Lenny Bruce without Tears

Can you shout "Fuck!" in a crowded nightclub? Maybe it would be all right if you were an etymologist, though professors ought not shout. You might avoid jail, oddly enough, if you said you were satirizing the obscenity laws, or Fire Drills, or anything. But if you said it only in jest, for the fun of it, watch out. Wear sneakers.

Lenny Bruce's life in all its perversity, variety, tragedy, has so fascinated us—read Albert Goldman's Boswellian biography—that it is difficult to think of him except in the heroic cult terms: Icarus, Foul Mouth, Socrates, Drug Fiend, Defendant, Satirist. He is a totem figure carved of many different heads. It is time now to separate if we can the Work from the Life, and to try to know him for his real accomplishment, his real face—Comedian.

An appropriate place to begin is Lenny Bruce's best joke and the best sustained monologue of his career—the piece on Frank Dell's disastrous performance at the Palladium Theatre. Bruce begins in his own voice, disclaiming the concept of "the class room," the geographic idea of happiness. But this skit deals with Frank Dell, "Dean of Satire and Mimicry," who believes that his whole life would be meaningless if he did not play a "class room." His agent tries to argue or humor him out of this obsession, but Frank is a driven man: "Look, I'm tired of playing the toilets, man. I've had it." Of course it is a mistake. Frank is fine in the lounges of Las Vegas for decent money—"Is that spit?" his agent argues. This agent, an insufficient creature in almost every way, does comprehend the hard realities of the business. His expertise is in the dispassionate calculation of the probabilities of supply and demand. His view of the world is brutally limited, but he is absolutely right about Frank Dell. We are not encouraged to like the agent—Lenny Bruce gives him the busy Broadway agent's voice that is capable of sudden modulations from roughness into transparent motherly love: "Sweetie baby bubby, sweetie." We do not like him, but he is right and Frank Dell is wrong. The music conductor at the Palladium also knows immediately at the rehearsal that Dell will fail. When he sees Frank's list of the standard show biz impressions, he mumbles, "Same crap week after week... disgusting." Frank apparently asks what he said, but the conductor replies primly, "I'm sure you do the impressions different—you probably do them as children." The conductor, the agent, and later the house booker at the Palladium, Val Parnell, all see Frank's limitations. They are the bottom line—reality. They know exactly what will

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happen, and they are right. Frank Dell's performance, therefore, stacks up as a confrontation between his tremendous need for recognition and acceptance and the reality against which all wishes must struggle.

The comic energy of this piece derives from the fact that Frank Dell has pushed himself into a situation where he cannot succeed. His shlock American jokes just will not go over for a British vaudeville audience. His impressions—"Show Business Heaven"—his pseudo-hip shtick—"Hep Smoke a Reefer"—his tired Las Vegas jokes—"walk right into the propeller"—none of it will work. But it is not his inadequacy alone that kills him. Fate has conspired the show bill so that Frank follows Georgia Gibbs who is absolutely smashing. She has the audience in the palm of her hand. Song after song. Then she's into her "Tribute-to-Sophie-Tucker-Hello-God number." And finally, for her encore, she pitches her voice deep towards lachrymose sentimentality as she gravely invokes "a moment of silence—for the poor boys who went to Dunkirk—and never come back." Lenny Bruce cackles in amazement at the incredible fatalism of Frank's bad luck: "You couldn't follow that except with a leper on the Art Baker Show!" But Frank has to go on. This is his last chance, the one he begged and sobbed for. And now he has somehow to wrench laughs from tearful faces. His programmed "bits," his mechanical patter—"I got it down, man—24 minutes of dynamite"—they didn't work before, and now, "Ring-a-ding, into the toilet for good this time. Forget it. Not one laugh." The stony silence has made Frank desperate. He keeps trying, bit after bit, but "It's granite out there: Jefferson, Washington, Lincoln—forget it! It's, like, not there, but keep punching and punching away. . . ." Desperate with self pity and rage, Frank suddenly tries to play upon the audience's conscience: "It's a nice way to treat an American, folks, thanks a lot for that. I was in the service too guys, if that means anything to you." He's drowning. "Nothing. They're looking at him. Mean faces. They're staring up there—fifteen hundred people—an oil painting." This scenario is not immediately comic—closer to tragedy, it would seem. A mediocre comedian out of false pride has thrust himself into a situation in which he must fail. This is a plot that can go either way—towards comedy or tragedy. The closeness of the balance makes Bruce's final version share the flavor of both, but the factor which aims it towards comedy is Bruce's artistic exaggeration. Most notable is the language of hyperbole—Georgia Gibbs' catch-all "Tribute," and the "oil painting." Bruce, as narrator, takes audible delight, chuckling over these strokes of wit. And the audience responds in kind, laughing no doubt at the surprising purity of the imagery. Here are pictures not to be found in reality, yet partaking of it by means of purification and exaggeration. So these are images which we can understand because they have a share in reality, but we can also laugh at them because more importantly they have a larger share in fantasy, fiction, and exaggeration, a circumstance which renders them harmless in a way. Thus the audience responds not to Frank Dell's catastrophic evening at the Palladium, but to the author of this disaster, Lenny Bruce, who, unlike Dell, is obviously in control, creating and exaggerating this event.

We understand this process in our own lives: when a day goes badly for us, we are fretful, but when it is perfectly awful, we may surrender to the humor of the
situation, laughing at the artful concatenation of events which conspire to create a vision of gloom so untainted by optimism, so ideally bad, that we are perversely and aesthetically delighted with the artfulness of the exaggeration. In short, when the events become so hyperbolically painful, we may tend to dissociate ourselves from the content and rather enjoy the style which so perfectly orders the content towards an idealized awfulness. The result is that we are led away from the sad contents of reality towards a sympathetic appreciation of the style which contains them. There occurs a progression from real to ideal, from fact to fiction, from content to style. This progress releases reality's painful grasp upon our hearts and frees us to humorously appreciate the artful arrangement rather than the content of painful material.

In Lenny Bruce's Palladium Concert piece, we appreciate his verbal artistry and wit, symbolizing his control over and superiority to Frank Dell's disastrous performance. But just as attractive as the verbal control and sharing in its exaggeration towards hyperbole is Bruce's control over and exaggeration of the entire scenario. It begins with Dell's impatience over his lagging career, the comfortable but narrow rut he is in, and his willingness to gamble it all away for a chance at the respectability of a "class room." It can not happen. Even from the introduction of this piece, Lenny Bruce leaves Dell to slide down the way to destruction. It is not a graceful exit. All the way down, Dell is "punching, punching," digging his nails in, white. Failure is inevitable, but Dell pounds the sullen audience, bit after bit, with his stale and, to them, incomprehensible shtick. He even insults them. Then, desperately, he plays on their pity. Finally, driven nearly berserk with rage and frustration, his mind fastens on an incredible stratagem: "All right folks, there's another little bit here. Screw Ireland folks, how about that?" Immediately from up in the balcony, a voice through cupped hands booms back: "That's the funniest thing you've said all night, boy. That's right! Screw Ireland! Screw Ireland! . . . Screw the Irish. They stole the Grail!" The irrational stratagem on the stage triggers the insane race and religious prejudice slumbering in the audience. The ensuing riot completely destroys the interior of the theater, while the sounds of rage and destruction pursue Dell into his dressing room where he stoops over the toilet bowl. Bruce mimics the sounds of vomiting. It's over.

The catastrophic denouement again borders between tragedy and comedy. In the tragic formula, we see a man driven by false pride into a situation which fatalistically impels him towards disaster. There is no exit. And, comically, we laugh at the deliberate, hyperbolic perversity of fate: not only are the dice loaded against him, but the circle is made of shills, and the money is counterfeit. There is no hope against these odds. Really, there are no odds at all, no possibility. His fate is signed and sealed. But Frank Dell doesn't know this—only God, Lenny Bruce, and us. So Frank keeps trying, "punching, punching." He has unravelled the whole ball of string which curls around his feet. Now he is left holding the end. The audience has become his enemy, the inflexible material upon which he must hack out his dream. But it is a material intractable to the artist's wishes. He grows angry, insults the audience, pleads with them. Desperate with frustration, his career unreeling before his eyes, he must get a reaction from them. His stratagem, arising spontaneously like a free association, is to provoke their anger. The
response is more than he could expect or wish—a rolling tide of hatred that destroys the theater and his career.

Bruce's humor here turns on the motif of the failed stratagem. Sudden, unforeseen bursts of tactical inspiration are a natural material for comedy, exploding the tension of the apparently insoluble problem. It is the immaculate victory of beleaguered man against whom all the harmful forces of the world have allied themselves. Stratagem is the patron saint of the average man whom tragic circumstances fire with inspiration. Strategy, on the other hand, is an abiding workaday guardian of the wise man. It is a cure against problems that can be foreseen and with prudence solved. So while we may nod approval at strategy, we laugh with delight at stratagem. But Frank Dell's stratagem had an effect exactly opposite from his intention. In a stroke of brilliant self annihilation, he has turned a bad situation into a holocaust, snatched disaster from the jaws of simple defeat.

Thus, the final stroke of Bruce's humor is about the perversity of the human mind. Frank Dell had been following his instincts from the very beginning. He was wrong then. His whole performance was wrong. And his last joke was irrevocably wrong. He could not have done worse if he had engaged a team of assassins to blow up the theater and his career while he was on stage. The humor here coincides with the general humor on cosmically bad luck. Sometimes events conspire to make everything turn out so badly that we must laugh at the hyperbolic artistry of fate. And sometimes our every effort to save the disaster works only to increase its size and impact. You replace the fallen can in the supermarket and the next thing you know, the manager and the stockboys are digging you out of the avalanche of the weekly special. Frank Dell had that kind of a day. The humor is cosmic—it tells how we are made ridiculous by a complex succession of events, accidents really, and how what should be of most aid to us in such straits, our mental powers, most betray us.

Bruce's humor is about the impulsiveness of the imagination. Especially as an artist, he understood that it is when the imagination is placed under some tension that it is capable of the most surprisingly creative outbursts. Bruce, who invented almost all of his material ad lib before an audience, must have known this kind of sudden creativity. It is capable of producing the bon mot, the apt characterization, the flash of insight. But by the same token, judging from the Frank Dell portrait, Bruce must have also known the bad night and the dull audience; certainly there were the drunken audiences in cheap nightclubs who waited only for the strippers. To gain their attention, in desperation, Bruce sometimes undressed and went naked on stage. Surely if under pressure the imagination is capable of achieving images of perfection, it may also achieve the opposite; that is to say, not just dull ordinary mediocrity, but images that are perfectly inapt, perfectly awful. If the mind can run impulsively towards greatness, it can also plunge into the opposite, a kind of negative creativity, a theatrical nihilism. Frank Dell's desperation produced a flash of this kind of perverse genius. A mediocre comedian, but under pressure to win approval, he had invented a stratagem that failed on an enormous scale. He had abandoned his canned patter and had plunged into his imagination. It was probably the first, and considering the response, the last truly inventive act of his career. To be sure, the imagination contains the energy of life.
But its effects cannot be predicted. Dell wanted the audience to go crazy for him. And they did, with a vengeance.

The stratagem is a device that appears throughout Bruce's work. It forms the punch line for his extended fantasy about a prison rebellion called "Father Flotsky's Triumph." The scene opens with the Warden's voice through a bull horn: "Give up Dutch and we'll meet any reasonable demands you men want—except the vibrators." Can you imagine how those demands were drawn up in the movies of the thirties and forties? They get the editor of the prison newspaper, Charles Bickford, probably, to write them out, because nobody knew how to spell "vibrators." And Edward G. Robinson, probably, kept nagging, "Don't forget them vibrators!" In Lenny Bruce's version, the warden thinks that he might put down the insurrection "if we kill a few for an example." But his staff is extremely inefficient, and he has to prod them away from their card game. Then they can't find the ammunition. "The bullets?" the Warden replies, "Look in back of my brown slacks. . . ." It is a silly scene, including the amiable Father Flotsky himself, with the Barry Fitzgerald voice, and the quaint homilies: "There's an old story, that once a boy goes the bad road, the good road is hard to follow, when the good road is hard to follow, the bad road opens when the good road closes." But when his palsy counsel fails—after all, he's got an investment in this scene too—he turns vicious: "They're no good the lot of them. Pour it in. Kill them all!" It looks like another Attica until a voice suddenly croons out. It is Kiki the hospital attendant.

Bruce does the voice of the stereotypical homosexual male—with nasality, lisp, lilt and all. "Dutch, listen to me bubby!" He reminds Dutch of all the bed baths and rubdowns he gave and he tells the rioters to cool it. His advice is successful, and the scene ends with his reading off his own demands to a tired and beaten warden. First, "A gay bar in the west wing." And the capper: "I wanna be the Avon representative in the prison!" Both punch lines—about vibrators and the gay bar—humorously undercut the pretensions of the Hollywood genre of prison films. But even more, it is a basically human response to the inhuman pressures of reality. For Lenny Bruce, as in the Palladium Concert piece, when a need is frustrated, it asserts itself explosively, apparently irrationally, like a non sequitur. The stratagem is one version of this impulsiveness.

It asserts itself again suddenly and economically as part of a piece called "White Collar Drunks." A respectable looking man, but completely smashed and not wanting to show it, sits down at the bar and immediately complains to the bartender: "Don't you think it's time that the house bought a drink?" A little while later he accuses the bartender of taking away the drink he never bought. These are transparent, pathetic ploys, almost not worth the name of stratagem, but they show how much he wants a drink. The scene is interrupted by another chiseler, a real heavy drunk, his voice gravelly, aggressive, ready to belch. This is his incredible, blunt con: "I'm with the FBI. I may have to take you in if you don't give me 29 cents for some wine. You wanna go downtown, or you wanna gimme the money?" Can he believe that such an outlandish stratagem will actually work? It almost doesn't matter. When the mind doesn't get what it needs, it grinds into itself, pushing for some angle, some shortcut to satisfaction. In a similar vein, Bruce sets a middle class white citizen next to a black man at a suburban cocktail
party. He tries to strike up a friendly conversation, but his mind, driven by prejudice and a perverse fatalism, invariably fastens on exactly the wrong thing to say: “That Joe Lewis was a helluva fighter.” He also wants to do the right thing and invite the man over to dinner: “I wanna have you over the house but I got a bit of a problem . . . I got a sister . . . and I hear that you guys . . . I hear you got some perfume you put on ’em and they make you do it to ’em . . . Is that true, there’s no perfume you put on ’em? They just do it to you?” Like Frank Dell, the more he talks, the more he wants to be liked, the worse matters get. When a stratagem fails, it does not fail by halves. It is perfectly awful, dismal. And when it succeeds, there is nothing more fortuitous and luminous. The trouble is, there is no predictable relationship between intention and accomplishment, between what one wants and what one in fact gets.

It is true that the result often mocks the intention, and this is one of the sources of Bruce’s comedy, but it must be emphasized that the result never utterly stifles the wish. Though the wish often meets with rebuffs from the world, and even from the mind itself, as it tries, in vain, for satisfaction, the wish survives as the driving force of the personality, the source of all hope and all energy. Lenny Bruce said it quite simply: it was all “Look at me, Ma!” It was all for love, for acceptance. That’s what Frank Dell wanted too. On another level, the sexual, that’s what Kiki and Butch wanted. Lenny Bruce tried to explain this sexual need in a long didactic piece about marriage. He was trying to explain to women why men have different sexual needs, and why women shouldn’t blame them for merely physical infidelities. “Guys” are different, he says, because they “detach.” “Like a lady can’t go through a plate glass window and go to bed with you five seconds later. But guys can have head-on collisions with Greyhound busses. In disaster areas—everybody’s laying dead on the highway, and on the way to the hospital in the ambulance, the guy makes a play for the nurse.” Now Bruce imitates the voice of outraged womankind:

Woman: How could he do a thing at a time like that?
Man: *(mumbling, embarrassed)* Well, I got horny.
Woman: *(outraged)* What?!
Man: I got hot.
Woman: How can you be hot when your foot was cut off and you’re . . . dead?
Man: I don’t know.
Woman: He’s an animal! He got hot with his foot cut off!
Man: *(broken, ashamed)* I guess I’m an animal . . .
Woman: What did you get hot at?
Man: The nurse’s uniform . . .

As if the point weren’t clear enough, Bruce zips into another fantasy about men trapped on a desert island: “You put guys on a desert island, they’ll do it to mud.” Then he imagines the guy’s wife showing up and catching him doing it to mud, and berating him for being a pervert, and telling him to get his mud to make his dinner for him. Bruce explains to the women: “You can’t get angry at them. You can’t wanna leave them for that.” There is no guaranteed right time, right place, or right way to want anything in this world. When wishes make their journey into the world, reality treats them as if they were irrelevant. They make
their journey all alone, and are treated most unequally; sometimes rewarded, and sometimes frustrated, but upon no set plan. How do you live in such a world?

One way is the con. If there is no impeccable system of reward and punishment, then you are left to figure out some plan for each situation. Ad hoc. So you try to measure the direction and force of your wishes and the resistance of the world to them, and hopefully find a loophole through the difficulties. Philosophers may square the circle. What is needed in reality is an angle on the corner—a percentage against the uncertainty of fifty-fifty. That's the con—a carefully conceived and elegantly executed incision through the corner. But if the short cut opens suddenly, fortuitously, and if on impulse alone we plunge into the opening, that is the stratagem. Bruce's imagination abounded with examples. His biographer, Albert Goldman, has called the con one of the basic metaphors of Bruce's mind, reducing everything, religion, the law courts, love, to the narrow perspective of the shingleman or the Broadway agent. But what ought to be said also is that this association and this reduction is in no wise pejorative or demeaning. Bruce does not hold up the dice for us to see the shaved corner and complain, "Look what cheats there are among us!" No, the shaving shows what kind of pain it is living in a fifty-fifty world, and how we need an angle to improve the odds. It is as much a testimony of human presence as the great pyramids. The hypodermic syringe taped to the underside of the hotel room bureau drawer—a hedge against the feds: let the future anthropologist discover and ponder that. It is as much a memorial to human nature as the Bill of Rights and the microfilmed New York Times in the library vaults. It is the stigmata of humankind. It means that here a creature at once left his protest against the odds and his humble contribution to their improvement. Lenny Bruce, once a shingleman himself and a solicitor for bogus charities, Bruce understood the con from the inside out.

Perhaps Bruce's best dramatization of the con, and certainly his most controversial, was his piece called "Religions Inc." Its premise is the summit meeting called by the religious leaders of the nation and attended by the day workers in the field. The metaphor is the corporate convention, and religion is seen as Big Business, a con for packing the suckers into a tight circle around the snake oil wagon and fleecing them for all they're worth. But this is no penny ante con. The spokesman, A.A., comes prepared with charts and statistics: "The graph here tells the story. . . . For the first time in twelve years, Catholicism is up 9 points. Judaism is up 15. The Big P, the Pentecostal, is startin' to move finally." Later in the meeting, and getting deeper into business, a question arises about what to do with a valuable tract of "the Heavenly Land" that has just been acquired—Chavez Ravine. Since it is a matter of real estate, Rabbi Weiss is called on for his expert opinion. "I think we should subdivide," he says. On a smaller scale, A.A. announces the new line for the coming year from the religious novelty house: "the gen-yew-ine Jewish-star-lucky-cross an' cigarette-lighter combined; an' we got the kiss-me-in-the-dark mehzoozoo . . . an' these wonderful lil' cocktail napkins with some helluva sayings there—'Another martini for Mother Cabrini.'" Things like that. It's all a big con, and A.A., knowing he is addressing an audience of six thousand accomplished con men, prudently issues a warning: "You know, the commissioner promised there'd be no individual hustlin', you know. I mean, let's make the scene
together, because, like, if we burn ourselves, where’re we gonna end up, you dig?”
However, because he is among colleagues, he can lower his guard enough to
reminisce sanguinely about how far he has come: “I just was talkin’ to Billy this
afternoon. I said, ‘Billy, you come a long way, sweetie, long way.’ Who woulda
thought back in ’31—we were hustlin’ baby pictures then, an’ shingles and sidin’.
. . . An just like that we came on, you know? The Gideon, Bop!, and there we
were.” Lenny Bruce continues the metaphor of the con as he introduces the best
character in the piece, “a great man and a great holy roller, Oral!”

Oral has an incredibly flexible voice that draws into moody conspiratorial
whispers or booms with power and confidence—a passionate voice, totally unself-
conscious. Yet he knows that some people don’t like him, maybe for his preaching
style, his “ranting and raving,” or for his coarseness, or for his eccentricities, like
his holy rolling greeting to A.A., “Here, boy, have a snake!” He knows some
people think he’s dumb, but it doesn’t bother him: “Maybe I’m dumb. That’s it.
That old dumbbell up there. Ha Ha Ha. There’s the dummy. Why don’t you all
have a laugh. That’s right. Laugh at him. Ho Ho Ho Ho. There’s the dummy.
I’m dumb. Ha Ha Ha Ha! Yes I’m dumb. I got two Lincoln Continentals!
That’s how goddamn dumb I am! I’m dumber ’n Hell. I don’t know how much
a whole lot of nines are.” Here it is, the pride in achievement, in the successful
con. The scene closes with a phone call from the newly elected Pope. Oral
picks up the phone and bellows out his greetings in the jive, hipster, show-biz ar-
got: “Hello Johnny! What’s shakin’ baby?” The rest of the dialogue continues in
this show-biz lingo, as Oral gives the Pope the good news that he got him an eight
page layout for Viceroy: “The new Pope is a thinking man.” Oral thought, cor-
rectly, that the Pope wouldn’t go for the tattoo to get Marlboro. But the Pope
does seem interested in Oral’s tour package capped by an appearance on the Ed
Sullivan show. Their negotiations, however, are interrupted by a request from
Billy. Oral asks the Pope, “Billy wants to know whether you can get him a deal
on one of them Dago sportscars.” Of course, what we are impressed with immed-
imately is the audacity of the humor characterizing the Pope and the other thinly
disguised religious leaders as show biz personalities or only barely ethical business-
men. Everything is reduced, as it were, to the comedian’s own level. But we have
yet to answer why this reduction isn’t derogatory or satiric of religion.

Our own response to Lenny Bruce’s work provides the best evidence for an-
swering this problem. We laugh. But surely not at the idea that organized religion
might be regarded as being run very much like a big business. The idea is so trite
as to be capable of producing a kind of nervous laughter in only the most shel-
tered minds. Moreover, there is no real humor in the idea that sacred institutions
may be overrun with scoundrels. In short, religion only provides the occasion or
the background for the joke. What, in fact, provokes our humor is the incredible,
hyperbolic audacity of the characters Bruce portrays. For example, the sacred
idea of “the Heavenly Land,” whatever conventional or even private associations
that idea is capable of raising in our minds, one of them is certainly not the concept
of a land grab scheme in the Chavez Ravine and subdivision of the lots for tract
housing. The humor develops out of the background tension arising from the
desperate uncertainties about life and the nature of death for which religion
attempts to provide answers. And the acceptance of these answers is the outcome of spiritual growth and the triumph of faith. But the sudden and delightful humor is that Lenny Bruce's characters have found a shorter way. Subdivide! Would it were that simple. But that's exactly the pleasure we have in Bruce's characters. For them it is that simple. And for a time we cheerfully identify with them and share in their incredibly direct shortcut to paradise. If the Pope Himself is only concerned about public relations, his 8 x 10 glossies, and whether his Jewish nose gives him away—and who is in a better position to know what really matters?—then we certainly have nothing serious spiritually to fear from life or death. Everything is simple and on the surface. And if, like Oral, most of us are given to pause before stating how much a lot of nines are, we can all count two Lincoln Continentals in the driveway. This reduction to materialism satisfies a wish that we all to some degree share. In Lenny Bruce's imaginary world, we gratefully leave St. Augustine to agonize over his stolen pears. In Bruce's world, everyone is looking for the edge because in this game the percentage is always in favor of the house, and there's the ace of spades thrown down at the end and the game is over. In such a world, with death and dull audiences and dumb district attorneys, where there's so much bullshit anyway, where the hype and the press release are gospel, where so much seems to depend upon luck, whom you follow on the playbill, whether it's Georgia Gibbs or the trained birds, whether you are the Warden or Butch or Kiki, whether you are black or white, whether you have 29 cents for a glass of wine or you have to invent some pathetically transparent panhandle on the spot, when what you want most is nailed to the wheel of fortune and spun, round and round, where it stops nobody knows—in such a world, it is only the rube who doesn't restack the deck, reswitch the dice, find the angle. But it must be said that this is not an ethical issue, the old question about what it would take to make you kill or steal or sell your soul. This is not a Faustian problem. In Bruce's characters there is no issue about premeditation or of guilt. The stratagem arises spontaneously under great pressure and in response to overwhelming need. And it is this very suddenness and this total amorality that triggers our humor, for we all share to some extent Bruce's view of the world as a game weighted decidedly in favor of the house, or as a con, working to bilk us systematically of our deepest wishes, and we naturally rejoice to see the tables turned.

A misunderstanding, however, has arisen from the fact that the tables are sometimes turned by characters who do not appear to deserve our approbation. This raises what will turn into a perplexing question of whether Bruce should properly be called a satirist or a comedian. Indeed, if we feel contempt for characters like A.A. and Oral who corrupt religion for their own selfish purposes, or the white party-goer for his racial prejudice, or even Frank Dell for his nationalistic slur, then we should be inclined to call Bruce a satirist. That this is a term that was commonly applied to Bruce, and which he himself came to use, ought not greatly to influence our judgment. In the first place, the term “satire” is frequently associated in the show-biz argot with any comedian whose material is only slightly more biting or personal than Bob Hope's. It is a code word, a convenience, with which managers prepare booking agents and MC's audiences for material that is just a little bit “different.” But the term generally has no more technical validity in
referring to a genre than the word “epic” when it is applied to movies. It is true, for example, that Dick Gregory who began as a comedian became a satirist. He also got fewer laughs and less bookings. It would be a very unusual couple who would drop $50 at a nightclub to be satirized for living in an unintegrated neighborhood. Satirists are rarely funny, by choice, for they sense that the laugh unbarbs the anger. Lenny Bruce always tried to be funny. He was a humorist all his life. Sometimes he called himself a satirist, and not only because the word means the same as comedian in the show-biz language: he also assumed this title for the respectability and protection it seemed to offer his kind of humor.

Especially after the hostile audiences, the walkouts, the arrests, when Bruce was developing his new and shocking material on sexual and religious topics, he was pressured to find a justification for his act. Of course, this is a pointless task. Humor requires no other justification or defense than laughter. The trouble was that the ladies from the bus tour in their sensible walking shoes—two free tickets at an avant-garde nightclub—didn’t laugh. Neither presumably did Cardinal Spellman. Nor did the police. D.A. Frank Hogan of New York City was not especially known for his sense of humor. When Bruce had used the word “cocksucker” in his act and the police detective testified that Mr. Bruce recommended a sexual act prohibited by law, what could he say in his defense? That “cocksucker” can sometimes be a hilarious word? The detective had come into the nightclub, ordered a ginger ale, and sat through the whole show waiting for that word. He heard nothing else. Not only wasn’t he amused, but presumably the word aroused his prurient interest, evidence necessary for the charge of obscenity. Bruce, who was quickly becoming a legal expert of sorts in these matters, said what he thought was expedient to say. He came to claim first amendment rights of a satirist to criticize those very laws under which he was arrested. The obscenity law itself, the argument ran, gave an unnatural hyper-sexuality to words which people regularly use in their daily lives. This line of defense, which may have been relevant to the law, was utterly irrelevant to Bruce’s act and to his art. It must have been an incredibly tense and enraging trial for Bruce to have sat through, while listening to lawyers’ talk about his prurience. Nothing could have been further from the intention of his act than encouraging his audience to perform fellatio. Wouldn’t they just let him do the act, the bit, in court so that they could see for themselves what he meant? No, they would not. They already had his utterances, the evidence, in the transcripts. But they were misunderstanding it! Well, it wasn’t a question of understanding; it was a question of fact. Hadn’t he in fact said...? But for Bruce it was a question of understanding and appreciation. Here he was called to court with a judge in black robes and a legal secretary transcribing it all for posterity, and they were missing the whole point! It must have been intensely gall- ing to a serious performer like Bruce, and one so hungry for appreciation, to submit to such an important but misguided examination. Somewhere along the legal way, it must have occurred to him with the brilliance of a vision that judges were not an audience, that the courts were tied to The Law which spun out a whole system of its own protocol and rationalizations. To paraphrase what he said about wives’ confessions of adultery, “Courts have no authority vested in them to hear any truth.” So it must have come almost with the force of a stratagem that he
had to find the line that would lead him safely through the labyrinth of the law. He must have felt like Frank Dell, "punching, punching," looking for the magic key. And suddenly, there it was. If he called himself a satirist, a serious commentator rather than a comedian, he could say that he was simply satirizing the laws under which he was arrested, claim first amendment rights of free speech, and thereby politicize the trial and set it upon a new and more defensible footing. In fact, this was the line adopted in his most famous trial for obscenity in New York against Frank Hogan. Bruce was able to enlist a great deal of literary and political support. Much like one of his own comic characters, he tried to snatch the con line even as he was sinking. And yet one might wonder if ironically this solution was not almost as bad as the problem. How much had it cost one so anxious for understanding and appreciation as Bruce to deny his art?

We might consider for a moment this remarkable inequality with which society treats the satirist and the comedian. We might well wonder why Lenny Bruce, as satirist, had readily available to him a whole set of prepared rationalizations that justified his art to society, while Lenny Bruce, as comedian, had absolutely nothing in the social, legal, or aesthetic tradition that he could appropriate to his defense. All he could try to do, and it is noteworthy that he was consistently prevented, was to plead for permission to perform his act before the court to show how funny it was. Humor was no justification, but a satiric attack upon the law itself might be considered a possible defense. The natural conclusion to be drawn is that we prefer to be attacked seriously about topics that make us uncomfortable than to be made to laugh about the same material. This preference is most clear in the cases of satirists and comics employing equally objectionable material. (When they use milder stuff, they are rarely called upon by society to justify their practise.) Of course, this is not to say that satirists are never persecuted. In oppressive times they are nailed to the wall right next to the comedians. The point to be made is that in good or moderate times, when satirists and comedians employ the same objectionable material, the satirists stand a better chance of explaining their behavior with the ready-made justification provided by society. Say a satirist and a comedian both use the word "cocksucker" with regard to an important person like the President. Let us assume that both artists perform their craft well, so that in one case we are inspired with anger and contempt for the object of the attack, and in the other with bladder-bursting laughter. Then, let us assume, both artists are arrested.

The satirist in western civilization has in his favor a tradition thousands of years old which recognizes and places a unique value upon the concept of individuality. The principle of the privacy of conscience and opinion is recognized even and especially when it is abrogated. Moreover, the satirist labors within familiar boundaries: right and wrong, good and evil, sanity and madness. He works within these boundaries, and the intention and the achievement of his art is the conveyance of a persuasive opinion. His goal is to portray his opinion both emotionally and intellectually so that the audience can at once feel and understand the significance of his thoughts. The audience, of course, is free to misunderstand him, or, if it conscientiously perceives his meaning, to disagree with him. After all, it's only his opinion. In any case, it knows how to cope with the situation
because the problem of agreement and disagreement is an expected, familiar, and soluble phenomenon of everyday life. Thus, when the satirist in the example above is arrested, he immediately recognizes the role he must play. Instead of being put on the defensive by the arrest, he expresses outrage, moral indignation at the fascist government which by his arrest has demonstrated its tyranny and which, after his acquittal, will be revealed as powerless. Numerous organizations which cannot approve of what he said will nevertheless rally in support of his right to say it. Advertisements will invite the public to subscribe for his defense.

How entirely different is the situation of the comedian who is arrested for using the same material. Just try to explain a joke to the FBI or a judge. It won't work. The scene that one could imagine might resemble the one described earlier in which Bruce portrayed an accident victim who unaccountably became aroused by the ambulance nurse:

*Judge:* For the record, what exactly did you say?
*Comic:* That the President was a cocksucker.
*Judge:* How can you say a thing like that?!
*Comic:* I dunno...
*Judge:* Well, what did you mean by it?
*Comic:* Nothing much... I thought it would be funny.
*Judge:* You thought it would be funny to call the President a... the word you used?
*Comic:* It was a joke.
*Judge:* Well, it wasn't funny.
*Comic:* I guess not... I dunno...

It is impossible for a comedian to make a joke funny to someone by means of explanation, and it may be just as unreasonable to expect him to know what his joke really means. The point it that the laughter of the comedian is a more mysterious response to the world than is the anger of the satirist. Most of us, and indeed most scholars of these two genres, offer more uniform and more confident opinions on satire than on comedy. It is this uncertainty about why we laugh that probably accounts for the difference we have been noticing in the way the world treats satirists and comedians, as well as for the fact that the satirist has at his disposal a much more clearly defined and socially respectable justification for his art than has the comedian.

Even if there is a tactical advantage in claiming the rights of the satirist, that does not prove that Lenny Bruce appropriated that title and those rights without, in fact, being a satirist. Most often that title is associated with his skits on religion. We have seen in “Religions Inc.” that the source of the humor springs from the deflection of our attention away from the serious religious issues of life, death, salvation, towards the simpler and mundane questions of how to turn a buck. If we were in the mood, we might become enraged at Oral’s hypocrisy, and that would be a reaction appropriate to satire. But does Bruce’s work actually put us in that mood? The fact that we laugh rather than become enraged suggests not. Rather than displaying anger and contempt, we are delighted with the brazenness with which the characters avoid the potential for fear in the religious subject matter. In effect, then, we identify with Oral rather than reject him as we would
with satire. After "Religions Inc." had gained its notoriety, Bruce offered a retraction, or at least an explanation. He said it was wrong to criticize the church's preoccupation with wealth and show. What had once seemed incongruous to him—the rich baroque cathedral in the midst of a ghetto—now made sense when seen from the poor man's point of view: "A raggedy-ass guy won't go into a raggedy-ass temple: 'I'm livin' in a shithouse—what I got to go in one for?'" So no one wants to take religion seriously, spiritually—neither the priests nor the parishioners. Bruce had a quick bit about a missionary and a savage:

**SAVAGE:** Well, are you God?

**MISSIONARY:** (heavy brogue) Well no, but, uh... heh, heh... What the hell, you know... just, uh... well never mind that... and, uh... I can do you a favor, you do me a favor—that's all.

The problem of religion and of the church is that we don't tend to believe what we can't see. So anything that will make us believe is useful and acceptable. It's a public relations problem. Now, is the missionary a bad man because he let the savage believe he was God? That could be the material of satire. But in this context, what we respond to in the missionary's heh's and uh's is the sudden mental calculation: "How disingenuously naive of the savage to think I'm God! And I do represent God in a way. And it would be hard to explain to this benighted fellow how I'm more different from God than like Him. And...heh, heh, what the hell." We do not laugh at this rationalization because it is evil, although in a different context, the context of satire, we might find it so. Rather, we laugh at the sudden revelation of the humanity of priests, how they must secretly long for that question to be asked. And really, we laugh at our own humanity, for are we not gods also? The priest's answer is yet another example of Bruce's characteristic interest in dramatizing the humor in the way the mind tries to cope with conflict and with reality. It is yet another version, though a mild one, of the stratagem.

Lenny Bruce's most outrageous portrait of priests is his millenial vision of Moses and Christ's unexpected and humorously unwanted return to earth at St. Patrick's Cathedral. What triggers the laughter is the fact that no one really wants them back. Moses, of course, is a Jew, and that's an embarrassment at St. Patrick's, and Christ, predictably enough for Him—but it's an incredible nuisance—is accompanied by a swarm of lepers. Cardinal Spellman, performing the Mass, is apprised of what is happening at the door of the church, but he tries to ignore it even as the disturbance grows into a commotion with the arrival of TV cameras and reporters. It is, after all, the Second Coming, and New Millenium or not, Chet Huntley has a deadline. Anyway, lepers are always good for thirty-second fillers. Finally, Cardinal Spellman pretends to welcome the lepers, but he warns them to stay in the back and not to touch anything, or leave anything, likes arms or noses. Of course that's a terrible thing to say, but we are forced to identify with these sentiments in order to appreciate the humor. The joke is told entirely from the point of view of Cardinal Spellman, that is, from the point of view of a priest who accepts Christianity but who finds Christ terribly inconvenient. Miracles, by definition, are hard to absorb on the spur of the moment. The clergy, instead of celebrating the event, treat it as if it were a catastrophe and Christ a
nuisance. It's like a surprise investigation by the Board of Health. He couldn't have come at a worse time, and besides, He's interrupting the ceremony of the Mass. Doesn't He know He's in a church—bringing all those filthy lepers in there? The churchman's attitude releases our own mixed feelings towards Christ. Sure, He saved us, but He also established for our imitation an impossible model of self-sacrifice—kissing dirty feet, loving the sick and the poor, turning the other cheek. This is admirable when it's done a couple thousand years ago and on someone else's property. Christ in the flesh is a different matter. Part of our laughter comes from the surprise that Cardinal Spellman, of all people, would feel this way, and the laughter really springs from the recognition that we feel this way too. It's perfectly all right for Christ to cure lepers as long as it happens far away from the public school, the house, and the nearby shopping mall and churches. As the white suburbanite said, "I got a sister..." So what we are laughing at is the blatancy of the Cardinal's prejudice against Christ, and at his purely tactical rather than spiritual reaction to Christ's return: how can we get rid of Him with the least fuss? It is a pointedly practical and superficial answer to an incalculably profound religious event, the return of God to earth. We laugh at the superficiality because it is economical—it cuts the corner and avoids or denies the really painful demands that true religion places upon the soul, and we also laugh because it reflects our own anger towards the ideal of Christian self-denial. Do we really want to die with Christ at Calvary? Lenny Bruce, in another skit, portrays one of the thieves being dragged to the cross with Christ. A Brooklyn con-man voice keeps shouting for his lawyer: "Get my file down here! I'm in here for checks—how can I get crucified?" In the practical matter of life and death we are all prison lawyers. No one wants to suffer or die. In another bit, Bruce talks about the guilt that all Jews suffer for killing Christ no matter what the Ecumenical Council might be pressured into agreeing to say about Roman soldiers. Bruce can't stand the tension and freely confesses: "All right... Yes, we did it. I did it, my family. I found a note in my basement. It said: 'We killed him. Signed, Morty.'" The dynamics of all of these jokes depends upon the fact that the "good" feelings we ought to have, and perhaps in differing degrees do have towards Christ, do not prevent us from also having "bad" feelings towards Him.

Lenny Bruce's comedy makes us identify with Cardinal Spellman, with Oral, with the thief, with the guilt-ridden Jew. This is the method of comedy, inducing understanding and acceptance of others and ourselves through identification and empathy. The direction of satire is the opposite, towards rejection of others and ourselves. Both genres share the same content: human weaknesses, but one rejects them and the other embraces them in all their variety and ubiquity as the very trade marks of human nature. In this we see a crucial distinction between the satirist and the comedian. Both dramatize the discrepancy between what is and what ought to be. But the satirist rejects what is, and the comedian accepts it. In the examples we have been studying, Bruce shows us how characteristically human it is for us to raise ideals we cannot meet, and to hate, or at least subvert, those ideals. His comedy trains us to accept our faults, our humanness. Some people admired or hated him for what they thought was his satire on Cardinal Spellman's religious hypocrisy. But what made Bruce really dangerous was that he made us
agree with Cardinal Spellman that Christ was, in effect, a nuisance, and that whatever nameless person put the spear in, we all, in some degree emotionally share in his act. A satirist would have made us hate Cardinal Spellman and ourselves. Lenny Bruce's comedy makes us enjoy and accept Cardinal Spellman and ourselves. But society chose to misunderstand Bruce's comedy and to persecute him as an anti-Christian satirist because they did not want to face the real source and meaning of his humor.

In all of his comedy, Bruce celebrates the infinitely varied and often surprising ways that human nature strives to subvert the human condition. And we can sense a lot about what that condition is like by the necessity of and the nature of the stratagems or means of subversion. Jokes, as Freud discovered, involve a "deflection" away from painful material or a painful problem. But we can sense a lot about the nature of the problem from the direction of the deflection, that is, from the nature of the solution. In the jokes we have been examining, we saw Bruce concerned with such problems as the existence of God: "Ah, what the hell, you can think of me as God if it makes you feel better, heh, heh"; or the frustration of the need for love: "Screw the Irish!"; or the tension between the races: "That Joe Lewis was a helluva fighter"; or the fear of death and the uncertainty of heaven: "We'll subdivide!"; or the desperation for oblivion: "I'm with the FBI. Buy me a drink"; or the unpredictable and personal nature of the sex drive: "It was the nurse's uniform." Gains in pleasure are won not only against the inhibitions and fears of the mind, but also against the intractable nature of the social environment and the physical world in which we live. According to Lenny Bruce, at least, the world seemed not to have been designed for human happiness. To be sure, after creating this world, God saw that it was good. But that was easy for Him to say. He lives in heaven. Earth—it may be a nice place to visit, but the permanent residents have no choice. We bought this place the way some poor fools buy a cottage in the swamp—site unseen. And now we must make the best of a bad bargain. If that is the way things are, then we would be twice fools not to look for some loophole, or to invent some strategy, or, more suddenly, a stratagem designed to sneak some advantage over the condition in which we are trapped.

We can imagine how desperate the human condition appears to Lenny Bruce when we realize that any solution, no matter what it consists of, is acceptable and an occasion for rejoicing. We should observe the total lack of moral judgment here. We are not made to hate Oral even though he is a fraud, or Cardinal Spellman even though he is a hypocrite, or Frank Dell even though he is an ass, or the liberal white suburbanite even though he is bigoted, or the man at the bar even though he is an outrageous drunk, or the accident victim even though he has an erection in a disaster area. Moral judgment is left to the DA's and to those who cannot laugh, who can not see the joke for the content. As I said earlier about the cosmic humor of a perfectly awful day, the comedy derives from an avoidance of the content, and rises to an aesthetic or economic appreciation of the style with which the contents seem to be ordered. By almost any method of reckoning, a series of disasters such as Frank Dell suffered adds up to sheer hell. In only one very specious sense is the situation saved as an example of humor at work. And
that is the sense that Bruce fastens upon. By the same account, one would find
Bruce’s characters in general sadly wanting, if not downright evil. But Bruce al-
ways finds and shows us that one special sense in which they deserve our laugh-
ter and as a prerequisite to laughter, our empathetic understanding. The dangerous
aspect of his humor is that often there is only this one sense in which his material
is funny. It is as if he tried to crowd into his jokes material that is more appro-
priate to pornography, satire, tragedy, the analyst’s couch—material that might
never produce laughter except for the one touch of saving humor. The average
comedian would never attempt to place such a burden on himself and on his ma-
terial. But Bruce did, and the result is that when we laugh with him, quite uncon-
sciously, we have to buy his whole bag. Our acceptance of this material is spon-
taneous, unconscious, apparently induced by the magical catharsis of laughter.
Even in the simplest Henny Youngman mother-in-law joke, the audience laughs
because almost all of them have mothers-in-law and they can be made to feel spon-
taneously the tensions in that relationship. The emphasis is on “feel” because cer-
tainly Mr. Youngman is not offering a lecture on the extended family. The audience
must feel some relief and pleasure in this shared explosion of sympathy. That is the
success of the joke. But imagine what might happen if a satirist dealt with the same
material—or worse, a polemicist, a Hitler even. The success there would be a mass
uprising of the audience, and the next day would see the internment camps crowded
with mothers-in-law. It bears repeating that comedy goes in the opposite direction,
away from anger and rejection, and towards tolerance and acceptance. As we have
seen, there was no way for us to have appreciated the skit about Cardinal Spellman
unless we could share his sense of inconvenience and disgust at Christ’s returning
with a band of lepers. Of course, with our wits about us, that is, when we are not
under the influence of the joke, we might deny this feeling of disgust, and instead
express all the good feelings in our hearts and minds about Christ. And this would
be true too. But the fact remains that for the time we laughed, we tolerated far
different feelings. And they were also true. The remarkable and dangerous aspect
of Lenny Bruce’s comedy is that he radically broadened the range of material that
audiences had been accustomed to find humorous. He opened whole new conti-
nents of the mind and brought forth all their strange inhabitants who had not be-
fore been admitted into public displays of humor. If what we find funny is a
measure of what we would include in a definition of what is acceptably human,
Lenny Bruce succeeded in broadening that definition, in making us more human.
It was a door he held open into the darker areas of our minds and hearts. The
light shone in for a time, and we laughed at more than we knew.

* * *

BOOTLESS EPITAPH

Who would conquer by storm
Lies in the rain.
Hope is intemperate.
Boots are in vain.

STEVEN G. KELLMAN