

**INTRODUCTION:
TRUTH AND FURY AND OBSCURITY
BY SHALOM AUSLANDER**

What is comedy without truth and fury?
—Nikolai Gogol

The novel you hold in your hands is, unfortunately, funny. In some places, I am loath to admit, it's hilarious. There are prostitutes, whorehouses, cheaters, liars, radicals, pointless journeys, empty philosophies, anti-Semites, more prostitutes, hypocrites, fools, nose-pickers, semen-wipers, adulterers, xenophobes and, briefly, a World's Fair (which only leads to more adultery). It is full of truth and fury, and you'll want to tell your friends about it, but because the book is funny, I can tell you right now that they are not going to be very impressed.

"Is it funny?" they'll ask.

"Hilarious," you'll reply.

"Oh," they'll say with an air of disapproval—not just with the book, which they'll immediately reject, but with you for even suggesting it. "We're reading X," they will say, the serious book of the moment written by the serious author of the moment, which will weigh in at a minimum of

four pounds and tell a miserable tale of spiritual sadness and unfulfilled longing no one will understand or care to try. It will be about a man lying in bed. The review will call it hilarious. It won't be. It will win many awards.

I'm going to be honest with you—I don't like your friends. They're shallow assholes desperate for external validation who fear the very mirror that reflects them most faithfully, frankly, but I don't blame them; reading is difficult, and books don't have a touch screen or downloadable apps (yet), so the only real reason to suffer through them is to impress other people. Of course this book *is* a foreign translation, it does have that going for it, and the author is not only dead, but he died young—both of which should give the book a certain literary respectability, but not enough, sadly, to overcome the fact that it is (there's just no getting away from this) funny. If satire, as they say in the theater, is what closes on Saturday night, humor in literature is what gets belittled by reviewers, ignored by the award committees, goes out of print and is never spoken about again. Comedy bravely stands up, speaks the harsh truth, attempts to show things the way they are, to teach us to see and laugh at our own shortcomings and failures. For that it is dismissed. The fate of humor in literature, one could say, is utterly tragic, but then one would be saying something funny, and one would be ignored.

I was born on 9th December, 1901, and it was in Fiume, on the Adriatic, at 4:45 in the afternoon (4:30 according to another report). When I weighed twenty-pounds I left Fiume and loafed about partly in Venice and partly in the Balkans, and experienced all sorts of things, among others the murder of H.M.

King Alexander of Serbia along with his better half. When I was four foot tall I moved to Budapest and lived there for half an inch. There I was a keen visitor to numerous children's playgrounds and was conspicuous in a rather disagreeable way because of my dreamy and mischievous personality. At a height of about 5' 0" Eros awoke in me, but initially without causing me any bother. . . My interest in art, especially in the classics of literature, stirred relatively late (at a height of about 5' 7.5") but it only became an urge from about 5' 11.5", not, it is true, an irresistible one, but there all the same. When the first World War broke out I was already 5' 6", and when it ended I was 6' (I shot up very quickly during the war). At 5' 7" I had my first proper sexual experience—and today, now that I have long since stopped growing (6' 1"), I think back with tender nostalgia to those portentous days.

—Ödön von Horváth

Hungarian by birth, Ödön von Horváth lived and wrote in Berlin during the tense and tumultuous years between the First and Second World Wars. *The Eternal Philistine* was his first novel, a form he returned to later in his life after a successful career as a playwright.

“I have attempted,” Horváth once wrote of his work, “to be as disrespectful as possible towards stupidity and lies.”

That is the noble mission of comedy, perhaps the noblest mission of all, and one at which Horváth was very, very good. He was so good at it, in fact, that today, nobody's ever heard of him. Brecht, on the other hand, dealt with

many of the same subjects and themes in a dreadfully serious manner, and look at him: almost a century later, and I don't even have to use his first name.

So what can we do to help, you ask? How can we make sure that *The Eternal Philistine* at last acquires the audience and recognition it so rightly deserves?

One of the easiest ways, as I demonstrated earlier, is to quote Nikolai Gogol. Gogol was Russian, and everyone in the West respects Russian writers, even if they're crap. Trust me, with friends like yours, you cannot go wrong quoting Gogol. Nikolai, incidentally, was also hilariously funny (before he came down with an incurable case of Lord-itis), but somehow he managed to be taken seriously. Are there are lessons to be learned from his example? There are, and these are them:

- 1) Be Russian.
- 2) Die crazy.

Just to be safe, I will also, somewhere in this introduction, try to work in a mention of Voltaire (who is practically God by now), and of Kafka (who actually is God), both of whom were also funny writers your friends probably claim to read but probably don't.

Jesus Christ, I really hate your friends.

I'll shoot for Samuel Beckett as well, but I'm not promising anything.

The best thing you can do, however, while I'm busy name-dropping, is to not tell anyone that this book is "funny." There's no reason to frighten them away. What can you tell them, then, to make them read it? To make them respect it? To keep this work alive?

It's called "spin."

1. IT'S NOT FUNNY; IT'S DARK.

Dark comedy is, according to Wikipedia, a sub-genre of comedy whose themes “include murder, suicide, depression, abuse, mutilation, war, barbarism, drug abuse, terminal illness, domestic violence, sexual violence, pedophilia, insanity, nightmare, disease, racism, disability (both physical and mental), chauvinism, corruption, and crime.”

Unless I'm forgetting something, that's pretty much all the funny things in the world, so I'm not sure what the point of the label is (cannibalism isn't there, but I'd file that under mutilation, which everyone knows is funny). It may well be a pointless distinction, but it serves our purposes well, because for some reason, the literary gatekeepers who determined that funny isn't serious, determined, at the same smoke-filled, clandestine meeting, that dark is.

Funny is fatuous.

Dark is deep.

Funny is frivolous.

Dark is meaningful.

While Funny is in the kitchen with a fake arrow through its head, Dark is in the basement with its weirdo Goth friends, smoking cigarettes and making jokes about killing itself. Or cannibalism.

The Eternal Philistine, you can confidently tell your friends, is dark. It's about as dark as it gets. It's *Candide* dark. It's *Catch-22* dark. *The Eternal Philistine* is an inversion of the traditional “Journey” novel, wherein the protagonist, due to some “inciting incident,” it forced into a strange new world, whereupon he learns many lessons, whereupon he returns to the original world a better, changed person. While the basic story elements may be consistent, every

writer approaches these elements in their own particular way; in Voltaire's *Candide*, for example, the inciting incident occurs when the eponymous hero is discovered kissing his truly beloved. In *The Eternal Philistine*, it occurs when the hero, a used-car salesman named Kobler, is caught by his employers taking prostitutes for, uh, "test-drives."

Horváth: 1. Voltaire: 0.

The story takes place in Berlin, in the dark years following World War One. The German economy is depressed, and so are the people. The citizenry is struggling with the question of whether, through rapprochement, to join the greater Pan-Europe, or whether to go it alone (I think you know how that story ends). Nobody in this novel is particularly moral, or bright, or kind, or wise, least of all Kobler himself. After losing his job, defrauding a customer and "ill-manneredly" ripping off the car's real owner, Kobler decides, on the suggestion of his bitter xenophobic landlady, to go the World's Fair in Barcelona. His goal, incidentally, is not to gain a greater understanding of other cultures:

(...She) had convinced him that at a place where the whole world exhibits there would probably be a significantly greater selection of Egyptian ladies to be found than at the most luxurious hotel.

Kobler's got a thing for the Egyptian ladies, you see.

The thing he has for them is their money.

"I'll combine business with pleasure, he told himself."

The journey goes poorly. Everyone is angry, stupid, greedy and selfish, while Kobler can't seem to get his mind off Egyptians. Or prostitutes. Prostitutes are never far from

anyone's mind in this novel (one character decides to become one); a deep political discussion between Kobler and his traveling companion Mr. Schmitz on the contentious issue of retaking lost German colonies ends with an impassioned question from Schmitz:

"...(if we didn't retake them) what would then happen to our occidental culture?"

"That I don't know," Kobler answered, and with a bored look he checked his watch. "When are we going to go to the red light district?"

At last, Kobler finds some prostitutes at a stopover in Marseille, but they are diseased and disappointing.

"Surely (said Schmitz) everybody is sick around here."

"I never caught anything," Kobler said, and that was a lie.

"I, too, never caught anything," Schmitz nodded, and that, too, was a lie.

Later, at the fair, Kobler finally meets his dreamed-of Egyptian, who isn't actually Egyptian, but at least she's rich. She's also beautiful. And available. And a Nazi:

"Yes, the Jews make the workers quite hateful," (she) let herself be heard again. "No, I can't stand the Jews, they are too repulsively carnal; besides, they have their hands in everything!"

This anti-Semitic strain doesn't concern our hero too much;

she is, after all, rich. Schmitz takes offense at Kobler's hypocrisy, but Kobler is unfazed:

"By the way, Mr. Schmitz," Kobler continued, "I want to ask of you to kindly allow me now to work my way up in peace; I've already worked out a plan: I am going to compromise that lady in there once we get to Barcelona, then I'll escort her to Duisburg, compromise her there one more time, and then I'll marry into Daddy's company. And whether this lady in there is for Pan-Europe or not, Pan-Europe couldn't care less!"

"That's what they all say!" said Schmitz and left him standing there.

If World War Two ever decides it needs a slogan, it's going to be hard to beat "That's What They All Say."

The journey tale is an old and revered one; we readers hurry along with our hero as quickly as we can, anxious to see if our hero will survive, if he will return home, and what the greater purpose of his journey was in the first place. What has he learned? we wonder. What wisdom he has gained? In *Candide*, for example, the lesson of the journey seems to be that while the world is ugly, we can do well if we just "tend to our gardens." The lesson of the journey in *The Eternal Philistine* is best summed up by Mr. Reithofer, the only semi-decent character in the whole story:

"If all bastards would help each other, each bastard would live better."

Horváth: 2. Voltaire: 0.

"Is it funny?" your friends will ask.

"It's not *funny*," you will reply. "It's dark."

Then quote Gogol:

“The longer and more carefully we look at a funny story, the sadder it becomes.”

I have not, by the way, forgotten about Kafka.

2. IT'S NOT FUNNY; IT'S SOCIO-POLITICAL COMMENTARY.

If a book, sadly, must be funny, it's preferable, meritoriously-speaking, for it to be funny about political matters, which suggests that the author is not merely funny, but also knowledgeable, passionate and concerned with the major issues of the day. Why anyone would want to be knowledgeable, passionate and concerned with the major issues of the day is somewhat beyond me; Tolstoy's work survives despite the passages about the political climate of his time, not because of them. Kafka (there he is) wrote passionate, deeply felt, funny (shh) tales about his deepest inner self—his sense of failure, his feelings of impotence, of longing, of loneliness, of frustration. Fortunately for his literary legacy, he wrote them allegorically, which allowed people to see them not as reflections of a personal nature—and certainly not as “funny”—but rather as Socio-Political Commentary: on bureaucracy, or corporations, or political systems. “Kafkaesque,” should, if there has to be such a regrettable term, refer to the searing pains of dysfunctional families, of brutal fathers, emotionally manipulative mothers, to the spiritual tortures of ambivalence, self-loathing and guilt. Instead, it has something to do with the IRS. Or the DMV. Or the Post Office.

“Forty-two cents to mail a letter! This is Kafkaesque!”

I swear to God I have heard that, and not just once.

Fortunately for Horváth, his lacerating humor was aimed at many targets: at stupidity, at hatred, at misogyny, and, yes, at politics and the social system he witnessed around him. If we focus on that—and *only* that—perhaps we can restore his reputation and keep him in print.

Ödön's target list was a long one; class distinctions figure prominently on it. He is a friend of the powerless and exploited, and shows the bourgeois—the eternal Philistines of the title—for who they are. Here he is, describing the low-level office job of Anna, who considers becoming a prostitute, who loves Kobler, who loves wealthy Egyptians:

“..for on this day she had things to do there, on an exceptional basis, until 9:00 P.M. She had to do this on an average of four times a week, exceptionally. For that overtime she did not get paid, of course, because she had the right to quit on the first day of any month if she wanted to become unemployed. “

(“In no way do I, of course, demand that you should prostitute yourself,” says the man demanding Anna become a prostitute later in the novel, “but I beg you for your own sake to become more practical!” She comes to agree.)

When Kobler and his crew at last reach the glorious World's Fair, the holy idea of progress to which the fair is so committed is, in one short paragraph, utterly deflated:

Quickly night fell. And through the exotic bushes the three saw in the distance in front of the National Palace the splendid water fountains in action. That was indeed the progress of the modern age. In front of the gates of the World Exhibition stood the

masses who could not afford the entrance fee, and so they watched that progress from the outside but they were again and again being chased away by the police because they stood in the way of the cars.

It is this eye for hypocrisy, irony and truth that characterizes this novel. It appears on every page, relentlessly. Later, when Mr. Reithofer takes Anna to a movie—that flickering Philistinian temple to this very day—Horváth describes the film thus:

Unfortunately he saw no livestock now in the movie but a social drama, that is, the tragedy of a pretty, young woman. She was a millionaire, the daughter of a millionaire, and the wife of a millionaire. Both millionaires complied with her every wish but in spite of that Mrs. Millionaire was very unhappy. One saw how unhappily she dressed herself for hours on end, how she was being manicured and pedicured, how she unhappily travelled first class to India, how she promenaded at the Riviera, how she lunched in Baden-Baden, how she went to sleep in California and awoke in Paris, how she sat unhappily in the box at the opera, how she danced in the carnival, and, in an extremely unhappy state, turned down champagne. And she became ever more unhappy because she did not want to submit herself to an elegant, young son of a millionaire who adored her with decent sensuousness. It followed that she had no choice but to go into the water, and that was what she then did in the Ligurian Sea. Her unhappy body was recovered in Genoa, and all her maids, lackeys,

and chauffeurs were very unhappy. It was a very tragic movie, and contained only one episode: the lady millionaire had a maid's aide, and maid's aide once secretly dressed up in one of her lady's "grand" formal evening gowns, and went out in "grand" style with one of the chauffeurs. But the chauffeur was not quite certain just how the "grand world" handled knife and fork, and the two were unmasked as domestic servants and shown out of that elegant restaurant. In addition, the chauffeur was given a hefty slap upside the head by one of the guests, and the maid's aide was fired without notice by her unhappy lady millionaire. The maid's aide wept heartily, and the chauffeur too did not look exactly intelligent. It was very funny.

Horváth described his purpose in writing as "to be able to portray once again the gigantic struggle between the individual and society, this eternal battle with no peaceful outcome—during which the individual can at best enjoy a few moments of the illusion of ceasefire." His truth, and the fury that followed, was provoked by a genuine care and concern for the individual. Observing a photograph of a happy family, Mr. Reithofer thinks:

...that it would be nice sometimes if one could call such a family one's own. He, too, would sit in the middle like that, and would have a beard and children. Without any children one just dies out, and that dying-out would be something sad, even when one, as an Austrian citizen, had no rightful claim to German unemployment compensation.

“Is it funny?” your friends will ask.

“It’s not *funny*,” you’ll reply. “It’s social commentary.”

Then quote Alfred Kazin:

“Horváth . . . realized with extraordinary acuteness that to meet the horror of reality with a horror literature was no longer possible or useful; that the reality of Fascism was in fact so overwhelming and catastrophic that no realism, particularly the agonized naturalism of the twentieth century, could do it justice.”

I have not, by the way, forgotten about Beckett.

3. THE AUTHOR FLED FROM THE NAZIS.

There is no single greater guarantor of literary greatness than for an author to have, at some point, fled from the Third Reich. Sadly, though, there are no more Nazis from whom to flee, and you can see how few modern writers, consequently, are considered great. If David Sedaris had fled from Buchenwald instead of Raleigh, North Carolina, he would be seen as much more than just a successful humorist. *Through the twisted prism of a dark and gallows humor, Mr. Sedaris, a survivor of the death camps, turns his existential search for meaning into a something something something.* After all, Beckett (there he is) fled from the Nazis, and look how his career turned out. Beckett, incidentally, was hilariously funny; fortunately for him, though, he looked like a corpse, plus he frowned a lot, so everyone decided he was very serious (“My plays,” he was forced to remind a *Godot* producer, “should not be ponderous.”).

Horváth, however, did more than just flee the Nazis; he openly provoked them. It’s all well and good for me to make jokes about Nazis, because it’s 2011 and I’m a pussy.

But Horváth wrote in the early 1930's, in Berlin, and the Nazis were already a powerful and ominous presence. You did not fuck with them. The Brownshirts were not big fans of Horváth's work, and it's easy to see why. Here is Horváth at his Horváthian best, laying bare the contemptibility of the powerful that would blame the powerless for their own misfortunes:

Along that line (Harry) had a friend in Berlin, he said, and that friend with his fabulous car once ran over a pedestrian because she had crossed the street against the red light. But despite the red light an investigation had been launched, and the case even came to trial, probably because that pedestrian had been a regional court judge's widow; however, the district attorney succeeded in having his friend sentenced to the payment of some restitution. "A few thousand marks would not matter to me," the friend supposedly said, "but I want to see things clarified as a matter of principle." They had to acquit him, even though the presiding judge asked him if he did not feel sorry for the woman, in spite of the red light.

"No," he is said to have said, "principally, no!"

He just insisted on his right.

Every-time Harry saw his gasoline engine collide with the engine of state, a revolutionary bitterness flamed through him. Then he hated that state which in a motherly fashion protected the pedestrian from every fender, and which demoted drivers to the status of second-class citizens.

The connection made here to the humans at the World's

Fair having to make way for the cars is not accidental; progress may change the way we do things, he suggests, but we'll continue to do the same things we always have. Like mass murder.

Man, said Aristotle, is the only animal that laughs.

Or builds gas chambers.

Not surprisingly, after Hitler came to power, Horváth's home was searched and his writings banned. He fled to Salzburg, then to Vienna, where he married the German singer Maria Elsner in Vienna; she was Jewish, the marriage simply to help her escape from Germany by taking on his Hungarian nationality. He returned to Berlin in 1934, but was soon harassed by the Nazis again, and he fled to Zurich. He returned once more to Germany, to see his parents, but was ordered to leave after 24 hours. Which led, unfortunately, to this:

4. THE AUTHOR DIED TRAGICALLY.

It's bad enough this book is funny; to make matters worse, the author didn't even kill himself. It was the least he could have done. Respect-wise, nothing beats suicide (even Gogol had the courtesy to starve himself to death), and your asshole friends would have loved Horváth if he had. Still, he died tragically, and that should count for something.

Ödön was not afraid of much. He was not afraid of Nazis, criticism, or failure. What he was afraid of, however, was trees.

His whole life.

Trees.

In 1938, Hitler invaded Austria. Ödön left Vienna and, after many stops along the way, finally made his way to

Paris. He loved Berlin, but was thrilled to be back in a bustling, lively city.

“Human life,” Ödön once wrote, “is always a tragedy and only in individual episodes is it a comedy.”

One night, as he was returning from the cinema, a summer storm kicked up, and Ödön took shelter beneath a tree. A gust of wind broke off a branch, which landed on Ödön’s head, killing him instantly.

He was thirty-six years old.

Tragic.

And yet, in a typically, uniquely Horváthian way:

Hilarious.

5. THE BOOK IS PUBLISHED BY AN INDEPENDENT PUBLISHER.

If all that doesn’t convince your friends to read this book, they’re even bigger assholes than I thought, and you should immediately point out to them that the book is being published by Melville House, which they’ll not have heard of (+10 points), but which you can tell them is a tremendously respected (+10 points) independent publisher (+15 points) based in Brooklyn, New York (Win). It will have a beautifully designed cover and be published on high-quality paper, maybe even with that respected-book rough edge thing going on.

“I have neither prettified nor disfigured,” wrote Horváth of his work. “I have never built and will never build distorting mirrors, because I reject parody in all its forms.”

He wasn’t exaggerating.

He was telling the truth. Furiously.

“Please,” he wrote to his readers, “recognize yourself!”

“I see now,” wrote Gogol, “what it means to be a writer of comedies. The smallest trace of truth and they are up in arms against you.”

In the summer of 1989, the Horváth archive came up for sale at Sotheby’s.

It failed to make its reserve.

Hilarious.