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Extant

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Extant

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The black humorist wears many hats, but the one that appears to fit him best is that of the caricaturist. Using words as his medium, the black humorist paints society larger than life to make a topical comment. The tragedy of us moderns is that the black humorist must really labor to paint surrealistically, to outstrip real-life phenomena in distortion: today, the grotesques of Bosch pale beside Polaroid snapshots of That Day in Dallas.

Now the political caricaturist distorts according to the rules of a rather benign game: his work smacks of a harmless form of malice, harmless because we know that his creature is a biological impossibility, that it is not real. Were the conventional caricaturist’s work to be brought before a court of inquisition determined to root out and destroy pornography, it would be found blissfully innocent. In contrast, the black humorist’s work would be condemned by the same court as “malicious” and “pornographic,” largely for the very reason of the work’s unreality: no inquisitor could bear to be told that the world around him has itself become so obscene, so inured to horror, that art, to be noticed, must dredge pits of offal and parade the findings; but this is exactly the black humorist’s rationale.

While one of society’s tragic flaws is an exceedingly blase attitude toward violence and disaster, the black humorist himself is not unpossessed of a tragic flaw, or so it seems upon a cursory reading of his work. For if his first main trick as caricaturist is distortion for “force value,” his second main trick, it appears, is oversimplification. He leaves out features not relevant to his purpose. Sex and violence, popular as subject matter with black humorists, are often portrayed so starkly that the entire composition is set out of key, the more “wholesome” aspects painted out with harsh “Red Light” tones (Cf. John Rechy’s “Miss Destiny: The Fabulous Wedding”), tones dappled blood-red (Cf. Thomas Pynchon’s “In Which Esther Gets a Nose Job”); tones which, though red, still, under the imposed optics of conventional morality, fade into the humorist’s wonted black.

All of which points up the question of intent. Surely, the black humorist does not color the world absurd, unattainable, and cruelly phantasmagoric, without some purpose, nor without a secret disbelief that man is really so bereft of hope; for what individual could, without hope, turn to writing and wax hortatory in a world gone mad? But speculations withstanding, pigeonholing the black humorist’s specific purpose is not an easy task. Broadly viewed, though, his distorting, his stark treating of “taboo’d” material, his erasing the line between fact and fantasy, and his oversimplifying, tend toward “naughtiness” in a world gone mad? But his work’s unreality: no inquisitor could bear to be notified. The brew comes bottled behind many labels, but it is essentially an emetic: steeped in exaggeration to high potency, it is administered in hopes of eliciting cascades of deeply-rooted prejudices, fetishes, and “hang-ups,” for the cure of the societal body.

Tom Bisky

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Extant

To be
a dancer-beam that over water skipped
for just a night
awakening a morning-ray adrift
on gossamer shaft,
or dream of floating once
with unweighted arms delight
to embrace a crystal tone
(the final tone)
of a silver bell,
to be.

—Lenore Ventura