

In Praise of Folly: The Hegemony of Reason and the Assimilation of Comic Folly

James Mark Shields ©1990 (revised 2007)

ABSTRACT

According to Michel Foucault, one aspect of discourse control is the principle of “exclusion,” which may take the form of what Foucault calls “division and rejection”—where discourses are categorized so as to reduce the significance of some categories. As an example, Foucault produces the opposition of reason and folly, a division investigated in greater detail in his *Madness and Civilization*. In this latter work, however, Foucault speaks primarily of the Fool as a socially categorized individual; one who, through the course of history and changing discursive habits, has become the Madman. The Fool/Madman character and the issue of insanity are not by any means exhaustive of the broad and often convoluted concept of folly. To take a strict denotative approach, *folly* has various meanings, all of which focus to some degree on “unreason” or “anti-reason.” Cultural limits have been established, and these limits can be investigated through an analysis of one particular form of folly, that which I will call *comic folly*—that side of folly dealing with mirth, humor, laughter, and the joke. In this essay, the following matters are explored: the concept of folly, its various facets and history; comic folly as a branch of unreason; the hegemony, power, and limits of reason in modern Western culture; the comic folly of the so-called rational/sane person; and the strengths and limits of comic folly within our Rational Western world. Must unreason, as *Webster’s* seems to suggest, always end in disaster?

I am uneasy to think I approve of one object, and disapprove of another; call one thing beautiful, and another deform’d; decide concerning truth and falsehood, reason and folly, without knowing upon which principles I proceed.

– David Hume, in Nathanson xi

In an essay entitled “Orders of Discourse,” Michel Foucault discusses the essential power and potentially dangerous character of discourse. One aspect of discourse control is the principle of “exclusion,” which may take the form of what Foucault calls “division and rejection”—where discourses are categorized so as to reduce the significance of some categories. (“Orders” 9) As an example, Foucault produces the opposition of reason and folly, a division investigated in greater detail in his *Madness and Civilization*. In this latter work, however, Foucault speaks primarily of the Fool as a socially categorized individual; one who, through the course of history and changing discursive habits, has become the Madman. “My only quarrel with the book,” writes José Barchillon, editor of *Madness and Civilization*, “is the lack of emphasis on the humoristic elements [in madness], i.e., the patient laughs at himself, or laughs at the world through his illness” (viii).

The Fool/Madman character and the issue of insanity are not by any means exhaustive of the broad and often convoluted concept of folly. To take a strict denotative approach, *folly* has various meanings, all of which focus to some degree on “unreason” or “anti-reason.” Of course, all of us are prone to bouts of unreason, yet very few of us have been labeled, let alone confined, as fools or madmen. Cultural limits have been established, and these limits can be investigated through an analysis of one particular form of folly, that which I will call *comic folly*—that side of folly dealing with mirth, humor, laughter, and the joke. In particular, the subcategory of comic folly will be examined here in relation to one of *Webster’s Dictionary’s* definitions of the broader concept of folly: as “misguided behavior liable to end disastrously.” Just what are these disastrous ends, and why the ominous tone for the description of such a seemingly harmless term?

The danger lurks precisely because there are limits to folly, and these limits have been systematically engrained within modern “rational discourse.” The hegemony of Reason in modern Western times is self-evident, and is by no means as great an evil as it is sometimes made out. Rational discourse is, however, extremely powerful, and by framing particular kinds or channels of dissent it invariably renders any and all dissent harmless. Criticism of this tendency has been expressed, but the Order of Reason has not been seriously challenged for several centuries. With regard to folly and unreason, rationalism has divided and conquered each and every one of its historical foes. Comic folly has been virtually assimilated into the Rational Life, effectively reducing if not eliminating any powers of subversion that the humoristic side of unreason ever possessed. In this essay, the following matters will be explored: the concept of folly, its various facets and history; comic folly as a branch of unreason; the hegemony, power, and limits of reason in modern Western culture; the comic folly of the so-called rational/sane person; and the strengths and limits of comic folly within our Rational Western world. Must unreason, as *Webster’s* seems to suggest, always end in disaster?

Reason: Attempt at an Explication

Before plunging into an examination of the so-called modern Rational discourse, ideology or framework, we must make some attempt to explicate the term *reason*, including its salient features and its relevance for the particular purposes of this essay. Reason is one of those terms that one comes across quite often in modern English, but which is virtually unexplainable. Ask someone to define reason, and they will probably have trouble doing so. Like truth and belief, reason for most people “just is”—we do not know exactly what it is, but, like the Supreme Court justice’s take on pornography, we know it when we see it—and most of us have a feeling that it is a good and necessary thing. The *Oxford English Dictionary* seems to have its own difficulties defining reason, coming up with explanatory gems like “to think out.” Of course, reason

can be used as a noun or a verb, but the difference in denotative meaning between the two forms is minimal.

It seems that reason can be reduced to two, not mutually exclusive, spheres of meaning. Ronald DeSousa, in *The Rationality of Emotion*, makes a distinction between what he calls “cognitive” and “strategic” rationality. Strategic rationality is the evaluation of a “representational state” in the causal sense—its *utility*. By contrast, a state is cognitively rational “if it is arrived at in such a way as to be probably adequate to some actual state of the world that it purports to represent” (164). This second sense, DeSousa’s cognitive rationality, corresponds with what we mean when we speak of “making use” of reason; it is the “intellectual faculty by which conclusions are drawn from premises,” or, in verbal form, “to form or try to reach conclusions by connected thought,” or “to express in logical form” (*Webster’s*, s.v. “Reason”). This is reason in the sense of efficacy; what can be called *logical* or even (though I hesitate) *pure* reason, and which will be referred to throughout this exposition with the lower-case “r” and in italics (i.e., *reason*, *rationality*, *irrationality*). The other form of reason, and probably the connotation that dominates in the modern English lexicon, is reason as a set of rules, norms, or ethics, which stem from the “use of” reason but actually extend above and beyond logic and pure efficacy of a direct means-end sort. This alternative form of reason, implied by the injunction or admonition to “be rational,” involves the denotative aspects of “sense; sensible conduct; what is right or practical or practicable,” and perhaps the most glaring denotation, “sanity” (*Webster’s*, s.v. “Reason”). This sense of reason, which corresponds with DeSousa’s “strategic rationality,” is equivalent to correctness of thought, speech and behavior, and to use reason in this sense is not necessarily to employ logical principles, but to *be* rational (i.e., acting according to what is “right”). In this second sense, reason and associated terms will be referred to by using capitals and roman font (i.e., Reason, Rationality, Irrationality). Of course, there is some overlap, and the discourse and ideology of Rationality (which utilizes the second sense of the term) has in fact developed out of the lower-order principles of *rationality* in its first sense. However, I would like to contend that reason has been, in the modern era, reified (deified?) into Reason, while retaining its pure sheen as a justification for Rationality.

The above may seem convoluted. Perhaps an example will serve to illuminate the distinction being drawn:

Robert and Mary are both college students. Both are below-average students from broken families and working-class backgrounds. Robert and Mary (separately) find that they have failed the biochemistry final examination, and both will consequently have to leave the university. Without a degree, money, or family for support, both Robert and Mary fall into states of depression. One weekend, Robert gets extremely intoxicated and nearly kills himself by alcohol poisoning. Mary, on the contrary, decides to give up on all her ambitions, and continues to exist in a depressive condition.

It is clear, from our previous explication of reason, that Robert is acting in a *rational* manner—he is in great despair, and he makes an effort to relieve himself of that despair through intoxication, even to the point of suicide. This is a

perfectly logical equation, given the circumstances. Robert clearly draws his conclusions from his premises; he is being cognitively *rational*. Our natural reaction, however, is to sense that Robert is not being rational at all, and this is true in one sense: he is not being Rational. Excessive consumption of alcohol, and suicide, have long been considered Irrational by Western Judeo-Christian as well as modern secular standards (i.e., such actions are neither practical, sensible, moral or sane). Mary, on the other hand, is being Rational, or at least more Rational than Robert, in her choice of life over self-destruction. She may be dreadfully unhappy, but she refrains from intoxication and suicide; she “has more sense” than to act in such a fashion. However, we need to ask whether Mary is in fact being *rational*? The answer here seems to be in the negative, for whereas Robert deduces his actions from his premises in a logical manner, Mary has no *rational* justification for her apathy. She does not attempt to relieve her despair in any way, shape, or form.

This rather grim parable must not be taken too seriously; it is merely an attempt to give some basis to the division of reason upon which much of the argument of this paper will be premised. Paraphrasing DeSousa, we can develop a maxim of the dual nature of reason and rationality: It might be Rational (i.e., strategically) to act in the face of the evidence because the consequences of acting as such would be good. It is always, however, *irrational* (i.e., cognitively) to do so. Rationality implies the use of *reason*, but, in actuality, Rationality often supersedes *reason* in the name of some good.

Reason in History

Jules DeGaultier speaks off an “official philosophy” that is a “vital expression of the instinct of knowledge, but does not develop according to its own tendencies, but rather exerts itself as an involuntary and constrained collaborator of the social instinct” (7-8). Official philosophy is not, he continues, “as yet at the stage of contemplating reality, but engaged in fashioning it.” In essence, DeGaultier is speaking of what is usually called *ideology*, in the sense of a (powerful) socially-shared paradigm or framework that has developed or has been constructed as the basis of a particular political, economic or social system. The modern world is all-too-familiar with this concept, and has seen various competing ideologies come and go over time. The Rational paradigm, in which the Western world has been embedded since the Enlightenment, has had an interesting development as an ideological phenomenon and an eventually hegemonic discourse.

Of course, reason and logic were popular topics among the ancient Greek philosophers, Aristotle in particular, who essentially set the foundation for *rationality* in thought and method that re-emerged in full force some fifteen centuries after his death. Nietzsche proclaimed the “death of God” in late Victorian times, but the Judeo-Christian deity was certainly dealt a blow when, under the leadership of Thomas Aquinas, Aristotelian principles were used to explain and justify God Himself. By invoking *reason* to explain revelation, Christian scholastics unwittingly committed ideological suicide: *reason* became Reason and revelation a part of the latter’s all-encompassing scope. Aristotle and Christ maintained a fairly compatible relationship for a few centuries, until the former, revitalized, gained the upper hand. Reason thus became “an earthly spiritual power” (Horkheimer 9)

within everyone, a power that assumes God's prior roles of creativity and control.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, reason could no longer support the extra weight of religion, and there ensued a gradual divorce of the two. This separation, and the subsequent establishment of Reason as an ideological paradigm, marked a critical point in the development of the modern Rational discourse as it moved towards a higher degree of formalization. Rationalism looked to its progenitor, *reason*, for support, and *rationalist* philosophical systems provided a light capable of penetrating deep into human life and activity—and harmonizing such with the external world. Thus, through *reason*, Rationality effectively secularized Christian ethics, and thereby appropriated them for its own.

According to Max Horkheimer: "Reason has become completely harnessed to the social process. Its operational value, its role in the domination of men and nature, has been made the sole criterion" (21). As a consequence of the formalization of reason, the means towards human satisfaction within society have been subordinated in favor of the ends, the consequences known only by the privileged few in a sort of New Age Rational Gnosticism. In other words, *rationality* in its pure sense, though still acclaimed as the basis for human happiness, has in fact been relegated to the status of the Victorian child, who speaks only when spoken to, and is to be seen and not heard, yet is nevertheless essential for the continuation of the family line and the propagation of the species. *Rationality* can be used, but is not necessary to appraise Rational ends; these claim to be *rational* by virtue of being Rational, and not vice versa. Horkheimer uses characteristic imagery to make this point: "The more the concept of reason becomes emasculated, the more easily it lends itself to ideological manipulation and to the propagation of even the most blatant lies" (23).

Modern Rationalist Ideology and Discourse

The rhetoric of liberation [in modern Rationalism] concealed new patterns of self-manipulation and new modes of accommodation to the emerging corporate system.

— T. J. Jackson Lears 54

According to Foucault's definition of discourse, the culturally defined desire for truth frames what is said. Modern Rationality, as an ideology, frames a Rationalist discourse that has become hegemonic. "The process of rationalization did more than transform the structure of economic life, it also affected the structure of thought and feeling, of culture, in the broadest sense" (Lears xvi). Herbert Marcuse concurs; as Rationality unfolds, he says, "it shapes the entire universe of discourse and action, intellectual and material culture—in the medium of technology, culture, politics and the economy merge into an omnipresent system which swallows up or repulses all alternatives" (xvi). Thus, technology is the offspring-cum-protector of Rationality, and contributes to the sociopolitical success of the latter by its very omnipresence. There are of course various interpretations of the so-called Rationalist hegemony—positive, negative, reformist and revolutionary—but there seems to be a general acceptance of *reason* as a defining element in modern Western culture, and without doubt, as a powerful aspect of our existence as human beings.

The Ideal of Rationality: Hogben and Jaspers

"Rationality," says Stephen Nathanson, "is an ideal lacking neither proponents or critics" (xi). In a lecture delivered in London in 1936, Lancelot Hogben provided a valuable summation of the ideals of Rationality. Reason, he begins, is much more than mere logic, it is something more empirical, and must be "grounded in experience and prepared at all times to accept the touchstone of fact" (xii). *Ergo*, reason must adopt the methods of the sciences. Hogben postulates two "beliefs," which, in his view, encapsulate the Rationalist Ideal. First, the exercise of human reason is an indisputable condition of social progress and the maintenance of social welfare; and, second, no society is safe in the hands of a few clever people without intelligent co-operation and understanding from the "average" man and woman. Thus, according to Hogben, Rationality does not partake in gnosticism, but is rather a truly democratic principle—a gift we all have and must utilize. Reason, qua reason, is the *best*, and in fact the *only* way towards human social progress. But what exactly is this "progress" brought up by Hogben as a reverse-justification for Rationalism? Is it progress in its looser connotative sense of advancement, implying a better, freer and more just world for all human, or is it progress in the stricter sense of a progress of Rationality? Whatever the case, reason and rationality appear, in Hogben, to be requisite human goods.

The second "belief" of Hogben's is fairly self-evident, and must be put into the author's context: interwar Britain, with communist, Nazi, and fascist fears running high. Hogben associates "communist tactics" (which derive their inspiration from "the ponderous verbosity of the Prussian mystic, Hegel" [3]) with irrationality, and uses Rationalism as a discourse embedded within a liberal democratic capitalist framework to critique political and economic alternatives, under the auspices of rationality condemning irrationality. Hogben fiercely condemns the so-called "retreat from reason" that he sees arising in the interwar years. These irrational tendencies, he argues, are the price we pay for allowing a dichotomy to emerge between the technically minded (the *rational* person) and the socially aware (the Rational person). All Rationalists, Hogben cries, must stand up and fight Irrationalism as a source of chaos and anarchy, embodied most clearly in German Nazism and the Soviet experiment.

Karl Jaspers, another modern apologist for Reason, proclaims the self-evident nature of reason—the "essence of philosophy" (15). Reason is intrinsically connected with the scientific method, and thus, under the rubric of Rationality, closes the long divide between science and philosophy. Whereas Hogben admits to the existence of Rationality as a (positive) ideological phenomenon, Jaspers takes a more traditional stance of covering Rationality with the cloak of *reason* and *rationality*: "In contrast to the unifying essence of Marxism, authentic modern science of every kind is essentially particular—leading to cogent, methodologically sound, objective insights, recognizing no universal method, adopting its methods to the nature of the objects under study" (15). Jaspers debunks the notion of an ideological Reason; he invokes *reason*, embodied in the scientific method, as a particularizing phenomenon, a loose band of free-floating principles and axioms rather than a social paradigm. To have such a 'totalitarian' approach would be, he argues,

intrinsically unscientific. Here we see the Rationalist (and Western scientific) claims to uniqueness: unlike Irrational (or non-scientific) methods, Rationality works for everyone's ultimate benefit. Jaspers's defense of rational knowledge revolves around the "liberation" of Rationality from previous, more "primitive" thought systems:

The meaning of knowledge appears no longer as the possibility of a single comprehensive theory of Being, not as a dogmatic picture of total knowledge, which is incomplete but exists in principle and only needs elaborating—but merely as a methodological system which shows me by what processes and what means I encounter particular objects. (29)

Knowledge, Jaspers concludes, must not go beyond the bounds of reason, a feature he sees apparent in Marxism and psychoanalysis.

Thus, according to the Rationalist Ideal, there is no all-encompassing ideology of Reason; rather, by virtue of its efficacy and "self-evident" capabilities, *reason* claims a superior position in human minds, without requiring the force of a constraining ideology. Reason, in this sense, parallels the Christian virtues pronounced by the early mediaeval Church: it is "beyond intellect," "leads to self-knowledge and the knowledge of limits and humility," and demands a patient process of "listening" (38). Reason becomes "the will to Unity," a transcendental liberating force which will consummate human satisfaction through its intrinsic capabilities.

This ebullient portrait of reason is indeed heart-warming, and one might only wish it were this simple. However, it is the task of the cultural critic to lay all the cards on the table, and call any all bluffs as they arise. The Rationalist ideology and discourse of Western society, which has usurped the principles of reason as its own, is difficult to conceal, despite the valiant efforts of Jaspers. *Reason* is utilized by Rationality in order to justify and maintain its hegemony in the modern world, and it does this in part by associating with another significant and powerful modern Western concept: 'freedom'. Once this connection is made, to renounce Reason is not only to abjure the principles of *reason*, but also to deny the fundamental "right" to freedom. With *reason* and freedom, as well as the powers of science and technology in tow, the hegemony of Rationality is consummated. Rationalist apologists go on, using the faith in Reason to connote its very "faith-less-ness." "The faith of reason is different in character from all the other faiths which are determined by devotional creeds, objective certainties and guarantees. *It [Reason] cannot engage in propaganda, it cannot hypnotize, it has nothing tangible to offer*" (Jaspers 79, my emphasis). Nothing to offer except, of course, Truth—which may be little more than God in secular dress.

The Power of Rationality

The power of Rationalism is formidable. In fact, as will be discussed below, Rationalism has incorporated *rationality* and *irrationality* within its bounds, and for its benefit.

Before knowing the veritable claims of morality, such as its effectiveness as a condition of existence appreciating

its utility, it had been deduced a priori in order to impose it with greater authority—first that of theology, then of rationalistic ideology, since the power to engender ideas and promulgate imperatives had been transformed from God to Reason. (DeGaultier 9)

Thus, with the onset of Rationalistic morality, humans are constrained as they were previously, only by much more subtle means. Continuing the analogy with religious ideologies, irrationality can be equated with heresy as a harmful and dangerous element to be contained at all costs. This repression, argues Marcuse, operates from a position of great technical strength—Reason has been able to grab a hold on technology, to use for its own ends. "Our society distinguishes itself by conquering the centrifugal forces with Technology rather than Terror, on the dual basis of an overwhelming efficiency and an increased standard of living" (x). Thus, Rationalism monopolizes not only what we do and say (the means of knowledge-production), but also the social relations of the production of knowledge itself, the very way we do things and our conceptions and beliefs regarding our actions.

The power of Rationality, then, lies within several of its outstanding features. First, its use of *reason* as a cover for objectivity and efficacy; second, its assimilation of "freedom" as a virtual synonym for Rationality; and third, the use of science and technology to promote the goodness of efficacy and an increase in (material) well-being. In this way, Rationality has effectively marginalized or eliminated all serious challengers. According to Marcuse, "confronted with the total character of the achievements of advanced industrial society, critical theory is left without the rationale for transcending this society" (xiv). Critics of the Rationalist paradigm must use *reason*, for obvious practical purposes, but *reason* has been effectively usurped by Reason, and thus tends to fall flat in the face of its master.

Freedom of thought, speech and conscience were—just as free enterprise which they served to promote and protect—essentially critical ideas, designed to replace an obsolescent material and intellectual culture by a more productive and rational one. Once institutionalized, these rights and liberties shared the fate of the society of which they had become an integral part. The achievement cancels the premise. (Marcuse 1)

This is essentially the development of what Marcuse calls "one-dimensional" thought and behavior, where the Rationalism off modern Western society repels and counter-objects by incorporating them into its own established universe of discourse; i.e., they are redefined by the Rationality of the system. "Rationalistic faith, however paradoxical that may seem, is expressed in the fact of covering the irrational with the cloak of reason—to make believe that the battle has been won in order to elude an attack" (DeGaultier 31).

Critiques of Rationalism I: Romanticism

Criticism of Rationalism has been evident for as long as the paradigm has reigned, roughly since the Enlightenment. Indeed, a major tenet of the European Romantic movement of

the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly in the literary sphere, was the importance of the emotions and the imagination over and against reason, as typified by the work of English Romantic poets Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth. In Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, the heroine rejects her rationalist-empiricist upbringing:

They told me that I had five senses
to inclose me up,
And they inclosed my infinite brain
into a narrow circle,
And sunk my heart into the Abyss. (47)

The Romantic critique of rationality was actually directed against *reason* itself, as the powerful ideological character had not yet gained its near-absolute hegemony over Western society. Thus, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, denounces Enlightenment notions as corruptions of the soul and typical of the depravity of modern society. Since error, says Rousseau, is more likely a consequence of rational speculation than truth, the reification of speculation is inherently dangerous to the individual and society. The Romantics stressed *sensibilité*, the openness to emotion, as a positive aspect—and one that cannot be reduced to reason. As Rationalism gained power in the later nineteenth century, Romanticism and its anti-rational tendencies lost popularity along with its youthful enthusiasm. Emotion and the Imagination, like Faith before them, lost out in the confrontation with Reason.

Critiques of Rationalism II: Critical Theory

In the twentieth century, a new wave of critical theory emerged, utilizing, for the most part, *reason* to condemn a denounce Rationalism—a difficult project, as mentioned above. Max Horkheimer, in his *Eclipse of Reason*, vociferates on the fundamental *irrationality* of Reason:

If by enlightenment and intellectual progress we mean the freeing of man from superstitious belief in evil forces, in demons and fairies, in blind fate—in short—the emancipation from fear—then denunciation of what is currently called reason is greatest service reason can render. (v)

Horkheimer uses the language of Hogben and Jaspers to critique the paradigm over which they waxed with such ebullience. He stresses the power of reason in modern industrial society to reduce and constrain human thought, activity, and autonomy—the dehumanization of ‘man’ labeled as progress. Interestingly enough, Horkheimer does not propose a plan of action, on the contrary he denounces the modern propensity to “act for action’s sake,” and instead makes a call to “thought for thought’s sake” (7). “Philosophy today,” he claims, “must face the question whether thought can remain Master of itself in this dilemma and thus prepare its theoretical resolution, or whether it is to content itself with playing the part of empty methodology or deluded apologetics” (57). By virtue of being heirs to the Enlightenment, we cannot regress to a more ‘primitive’ stage (i.e., relying simply on faith or emotion) to combat Reason: “the sole way of assisting nature is to unshackle its seeming

opposite, independent thought” (127). Thus, *reason* must be used against Reason, in an attempt to prepare in the intellectual realm the reconciliation between *rationality* and *irrationality*. The malady of Reason (i.e., its tendencies towards hegemonic control, as in Rationalism), argues Horkheimer, is, in fact, inseparable from the nature of *reason*, which is born from man’s urge to dominate nature:

Reason can realize the reasonableness only through reflecting on the disease of the world as produced and reproduced by man; in such self-critique, reason will at the same time remain faithful to itself, by preserving and applying for no ulterior motive the principle of truth that we own to reason alone. (176)

In other words, Reason must revert, somehow, to *reason*, perhaps by realizing its weakness—the tendency to dominate. Horkheimer longs for an essentially non-ideological *reason*: “Now that science has helped us to overcome the awe of the unknown in nature, we are slaves of our own making. When called upon to act independently, we cry for patterns, systems and authorities” (186).

Nathanson: Warm Rationality

Stephen Nathanson, in *The Ideal of Rationality*, provides a slightly different, and perhaps more conclusive critique of Rationality. Nathanson rejects the standard ideal of Rationality, pointing out several fundamental defects of this model: First, it mistakenly suggests that a “cosmic point-of-view” (ideology) is appropriate for value judgements, while rejecting the standpoint of the agent as the basis of evaluation (i.e., rejects the individual mind). Second, it tends to place an absolute value on truth, knowledge, and high standards of evidence, while denigrating the importance of other aspects of human life. (77) Nathanson resorts to reason to point out that it is fundamentally “irrational” to live according to the Rationalist Ideal. Being objective, he argues, has obvious value in many circumstances and pursuits, but like deliberation, objectivity is sometimes out of place. (55)

Here Nathanson invokes David Hume, who said: “reason does not set our ends/goals but its job is to discover things that satisfy our desires and means for acting so as to satisfy them” (81). Thus, reason must divest itself of its claims to being the ends or the goal of human life, and must be satisfied as a means to whatever goals humans may aspire to. Essentially, Nathanson pleads a return of Rationality to its roots in *rationality*. He rejects Rationalism because it equates the Rational life with the life of *reason*, i.e., one in which “intellectual and cognitive values predominate over all others” (160). Yet the Romantic alternative, which involves forsaking *rationality* and thus efficiency—rejecting the idea that one must use available premises and information to reach worthwhile conclusions—is equally untenable, says Nathanson. Instead, Rational Man can be “warmly rational,” that is, he can live a rational life without forsaking the non-rational aspects of daily life. Nathanson desires the continuance of rationality, but stripped of its pretences as an all-encompassing ideology and discourse. His *rationality* must operate within a larger, more affective human realm.

Marcuse’s Different Logic: Irrationality

Herbert Marcuse's classic work *One-Dimensional Man* offers an alternative critical vision with constructive possibilities. Like Nathanson, Marcuse rejects the necessary equivalence between what is "real" and what is "rational," as well as the belief that only rationality can "deliver the goods" (84). This belief, which Marcuse calls "The Happy Consciousness," is "a facet of technological rationality translated into social behavior." In short, Marcuse rejects the Reason=Truth=Rationality equation implied in modern Western society, and argues for the (re)incorporation of contradiction into reason—because contradiction belongs to the very nature of the object of thought, to reality. However, all established reality fights against the logic of contradiction, favoring instead the modes of thought that sustain the established forms of life and modes of behavior that reproduce and improve them. Again, Reason's cloak of *reason* is shown to be transparent. This being the case, that the given reality (Rationalism) maintains its own logic and its own truths:

[T]he effort to comprehend them as such and to transcend them presupposes a different logic, a contradicting truth. Thus these modes of thought appear to be a relic of the past, like all "non-scientific" and "non-empirical" philosophy. They recede before a more effective theory and practice of Reason. (142)

With *rational* attempts at criticism, like those of Horkheimer and Nathanson, rendered nearly impossible by the usurpation of the language and principles by the ideology, Marcuse reverts to irrationality as the last critical option. Many *rational* people, he claims, have come to see this dimension: "The advancing one-dimensional society alters the relationships between the rational and the irrational. Contrasted with the fantastic and insane aspects of its rationality, the realm of the irrational becomes the home of the really rational—of the ideas which may 'promote the art of life'" (247).

The aesthetic realm still retains a freedom of expression for irrationality, which enables the writer or artist to call people and things by their names—"to name the otherwise unnameable" (247). Marcuse's theory is essentially a dialectical-critical one, in which our only hope lies in what he calls the Great Refusal of the Rationalist Way. His concluding remarks present further insight into the irrational, which will be the focus of our next section: "No matter how obvious the irrational character of the whole may manifest itself, and with it, the necessity of change, insight into necessity has never sufficed for seizing the possible alternatives" (253).

The Concept of Folly: An Explication

For what that passes among mortals everywhere is not full of folly, done by fools in the presence of fools.
– Erasmus 33

The concept of *folly* is a difficult one to fully grasp. Like reason, its usual antithesis, folly is virtually indefinable as a term—yet most would say they know it (and generally frown upon it) when they see. Its salient features can be uncovered, however, enabling us to continue along the course of this argument. In order to uncover folly, we must return to reason

and the previous explication of its duality in the modern West. As *reason* developed into Reason, the contraries of the former were subsumed into the latter, and expanded to suit ideological necessity. 'Unreason' can be used as a comprehensive rubric for anything falling outside of the category of the rational (i.e. both Irrational, like Robert's suicide attempt, and *irrational*, like Mary's apathy). "Unreason" is much too broad a term, however, and can be divided into three seemingly comprehensive categories. These categories are by no means mutually exclusive, but each has central defining elements particular to itself:

Unreason
|— Folly
|— Faith
|— Emotion

Of these three, *emotion* is perhaps unique in its conceptualization as a separate, distinct and viable, though subordinate realm within the sphere of Rationality. Emotion is acceptable and understood in many situations, but rarely does it exceed the power and validity of *reason*. Emotional discourse may be effective, for a period of time, but usually requires a Rational basis, or *rational* content. In *The Rationality of Emotion*, DeSousa unveils the relationship between the two, a relationship that, though at times complementary, is for the most part antagonistic. Somehow, emotions and feelings always come to be "lower" or more bestial than reason.

Faith, on the other hand, once held sway over Reason, in fact the hegemony of faith, as an ideology and controlling discourse, is apparent throughout much of the history of Western civilization. However, as noted above, the attempted conjunction of reason and faith by the scholastics eventually led to the disinheritance of the latter by the former, as Reason became a secularized deity, replacing the God of Abraham and Paul with the God of Aristotle and Newton. In modern Rational society, faith is accepted, though marginalized (and privatized) as something intrinsically Irrational. Of course, faith is fundamentally *irrational*—there are no logical precepts involved; but it has become, in most cases, something considered antithetical to human progress and development. Not only religious faith, but faith in anything, other than the validity of Reason itself, is deemed Irrational.

Finally, we come to *folly*, the third and final branch of unreason, and the one that most clearly evokes unreason itself. Indeed, folly is probably best expressed as simply "a lack of reason." However, our goal here is an explication of one particular subtype of folly—comic folly—and to get at such we must further deconstruct the larger term:

Folly
|— Christian folly
|— Tragic folly (madness)
|— Comic folly (humor)

Folly, which was at one time a relatively unified and undifferentiated category, has through modern history and the emergence of the Rationalist paradigm been divided into these three essential parts.

The first—*Christian folly*—is a crossover between faith and folly in which the essential "foolishness" (Gk. *skandalon*)

of the Christian message and perhaps of the ways of God himself are underscored as a beneficial and liberating aspect of Christian understanding.

That God, conceived in a monotheistic and transcendent fashion, should take man's nature upon himself, don, that is, the flesh of man and live really and truly as a man—flew in the face of all mature philosophical and religious assumptions. That this God/Man should then allow himself to be legally executed as a criminal by the properly constituted political authorities—seems even more insane. (Screech 19)

Early adherents of Christian folly—beginning with Paul of Tarsus—praised this aspect of their faith. At a later time, however, the most vocal supporters of Christian folly were more than likely labeled and punished as heretics, especially during the period when reason and faith were going through their attempted betrothal. As such, Christian folly has virtually disappeared, or at least has been relegated to a miniscule and ineffectual position within the larger realms of Christian tradition.

The second salient area of folly is what can be called *tragic folly*, or what is better known as “madness.” Tragic folly is, or at least was, a much broader category than (clinical) insanity, however, being essentially the (continued) transgression of logic or reason to the point of alienation from Rationalism. Tragic folly has been isolated and set aside as madness in the past few centuries (see Foucault *Madness*). Of the three aspects of folly discussed here, it is the most highly censured, and the most heavily controlled.

The last and final aspect of folly is that which we have called *comic folly*—the humoristic side of unreason. Essentially, comic folly is opposed to rationality by its logical absurdity, and involves elements we call wit, humor, comedy, satire and irony. Comic folly, unlike Christian folly or tragic folly, has been assimilated rather than rejected by the Rationalist discourse. In the process, Rationality has divested comic folly of its “unreasonable” roots and has retained the category as an acceptable form of *irrationality* within Rationality. Whereas tragic folly, Foucault's madness, has become Irrational, comic folly, its sibling, has been subsumed by the Rationalist paradigm as a permissible but controlled outlet for *irrationality*. In order to understand these divisions more fully, it may be of some use to briefly review the history of unreason in the West.

Folly in History

The history of unreason is long and colorful, from classical saturnalia, mediaeval *charivaries* and carnivals, to the antimodern impulses of the Machine Age. In mediaeval times, the carnival was perhaps the most socially significant manifestation of unreason. Mikhail Bakhtin writes: “In the world of carnival the awareness of the people's immortality is combined with the realisation that established authority and truth are relative” (in Stallybrass and White 6). Carnival was more than just a ritual feature of European culture, but an entire mode of understanding the mediaeval world through the practice and display of folly. Even before the Rationalist paradigm was made manifest, the world of social positions was based upon a rational hierarchy, which was in a number

of ways undermined by festive license. Bakhtin connects the mediaeval carnival with François Rabelais and his praise of laughter, best expressed in *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, one of the Europe's first novels: “No dogma, no authoritarianism, no hollow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook (Stallybrass and White 7)

Thus, late mediaeval folly, in the guise of Rabelaisian laughter, was antithetical to the pre-Rationalistic logic of hierarchical society. The dangers of unreason were not, however, so great as they were to become under Rationalism, because the Truth of society was still based on God and faith, not upon rational principles. Folly could be subversive, but was certainly a far cry from atheism.

With the Renaissance and the birth of rationality as the pervasive component of human existence, folly became a more definitive category, one that was opposed to “wisdom” and suggested a “common type of human behavior, some way of action hindering man's achievement of his desire, some particular aberration of an individual from group standards. (Swain 4)

This definition invokes both our definitions of *irrationality* and Irrationality. On the other hand, folly in the Renaissance could be a source of amusement, a harmless source of refreshment and entertainment. Barbara Swain differentiates between the “mock-folly” of the court jester, and the “true folly” of the street fool. The first was an accepted and staged outlet for *irrationality*, the second “suffered” from a genuine lack of *reason*, and was considered an aberration in society. The Renaissance recognized the occasional need for *irrationality* in the acceptance of the mock fool. *Reason*, it was realized, is not always the surest means to human satisfaction.

When bewildered by experience it [i.e., *reason*] may cease to function as purveyor of significance and rationalizer of ends. A man may then turn with the approbation of his conscience to a principle of unreason, illogical, careless of consequences, to replenish his vitality and restore the zest in experience which is as valuable as the interpretation of experience. (Swain 7)

In other words, *irrationality*, if *properly expressed*, may be beneficial in the long run to Rationality.

Thus folly was divided, and the mock fool assimilated into acceptable social ideology. The real fool, however, maintained a certain power because of his very liminality. The real, of true fool, is one who “transgresses or ignores *codes of reasoned self-restraint* under which society attempts to exist, is unmeasured in his hilarity or his melancholy, disregards the *logic of cause and effect*, and conducts himself in ways which seem rash and shocking to *normal morals*” (Swain 1, my emphasis). The Renaissance fool was not subject to the bounds of reason, but was thought to have some close connection with the powers of nature—a feature that added some measure of respect to the patronizing amusement with which he was generally regarded. Fifteenth-century European society was still very Christian, however, and the Christian

moralists eventually denounced folly and began to see the fool as a social nuisance, and as one who held true Christian living in disregard. Folly became a pitfall to be avoided and the true fool was ruined on earth and damned in the afterlife.

With the denunciation of the true fool, the stage was set for the mock fool, who assumed the position of the former (whose fate will be discussed in the following section). The mock fool “supplied living illustrations of real fools’ ignominy, of his irresponsible wantonness and hilarity, of his occasional rise to power from low estate, and of the freedom which his ‘innocence’ won for him” (Swain 53). This freedom was the privilege of fools; a general lack of responsibility for their words and deeds. Mock fools took full advantage of these privileges, and claimed in the name of Folly the particular privileges of high spirits and irresponsibility. “The simplest triumph of the fool—the victory of impulse over reason—distinguished the riotous celebrations indulged in seasonally by mock fools of organized fool societies” (75). With the division of the labor of folly between the mock fool and the true fool, we see the beginnings of the separate categories of tragic and comic folly, or, in more familiar terms: madness and humor.

Foucault, Madness, and Tragic Folly

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault records the history of insanity from a critical, “archaeology of knowledge” standpoint. In this work Foucault dispels the myth of mental illness by re-establishing folly and unreason in their rightful place as complex human phenomena. We have already mentioned Barchilon’s disappointment with the author’s failure to emphasize the humoristic elements of madness, but neither he nor Foucault make any kind of distinction between the humoristic and tragic aspects of folly. “The roots and symptoms of folly,” says Barchilon, “are being looked for today in psychology, medicine and sociology, but were and still are present in art, religion, ethics and epistemology” (Foucault *Madness* vii). No mention is made of folly in humor and comedy. Foucault’s exposition of madness does, however, shed enormous light upon the consequences of one important aspect of folly, and the fate of Swain’s true fool.

Foucault returns to the late Middle Ages to find the origin of “the caesura that establishes distance between reason and non-reason; reason’s subjugation of non-reason, wresting from it its truth or madness, crime and disease, derives explicitly from this point” (Foucault *Madness* ix-x). He proposes to write the archaeology of the “silence” or void created between Rational Man and the Man of Folly—the Madman. “Because it symbolized a great disquiet, suddenly dawning on the horizon of European culture at the end of the Middle Ages, madness and the madman became major figures, in their ambiguity: menace and mockery, the dizzying unreason of the world, and the feeble ridicule of man. (13) The power of the madman vis-à-vis wisdom and the growth and development of Rationality had become too great, and must be controlled. By the seventeenth century, the mediaeval practice of putting real fools together in ships (the *Stultifera Navis*) and sending them to sea had become obsolete. From the Ship, the Madman was to move to the hospital, and madness became associated with sickness and disease. “Tamed, madness preserves all appearance of its reign—it now takes part in the measures of reason and in the labor of truth” (36). Thus, the violence of

madness was controlled, but it was the Classical Age—the “Age of Confinement”—that was to reduce to silence the madness that had gained its voice in the Renaissance. The Great Confinement of the insane, where they were moved to asylums, was a decisive event in the history of unreason, as the moment “when madness was perceived on the social horizon of poverty of incapacity for work, of inability to integrate with the group” (36). In short, Reason reigned in absolute control; unreason was effectively exiled: “The Classical Age enveloped madness in a total experience of unreason—it reabsorbed its particular forms, which the Middle Ages and the Renaissance had clearly individualized into a general apprehension in which madness consorted indiscriminately with all forms of unreason” (70).

By the seventeenth century, the hegemony of Reason was establishing itself powerfully, and unreason had little instructive value as such. In the words of Foucault, “the perilous reversibility of reason had disappeared” (*Madness* 70). Madness (tragic folly) had become even lower than mere *irrationality*; it had fallen to the level of the beasts. The unreason that was at one point (in early Christian folly) proselytized as an attribute of God himself was now, with madness, applicable only to something much lower than Rational Man. Madness is thus akin to the passionate unreason of William Blake: a “derangement of the imagination,” which stems from passion and breaks down reason to become, with “its violence, its stupors, its senseless propagations,” and Irrational movement, one that escapes ‘truth’ and its constraints. (93) With the confinement of madness, medicine, that great disciple of reason, became content to regulate and punish, “with means which had once served to exorcise sin, to dissipate error in the restoration of madness to the world’s obvious truth” (198). In time, madness became further relegated to the realm of psychology, which was born “as a sign that madness was now detached from its truth which was unreason and that it was henceforth nothing but a phenomenon adrift, insignificant upon the undefined surface of nature” (198). By this time, the undifferentiated character had certainly been broken, as madness became individualized. However, it seems that this process of differentiation had begun long before the confinement of madness, with usurpation, by the mock fool, of the place of the true fool.

In conclusion, Foucault proclaims the new triumph of madness, which, measured and justified by the rational world through psychology, now forces the world to justify itself before madness—“and nothing in itself, especially not what it [i.e., the Rational world] can know of madness” assures the world that it is justified by the works of a Nietzsche, an Artaud, or a Van Gogh. (199) Thus, madness, envisioned as tragic folly, has been systematically confined by Reason, until it has become completely isolated from Rational discourse, and the experience of madness “remains silent in the composure of a knowledge, which, knowing too much about madness, forgets it” (xii). Tragic folly has met a truly tragic fate.

Comic Folly: The Legacy of the Mock Fool

Now we can turn to the course of comic folly, which has arisen out of the usurpation of unreason by the mock fool of the Renaissance. The mock fools works with the latent power and freedoms of the discourse of unreason, and turns them into

an acceptable societal and personal outlet for *irrationality*. These early comedians “entertained the public in costume of fools, making use of the fool’s freedom to push their own ribaldry or satire to the borders of rashness” (Swain 2). However, the mock fool, as the manifestation on comic folly, was not merely a harmless satirist—sometimes the jesters maintained the full power of the true fool, as well as his freedoms. For instance, there were the Abbeys of Misrule, a “fool society” in early modern France, which celebrated “power, youth, misrule, pleasure, folly, and even madness” (Zemon-Davis 98). The license of the mock fool, though generally allowed in order to perpetuate the traditional order, could also be turned against social authority, and become “an important channel for criticism... where the lower classes had little, if any, chances to make political decisions” (117). The mock fool, despite his initial acceptance by the Rationalist hegemony, was not always the most subservient of servants.

Phthonos and Wit

Comic folly itself can be divided into two principal categories, which are personified nicely by Jonathan Swift and François Rabelais:

Comic Folly
 |— *Phthonos*
 |— Wit

Phthono is a Greek word meaning something akin to malice of destructive satire. In *The Rationality of Emotion*, DeSousa develops the concept of “*phthonic* mirth”—a type of humor that needs no component of wit, but instead expresses emotional attitudes in humorous fashion. (276) Thomas Hobbes, the author of the very un-humorous *Leviathan*, makes the following claim: “That laughter consisteth in wit, or as they call it, in jest, experiences confuteth, for man laughs at mischances and indecencies wherein lieth no wit nor jest at all” (289). *Phthonic* mirth is the type of comic folly most often utilized by the mock fools of early modern times, as well as by such literary satirists as Swift and Fielding in the eighteenth century.

Wit, on the other hand, is that “intrinsically harmless” branch of humor that is often disparaged as a low form of creativity, but nonetheless has been called “a form of art; a psychological process; [and] a special expression of the spirituality of man” (Arieti 101). Wit is essentially the purest type of humor—laughter, we might say, for its own sake. Yet J. C. Gregory provided an important insight into the study of wit when he announced in 1924: “Wit is a quick, vivid illumination of a truth” (102). K. Lash agrees:

It is out of the incongruous relationship between a given norm and an object (person, action, situation, concept) that laughter springs.... The comic object pretends to fit the norms or in humorous naiveté believes that it does, but the intellect perceived the discrepancy between the posited and the actual, finds it incongruous, and laughs. (Arieti 102).

Thus, pure wit can be meaningful, and as creative as *phthonic* mirth, though perhaps more subtle. Rabelais is as crucial to the development of comic folly as Swift; both

writers essentially laugh at the foolishness of the world in which they are entrapped.

Erasmus, Swift and Rabelais

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, the leading humanist of the Northern European Renaissance, utilized both of these aspects in his own *Praise of Folly*. He uses *phthonos* to provide a biting satire of the fools who call themselves and think themselves wise, while at the same time Erasmus praises folly-as-vitality—the vitality of wit. Erasmus “transformed the fool from a figure cynically denoting man’s depravity to an ironic symbol of his comparative weakness and strength” (Swain 2-3). Without forgetting the certain disadvantages of folly, he accepted its place in human nature and filled the concept of the fool with great significance, based on the many paradoxes of human life. Thus, the folly of Erasmus is at once *phthonic* and witty: the goddess/narrator/ heroine of *Praise of Folly*—Folly personified—laughs at herself and at others all at once. Folly can be fiercely satirical, as well as immensely expansive, evoking “a happy madness which carries men beyond the bounds of reason” (152). Most of all, Erasmus’s goddess is free, with all the license of the true fool: “She thinks not of rewards and punishments but of man’s nature, weak as it is, expressing itself in life, and of the reality which cannot be approached by the strictly reasonable and prudent” (155). Out of this admission of human weakness, folly gains a sense of power: the power to laugh at itself and others.

Thus, comic folly evinces a dual power: the power of *phthonic* mirth—which laughs at the foibles of all Rational humans; and the power of pure wit—which laughs at (or with) the creativity and strength of the human imagination. This is the dual nature of humankind portrayed by Erasmus in *Praise of Folly*, where he successfully fuses the diverse connotations of the fool into a figure that at once condemns and vindicates human nature. Erasmus was a strong believer in moderation, and attempted to realize the extremes of humanity, reason and folly, while projecting some kind of expression that utilizes then two, without giving preference to the former. Thus, the work of Erasmus is not an outright condemnation of reason in humankind as much as a vindication of the powers of unreason, particularly in the form of comic folly, which must maintain its legitimate, independent place in human life.

Erasmus’s Folly, then, at once denounces and revels in the human condition. Those who claim knowledge and truth to themselves are mocked, while those who utilize herself, Folly, are praised. Folly knows she can be beneficial, and cannot understand why humans show such ingratitude towards her, to whom they owe so much. However, even in Erasmus’s own time, his panegyric was an anomaly in the discussion of unreason, and the praise and power of folly soon dwindled under the auspices of the Rationalist Ideal. The benefits of the Erasmian synthesis ceased to interest the increasingly educated masses, as well as the Rationalist authorities and men of letters: “The sheer vitality of the fool found no lettered apologist after Erasmus, and the sublime folly... was degraded to a giggling irritability at the idea of licentiousness” (Swain 176).

Rationality and Comic Folly

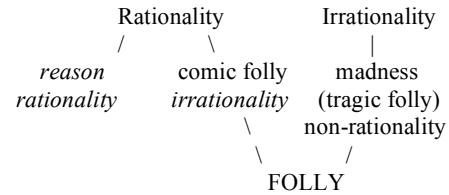
The power and vitality of comic folly diminished with the more sober spirit that pervaded the Enlightenment. Comic folly became “irresponsible,” and the mock fool was hidden behind the heroic New Man—the Rational Agent and Conqueror. The fool became the “shame of nature” (Swain 185) and, though not excluded from Rationality, was marginalized and nearly forgotten. The less said about the mock fool the better, the folly that was not extreme enough to be confined as madness was simultaneously incorporated and set aside. Folly *within* Reason was born. *Homo ludens* (i.e., “playing man”) was dead, and rational Man usurped his garb and possessions, leaving only the power of comic folly behind. Rational Man was able to see the benefits of the vitality of the mock fool and seized upon this viability for his own purposes, channeling it into effective conduct.

Before classes and the State, the comic realm was equal to the serious; with state and feudal societies, including that of the sixteenth century, the comic becomes... a second reality for the people, separated from power and the State but still public and perennial; in bourgeois society [and very likely in Bakhtin’s own socialist society] is its reduced to the home and the holiday. (Zemon-Davis 103)

Thus, comic folly lost its claims to Irrationality. Aristotle’s Rational Man, it must be pointed out, was meant in a categorical sense—meaning the kind of animal that can be *rational* or *irrational* if need be, but not non-rational. This is the essence of the Rationalist paradigm, where comic folly has become an outlet for *irrationality*, and anything non-rational is classified and confined as madness or insanity.

At the risk of complicating the issue, we must be permitted a small digression on this new concept: “non-rationality.” It is extremely difficult for us to conceive of thinking or acting outside of the domain of Reason. To be *irrational* is to lack *reason*; i.e., to fail to make proper use of *reason*; to be deceived as to the capacities of *reason*. This does not presume, however, an absolute denial of *reason*. The best way to express non-rationality is to do something with the knowledge that it will not be “effective.” For example, if one wants to cross the street, but stands on the curb all day, without attempting to cross and with no ulterior motives, such would be a totally inefficacious way to spend one’s time, and runs against the means-end domain of Rationality. Essentially, then, non-rationality is insanity, and on an ideological scale, nihilism. Aristotle believed that no human being, qua rational man, would not want his or her own good; Rational Man can be *irrational* at times, to be sure, but can never work against the principles of *rationality*. On the ideological-discursive scale, Irrationality and non-rationality are synonyms, both being contrary to Rationality. To pick up again on the religious analogy, *irrationality* can be equated with heresy as an evil to be controlled, but non-rationality, like atheism in Christian times, is almost unthinkable, and certainly unspeakable. For the modern person to reject, out of hand, the principles and motives behind *reason* and the whole process of Rationality is tantamount to the mediaeval person asserting unbelief in the existence of God.

Fig. 1 — *Rationality, Irrationality, and non-rationality*



Thus, the mock fool (i.e., irrationality) has survived where the madman (i.e., non-rationality) has been defeated, but the former has been incorporated into the Rational Man who is able to utilize the vitality of comic folly without its latent powers.

In modernity, comic folly is everywhere evident—in the newspapers, theatres, on television, radio, and at the dinner table. Yet all of these places are, for the most part, places of amusement and entertainment, and not places of serious deliberation and speculation, i.e., not the loci of power in Rational society. Rarely, if ever, do we find comic folly in the boardroom, the law court, or the international political conference; if so, it is expressed as a recognized outlet, or pressure-release, and not as a legitimate form of expression or communication. There are limits to the type of humor expressed, depending on the site of discourse and the context as a whole. DeSousa makes an interesting analogy, proposing that most people think of humor like they think of sex—as “a good thing in itself, at least when done in the right way and kept in its place” (279).

How dangerous can humor be? If a joke or laughter is “out of place,” it can usually be excused without great condemnation, as “s/he was only joking.” However, Webster’s definition of folly, as “misguided behavior liable to end disastrously,” implies a fundamental power, which is also asserted by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown in his seminal anthropological study of joking. If joking is characterized in all societies by exhibitions of “privileged license and permitted disrespect” (91), it is only because those who engage in such exhibitions are under strong obligations to not abuse their privileges or to “exceed the limits of what is logically defined and permissibly disrespectful” (Basso 73). When these obligations are ignored, Basso concludes, there may be “retaliation,” resulting in “explosive incidents.” I am skeptical about the nature of these disastrous ends and explosive incidents; comic folly appears to be safe because of its very harmlessness within the confines of modern Rationality. It is difficult to imagine a disastrous result from even the most ‘out of place’ act of comic folly. “We do have privileged jesters,” Swain relates,

conscious or unconscious, whose comments on events lighten the reading of the daily press. We have stage clowns doing the same tricks that aroused the wrath of Augustine and that entertained the spectators of the day-long French mysteries.... But the poised vision of man given by Erasmus in his figure of Folly is as rare today as it was in the sixteenth century and lacks even an expressive symbol. (187)

Comic Folly: A Viable Path?

If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.
– William Blake 36

Now that we have examined some salient features of modern Rationalism, as well as the concept of comic folly, we must see if there is any hope for the mock fool within the Rational Man, and whether comic folly can loosen the noose of Reason with which modern Western society may be hanging itself.

First, we can examine the concept of transgression, which can be defined, somewhat euphemistically, as “a kind of reverse counter-sublimation undoing the discursive hierarchies and stratifications of bodies and cultures which bourgeois society has produced as the mechanism of its symbolic dominance” (Stallybrass and White 200). However, comic folly fails as a possible transgressive mechanism because of its assimilation and incorporation into Rational discourse. Humor has become virtually harmless in this sense. According to Foucault, “in spite of so many scattered signs, the language in which transgression will find its space and the illumination of its being lies almost entirely in the future” (200). Modern Western society, by virtue of the incorporating and excluding techniques of Rationalism, has rendered transgression of any real sort unlikely.

Thus, transgression, the symbolic reversal off discursive hegemony, is out of the question. What we are looking for here, in any case, is not a revolution of discourse, but some prospects for reform and amelioration. There seems to be a place in the human being and in society for unreason, and even allowing for the reality of such a space may be beneficial. Humans may be *rational*, but are we, and must we be *only rational*? It is the absolute hegemony of this ideology called Rationalism that must be put into question—the one that ‘rationalizes’ us in the name of Reason, and inhibits the full growth of the individual and society.

Henry Adams was an anti-modernist cultural critic at the turn of the twentieth century who recognized “insoluble conflict” as part of the human condition, and protested the rationalization of both outer and inner life. Adams fought against all efforts to banish *irrationality* and contradiction in the name of social or personal harmony. By no means an Erasmian, Adams embraces a “tragic sense of life” rather than a comic one, but by doing so he provided much insight into the contemporary problem. For Adams realized that “the vilest faith in unmediated ‘reality’ lacked depth and that it was entwined with the evasive banality of the optimistic rational need” (Lears 295). In short, lamenting the growth of a “new social mind” to control post-positivist science and society, he longed for a separate and independent niche for *irrationality*.

The Fulfillment of Reason

It seems that the only way to reinvest comic folly with its lost vigor would be to somehow exhume the Folly of Erasmus, in order to give her the praise she deserves. We must break the strictures and limits placed upon laughter, unleashing it from the chains of Rationality. “We cannot hope,” says John Morreall, “to have anything like a complete picture of human life until we pay attention to such things as laughter” (ix). As he goes on to explain in *Taking Laughter Seriously*, humor can have a profoundly liberating effect; this being part of the reason we delight in it. The freedom that humor brings, Morreall claims, can even extend to the constraints of logic and reason. The philosopher Schopenhauer, “burdened more

than most people... by the constraints of reason, suggested that humor amuses us because it violates what is supposed to be inviolable—the rational order of things” (x). Morreall submits, however, that none of us would want to be permanent residents of a place like Lewis Carroll’s Wonderland, where folly reigns over reason with the power that Reason reigns in our day. Nor would we want to give up our capacity for *rational* thought, which is essential for human life. What we need, rather, is “the occasional bout of irrationality” (x). Morreall’s point is clear, but the notion of “bouts” of *irrationality* is exactly what the Rationalist paradigm enjoins. Rather, comic folly must not be co-opted and relegated to a kind of pressure release, but allowed to be a valid human capacity with certain epistemological advantages, lacking only the pragmatic strength of *reason*.

In short, through the use of comic folly, we must attempt to join the forces of *rationality* and *irrationality*, in order to dethrone Rationality as a paradigmatic ideology and discourse. Comic folly does not have to be *ant-rational* but can supplement *reason* in the fight against the master of them both: Rationality. In a similar vein, Morreall professes the possible value of amusement to reason: “In the development of reason, emotions would not have been a boon but an encumbrance... Amusement by contrast, like artistic activities and science, would be helpful because it involves a breaking out of a practical and self-concerned frame of mind” (DeSousa 287). DeSousa adds to this by emphasizing an avoidance of the equation of “the serious” with “the useful.” If we place humor in competition with love, art, and philosophy—things that are considered serious, but essentially useless—“who is to say that laughing is not intrinsically more important?” The issue in question here is the relative place of comic folly, laughter especially, in an ideal human life. For DeSousa, laughter as part of a larger sphere of emotions can enlarge our ethical sphere. For Morreall, comic folly, particularly in the form of wit, “offers us flexibility and openness... in the midst of what often seems a pretty rigid world” (128).

Not only are we not upset by the incongruities that pervade our lives, but we can actually enjoy them. This is not to say that humor blinds us to the reality of suffering and failure in life, that it deceives us. Quite the contrary... [i]t does not deny, but affirms the incongruities of things. (128)

Thus, comic folly, in *phthonic* mirth or in pure wit, can work side by side with reason to complement reason with laughter. Comic folly as an outlet for “bouts” of *irrationality* “within Reason” is not enough.

Summary and Conclusions

But indeed I have long since forgotten myself and run out of bounds.... If anything I have said shall seem too saucy or too glib, stop and think: 'tis Folly... that has spoken. But of course you will also remember that Greek proverb, “Even a foolish man will often speak a word in season.

– Erasmus 125

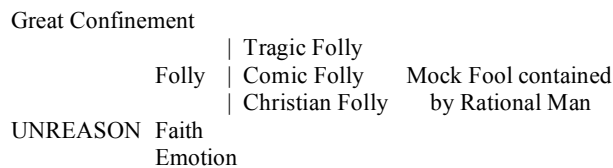
Folly may “hate a hearer that remembers anything” (Erasmus 125), but before reaching our conclusion, a brief summary at this point may be expedient. We began with reason, and

particularly the division between logical *reason* and ideological Reason in the Western world. The modern Rational ideology and the discourse of the same have developed behind the screen of *reason*, denying its own status as an ideology, while making ideological claims on society and the individual. Various critiques of this paradigm have emerged, the most important being those based on a *rational* critique of Rationality, especially those emerging out of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. The difficulties of such an attack are many, as the language of Rationality must somehow be turned against itself.

In explicating unreason, we deconstructed its salient components before reaching our ultimate goal with the discussion of comic folly. Comic folly, the humoristic side of unreason, developed from the separation of the true and the mock fool at the beginnings of the Age of Reason. With the Great Confinement of the insane (the tragic fool), the mock fool lost his own appropriated powers, and became assimilated into the Rational domain, as an outlet for “bouts of *irrationality*.” In order to somehow loosen the stranglehold of the Rationalist hegemony, the mock fool and comic folly must be liberated from their Rationalized position in the individual and in society. Comic folly can work *with reason*; can perhaps even *fulfill* reason, and together the noose of Rationality may be broken.

A simplified diagram may be of benefit here:

Fig. 2 — *The Course of Folly in History*



Henry Adams and the anti-modernists decried the hegemony of Reason, and pronounced its failures, one being that whereas it tells us all we want to know about the *object* in question, it fails when trying to fully explain the *subject*—the human being. Comic folly contributes to *reason* as “an important revealer of character” (DeSousa 279). *Reason* itself may be of positive value, but clearly the Rationalist ideology and hegemonic discourse limits humanity, both individually and socially: “Its productivity is destructive of the free development of human needs and faculties, its peace maintained by constant threat of war, its growth dependent on the repression of the real possibilities for pacifying the struggle for existence—individual, national and international” (Marcuse ix).

Rationality “fabricates means of seducing or intimidating the human mind in such a way as to incline it toward the chosen attitudes” (DeGaultier 8). Sebastian Brant, who wrote *Ship of Fools* against the prevalence of folly in his own day, reflected an alarmism found even to this day. Brant’s attack, says Swain, “shows that he felt the terrible discrepancy between the ideal order which man had tried to project and the travesty of that order visible in Western Europe in the 1490s” (Swain 133). The cycle seems to be repeating itself five hundred years later. When such a feeling of discrepancy become too acute—“when actual form cannot be wrenched

into conformity with the ideal preserved in reason, man’s only resolve is to turn away from the external and social forms of life to those inner personal springs of nature from which new forms may be evolved” (133). In the modern world, ‘new forms’ do not have to evolve; rather the old form of comic folly must be revived, beside *reason*, in order to bridge the discrepancy between the ideal of human fulfillment and the Rational Life.

Natalie Zemon-Davis’s conclusion about the realm of the comic in early modern France applies here as well: “rather than a mere ‘safety valve’ deflecting attention from social reality, festive life can on the one hand perpetuate certain values of the community, and on the other hand criticize political order” (Zemon-Davis 97). Perhaps we need someone (Lenny Bruce?) to do for comedy and humor what Artaud did for theatre and Nietzsche for philosophy. Failing this, if comic folly cannot reform Rationality, it can certainly be revelatory as a “distinctive mode of communication whose investigation can provide insight into the content and organization of systems of thought” (Basso 99).

In general, modern Western society needs to learn, or relearn how to laugh, not just at others but at itself—a real laughter, such as that of Rabelais or the mediaeval carnivalesque, “directed at all and everyone, including the participants,” and in which the entire world is “seen in its droll aspect and gay relativity” (Stallybrass and White 8). Laughter, that is, that is at once gay, mocking, and triumphant; as Milan Kundera would have it, both the laughter of angels—fanatical joy (wit), as well as the laughter of devils—skeptical mockery (*phthonic* mirth). (DeSousa 278) The aim of this project has been not to denounce *reason* but rather the hegemony of the Rationalist ideology, and to critique in particular its usurpation of *reason* and assimilation of comic folly. Hopefully, this exposition will provoke thought as well as laughter, but both are readily accepted. For, in the words of Shakespeare:

I must have liberty,
 Withal, as large a charter as the wind
 To blow on whom I please; so for fools have;
 And they that are most galled with my folly,
 They most must laugh.
 — *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene 7

Bibliography

- Arieti, Silvano. *Creativity: The Magic Synthesis*. New York: Basic Books, 1976.
- Basso, Keith. *Portraits of “The Whiteman”- Linguistic Play and Cultural Symbols among the Western Apache*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- Blake, William. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. David Erdman, ed. New York: Anchor Press, 1988.
- DeGaultier, Jules. *Official Philosophy and Philosophy*. Translated by Gerald M. Spring. New York: Philosophical Library, 1974.
- DeSousa, Ronald. *The Rationality of Emotion*. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1987.

- Erasmus, Desiderius. *The Praise of Folly*. Translated by Hoyt Hopewell Hudson. New York: The Modern Library, 1941.
- Foucault, Michel. "Orders of Discourse." *Social Science Information* 10, 2 (1971): 7-30.
- . *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, 1988. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Random House.
- Hogben, Lancelot. *The Retreat from Reason*. London: Watts & Co, 1936.
- Horkheimer, Max. *Eclipse of Reason*. New York: Seabury Press, 1974.
- Jaspers, Karl. *Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Time*. Translated by Stanley Godman. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952.
- Lears, T. J. Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920*. New York: Random House, 1981.
- Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.
- Morreall, John. *Taking Laughter Seriously*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1983.
- Nathanson, Stephen. *The Ideal of Rationality*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1990.
- Rabelais, François. *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Translated by J. M. Cohen. London: Penguin Books, 1955.
- Radcliffe-Brown, A. R. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. New York: Free Press, 1952.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "Discourse on the Arts and Sciences." In *The First and Second Discourses*, edited by Roger D. Masters. Translated by Roger D. and Judith R. Masters. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964.
- Sacks, Mark. *The World We Found: The Limits of Ontological Talk*. London: Duckworth, 1989.
- Screech, M. A. *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly*. London: Duckworth, 1980.
- Stallybrass, Peter, and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986.
- Swain, Barbara. *Fools and Folly*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1932.
- Zemon-Davis, Natalie. *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975.