hard as it is for Reinhart and Splendor to find common ground, it is even more difficult for Reinhart to relate to his own outlandish family. When he returns from the

war his mother's first words of greeting are "Here comes six more shirts per week" (16). Her opinions range from the crotchety to the bigoted and grotesque; if she's not lecturing her son on the dangers of filth, she's warning him about her imminent demise from cancer. Whatever "Maw" says seems designed to keep Reinhart off-balance and under her wing. If Maw is as impossible as she is indomitable, Reinhart's father is enervated and seemingly ineffectual. Maw dominates by dire threats and blatant intimidations, while Dad is a humble milksop who wheedles his way through passive resistance. Reinhart loves his Maw and Dad, even if he has difficulty liking them, as all three act out their giddy travesty of the family romance.

Reinhart's ultimate test in the art of loving is Genevieve Raven. In the war between the sexes, Reinhart has been a dogged campaigner, if not a successful or insightful one, but Genevieve is his Waterloo. Courtship and marriage, Reinhart believes, ought to be a stimulating engagement with the wonders of dailiness. But in Berger's world the commonplace consistently mocks all expectations. Although he thinks profound philosophical thoughts, Reinhart is often a dolt in practical situations. When he serves as Berger's spokesman, he can toss off glittering speculations, but as straight man for Berger's comedy, he often plays the fool, especially a fool in love. His misalliance with Genevieve is a hodgepodge of incompatibilities. The novel dramatizes how the illusions of love preclude clear-sightedness. Reinhart falls in love in spite of his reason; he only loves well when he is unwise. Berger suggests that by the irrational whims and compulsions of love people assert their exasperating but undeniable humanity.

When Reinhart returns to America he is disgruntled and directionless. His internal discontent serves as a prime breeding ground for passion. Theodore Reik has noted that "romance often starts as distinct antipathy and that if

frequently takes the form of a contest, a test of wills.” He argues that there is a disturbing pattern to love:

...there is an inevitable rhythmical movement that starts from dissatisfaction with oneself, astonishment about the object, admiration and envy, hostility, all of which then lead to the powerful reaction-formation of love, which in turn is followed by the countermovement retracing the same path in the opposite direction (91).

While Reik’s theories don’t fit everyone, Reinhart and Genevieve do live out this cycle. Constantly at cross purposes, they begin in envy and hostility, muddle into marriage, almost truly love each other, then begin the terrible downhill slide of emotional entropy. In the sequel, *Vital Parts*, Reinhart and Genevieve have become total strangers sharing the same house. All this is painful and sad, but it is also wildly funny given Berger’s comic presentation. Reinhart’s fumbling courtship of Genevieve and their trials and tribulations as newly-weds living on the GI Bill in Vetsville is a droll recapitulation of a type of experience shared by millions of American veterans of World War II.

As he attempts to make his relationship with Genevieve work, Reinhart decides that “marriage is pointless unless you develop some sense of fact, which is more important than love in this context, which perhaps is love” (201); yet he consistently misreads the facts in front of his eyes. Believing himself in bliss, in actuality Reinhart is driving his wife out of the Quonset hut they call home. Conflict is inevitable, Berger believes, because people are capricious. Finally, Reinhart acknowledges the imp of the perverse in family life: “If the baby was a boy, Gen would conspire with it against him; if a girl, he had an ally against his wife. Either way it was all bitter conflict, and where was love?” (279). Thus

the war between the sexes becomes all-too real to Reinhart, who fears that “love is a battle with each side winning a Pyrrhic victory” (133).

Disillusioned by marriage, Reinhart seeks grandeur in business. Claude Humbold, a mix of Flem Snopes and Babbitt, is Reinhart’s mentor in financial one-upmanship. When Reinhart confidently expresses his qualifications as an entrepreneur, citing his war record, Humbold sets him straight:

Yes, but this is serious, bud. That’s what you just can’t get through your coconut. This is bidniss, not them silly games like plugging Fachists, or Commonists, whatever them Heinies was at the time, not to mention the goofy Japs, who had a good thing going in novelties and should have stuck to it instead of grabbing the Philistine Islands where there ain’t been a loose dollar since little David licked them with a pea-shooter, according to the Good Book.... History ain’t the bunk, bud. Some of the finest bidnissmen ever lived were named the Phony Sheeans (151).

Claude may look and talk like a cartoon-strip character, but he teaches Reinhart some contorted truths about capitalism; the salesman has got to be boss: “What a man buying property *don’t* want is for the salesman to be no more than him... You always work *against the grain*” (92). In one of the novel’s finest sequences, Reinhart gets his first field experience in the real estate business. Watching Calude work, he senses again the acrimonious combat of all interpersonal relations: “Reinhart believed everybody present save himself was fighting some kind of war which had naught to do with buying or selling a house” (104). There is a battle of wills going on, but it has everything to do with sales. Claude gets his clients to hate him so much that they buy a terrible

property they think he doesn't want to sell just to spite him. At this point Reinhart has an epiphany; he realizes that "it wasn't money which your true businessman lusted after.... It was love" (102). Reinhart becomes enchanted with "the real romance of business.... Getting people to buy things they don't want—you make them love, fear, and loathe you. You have a definite influence in shaping their lives.... It's really a creativity not dreamed of in the Renaissance" (111-2).

Of course Reinhart has been duped again. Claude's penny-pinching chicanery may be an erratic striving for love, but it is rooted in corruption. Even when Reinhart thinks he is driving a hard bargain to increase his salary, Claude is always a step ahead of him: "You got the raise, sidestepped the car, and thought you had one on me. *But I got the laugh!* I got one in you, pal" (156). In the end, when Reinhart discovers that Claude has been using him as a front man for a spurious sewer swindle, he manages, largely through Splendor's prodding, to counterattack and get one-up on Humboldt: "I only mind when someone beats me fair and square, whereas I admire you for winning mean and dirty. As a bidnissman, you are rotten to the core, and God bless you" (358).

Home from the war in provincial Ohio, Reinhart has learned the local equivalents of many of the bitter truths he learned in the previous novel, *Crazy in Berlin*. In Germany there were victims and victimizers, Jews and Nazis, while in America he finds two kinds of people: "the hurters and the hurtees. The first get their satisfaction by working their will on somebody else. The second like to be imposed upon" (134). A failure in friendship, a failure with his parents, a failure in business, and a failure in love, by the end of the novel Reinhart feels like a defeated man: "It seemed always to be true of him that he was unsuccessful and responsible at the same time: unfair combination; Splendor for example invariably failed but could not be held responsible; Claude had responsibilities but succeeded. Civilian life was shit" (394).

Poor Reinhart is a worldly failure, but he is, at least in part, a moral success. Despite his abundant flaws his conscience persists in trying to keep accounts. Although he often finds himself in absurd situations, and his attempt to theorize about them is sometimes silly, we take his moral agonies seriously. Reinhart strives and suffers for us all. Ah Carlo! Ah humanity!

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