“Gravity is of the very Essence of Impos- ture. It does not only make us mistake other things, but is apt perpetually almost to mis- take it-self. For even in common Behaviour, how hard is it for the grave Character to keep long out of the limits of the formal one?”

Shaftesbury, Characteristicks.

“Les prétentions, les fatales prétentions, une des causes principales de la tristesse du XIXème siècle.”

Stendhal, Lamiel.
AFTER MOLIÈRE

If we recall our earlier distinction between “open” comedy and “closed” comedy in Molière, it would seem at first sight that the “open” comedy such as we find in Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme or in Les Précieuses ridicules has been practiced with continued success by generations of writers since Molière. The vanities and affectations of those who imitate their superiors would seem to be a favorite subject for comedy. Mrs. Slipslop, Lady Booby’s waiting maid in Fielding’s Joseph Andrews, apes the “distinguished” persons whom she serves with the same clumsiness as Jourdain imitating the nobility. The unfortunate lady’s attempts at refined speech are as disastrouslv unsuccessful as Jourdain’s attempts at fencing, music, dancing, and philosophy. The appearance of Mrs. Million at the Marquess of Carabas’ house party in Disraeli’s Vivian Grey reminds one of Jourdain’s ornate salutation of Dorimène. Just as Jourdain remains a bourgeois whatever he does, so Mrs. Million remains a wealthy parvenue whatever she does. She arrives at Château Desir with the modest suite she promised—"only three carriages-and-four," “Out of the first descended the mighty lady Herself,” writes Disraeli, “with some of her noble friends, who formed the most distinguished part of her suite: out of the second came her physician, Dr. Sly; her toad-eater, Miss Gusset; her secretary, and her page. The third carriage bore her groom of the chambers and three female attendants. There were

1 “Avaleur de crapauds” is Stendhal’s translation of this. For a brief explanation of the toad-eater see Lucien Leuwen, Chap. 23.
only two men servants to each equipage; nothing could be more moderate, or, as Miss Gusset said, 'in better taste'” (Vivian Grey, Bk. 2, Chap. 12). Having arrived sufficiently late to create a modest impression, Mrs. Million decides not to change for dinner. She enters the dining hall leaning on the Marquess’ arm “and in a travelling dress, namely, a crimson silk pelisse, hat and feathers, with diamond ear-rings, and a rope of gold around her neck. A train of about twelve persons, consisting of her noble fellow-travellers, toad-eaters, physicians, secretaries, etc., etc., etc., followed” (ibid.).

Flaubert’s satire of Emma Bovary and of Monsieur Homais likewise resembles closely the structure of an “open” comedy such as Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme. Both, like Jourdain, reject the narrowness and ordinariness of the world in which they are born and aspire to distinctions of which they have read or which they imagine, Emma to the exotic world of literary romance, Homais to the important and impressive world of academic and intellectual honors. Emma longs for a great and poetic love, and Homais longs to be celebrated as a scientist and champion of progress. But as everything Jourdain does reveals what he really is and has never ceased to be, everything Emma and Homais do confirms that they are no different from the very provincials to whom they feel so superior. Emma remains a country doctor’s wife, petty and narrow-minded. Her great loves are never anything but ordinary acts of adultery, which by the end of her career are scarcely distinguishable from acts of prostitution. Homais remains a provincial pharmacist, stupid and pretentious. His “science” is a characteristic mixture of superstition and crass positivism. Like the old wives he despises, he loves “remedies” and magic cures, though, unlike them, he requires that they have the paraphernalia of Latin names, and he amasses the dreariest facts with the same unimaginative avidity as the inhabitants of Yonville amass money or land. The pompous articles in the Fanal de Rouen and the paper which he sends to the Société agronome de Rouen, “Du cidre, de sa fabrication et de ses
effets, suivi de quelques réflexions nouvelles à ce sujet” and which procures him his election to the section d'agriculture, classe de pomologie are as clumsy in their imposture as Emma's refinements and false poetic sentimentality. As for his crowning achievement, the Book, to which he gives the learned title Statistique générale du canton d'Yonville, suivie d'observations climatologiques, it is as distinguished as Emma's grand passions for Rodolphe and Léon.

The comedy of these texts seems to resemble very closely the comedy of a Jourdain or a Cathos. Some significant changes have, however, occurred, which make the comedy of these later heroes less clear and straightforward than that of a Jourdain.

Between Molière's would-be gentleman and his models the distance was great and virtually unbridgeable, though already narrower than that which separated Don Quixote from his Amadis. Jourdain could openly avow his admiration and his imitation of models whose superiority he never questioned for a minute, while the models, on their part, could laugh freely and generously at the antics of the bourgeois in whom they never for a moment discerned a rival.

In the modern world, however, the imitator is increasingly the rival of his model, from whom he is separated by an ever narrowing margin. Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot in Jane Austen's Persuasion are shocked at Anne's visiting a Mrs. Smith in Westgate Buildings, while they cannot contain their pleasure at being invited to a concert evening given by Lady Dalrymple. But the manner in which they greet Lady Dalrymple—"all the eagerness compatible with anxious elegance"—indicates the contradictions in their attitude toward her. There is adulation, but there is also proud and resentful unwillingness to admit their adulation, in the Elliots' attitude to Lady Dalrymple. Similarly, their shocked displeasure at Anne's association with Mrs. Smith discloses an anxious concern to dissociate themselves from the middle classes, which a gentry

more sure of its own value would never have had. Even before Jane Austen, however, in the work of Fielding, we can observe how the classes are coming closer together and how everyone is already being swallowed up into a more and more homogenous "society."

Between Mrs. Slipslop and Lady Booby the difference is no longer very profound. The servant knows the intimate secrets of her mistress, and has no real respect for her. The two are in fact rivals for Joseph's favors and in this rivalry of mistress and servant for the young footman, Fielding shows a real insight into the true nature of their relation, just as a century later Stendhal showed through the rivalry of Mathilde de la Môle and the Maréchale de Fervacques for Julien Sorel, the true nature of their relation. Mathilde may well despise the Maréchale whose nobility is somewhat too recent for her taste: in the end she finds herself competing on a footing of equality with her for the love of the upstart Julien. The very attraction that the lower orders exercise on their "superiors," Joseph on Lady Booby, Marivaux's Jacob on the very aristocratic Mesdames de Ferval and de Fécourt (Le Paysan parvenu), Julien on Mathilde de la Môle and on the Maréchale de Fervacques, discloses the inner weakness and degradation of these "superiors." In their attitude to their social inferiors—a strange compound of desire to humiliate and desire to be humiliated—the "superiors" implicitly admit the growing uncertainty of their own position, the breakdown, on a subjective level, of any firm conviction of their own superiority and, on an objective level, the dissolution of the social order on which privilege and distinctions of rank were based.

Disraeli's portrait of Mrs. Million shows a similar awareness of human vanity to that of Fielding, Marivaux, and Stendhal. Mrs. Million has no difficulty in gaining access to Château Desir. On the contrary, she is honored and fêted by her noble host who protests "that her will was his conduct" (Vivian Grey, Bk. 2, Chap. 12). For all their contempt, the blue-blooded guests of the Marquess of Carabas are impressed by Mrs. Million and afraid of her.
"The entrée of Her Majesty," writes Disraeli of Mrs. Million's appearance in the castle hall, "could not have created a greater sensation than did that of Mrs. Million. All fell back, gartered peers, and starred ambassadors, and baronets with blood older than the creation, and squires to the antiquity of whose veins chaos was a novelty; all retreated, with eyes that scarcely dared to leave the ground; even Sir Plantaganet Pure, whose family had refused a peerage regularly every century, now, for the first time in his life, seemed cowed, and in an awkward retreat to make way for the approaching presence, got entangled with the Mameluke boots of my Lord Alhambra" (ibid.). Mrs. Million, for her part, has none of Jourdain's pure admiration of the nobility. There is dark resentment in her heart, and it is this resentment that Vivian, who studies and exploits the vanities of noblemen, millionaires, and servants alike, plays on with consummate skill. "How beautiful the old Hall looked today!" he exclaims. "It is a scene which can only be met with in ancient families." "Ah! there is nothing like old families!" Mrs. Million answers, "with all the awkward feelings of a parvenue." Vivian seizes his chance. "Do you think so? I once thought so myself, but I confess that my opinion is greatly changed. After all, what is noble blood? My eye is now resting on a crowd of nobles; and yet, being among them, do we treat them in a manner differing in any way from that which we should employ to individuals of a lower caste who were equally uninteresting?" Mrs. Million warms to these unusual and reassuring remarks which give expression to her deepest resentments. Encouraged, Vivian goes on to expound the virtues of the middle class, which permits its children to develop their characters, the true source of their superiority, impartially, without the handicap of "hereditary prejudices" or "hereditary passions." Mrs. Million is gratified but cautious. "I must hear everything before I give an opinion," she says to Vivian who asks her what she thinks of his principles. "When, therefore, my mind was formed," Vivian goes on, "I would wish to become the proprietor of a princely fortune." At last Mrs. Million has heard
what she has been waiting to hear, the confirmation of her own superiority to these noblemen whom she courts and hates at the same time, just as they court and hate her. A Million, Vivian has just observed, is worth a thousand Carabasses. Mrs. Million is delighted. She eagerly agrees with the young man and when she leaves him she is determined to invite this brilliant and profound philosopher to visit her in London.

Disraeli’s analysis of what he calls the Toadeys—the parasites of wealth and distinction that in Molière’s *Dom Juan* go by the name of Sganarelle—emphasizes the same mixture of imitation and resentment. “The great singularity,” he writes, “is the struggle between their natural and their acquired feelings: the eager opportunity which they seize of revenging their voluntary bondage, by their secret taunts, on their adopted task-masters, and the servility which they habitually mix up even with their scandal” (Bk. 2, Chap. 15). Miss Gusset, the toadey of Mrs. Million, and Miss Graves, the toadey of the Marchioness of Carabas, vie with each other through their respective mistresses. Miss Gusset complains at having been terrified by the Marchioness’ “horrible green parrot flying upon my head.” “Horrible green parrot, my dear madam!” retorts Miss Graves. “Why, it was sent to my Lady by Prince Xtmnprqtosklw, and never shall I forget the agitation we were in about that parrot. I thought it would never have got to the Château, for the Prince could only send his carriage with it as far as Toadcaster. Luckily my Lady’s youngest brother, who was staying at Desir, happened to get drowned at the time; and so Davenport, very clever of him! sent her on in my Lord Dormer’s hearse.” Miss Gusset’s delicate feelings are outraged by the idea of the parrot’s being conveyed in the hearse of My Lady’s youngest brother. Miss Graves, however, finds such sentimentality vulgar. “It is all very well for commoners,” she declares, and recalls that on the death of another member of the family shortly before, “everything went on as usual. Her Ladyship attended Almacks; my Lord took his seat in the House; and I looked in at Lady Doubtful’s where we do not
visit, but where the Marchioness wishes to be civil" (that we here is masterly!). "We do not visit Lady Doubtful either," replies Mrs. Million's toadey defensively: "she had not a card for our fête champêtre." Before long the two toadeys turn from vying with each other through their respective mistresses to vying with their mistresses themselves. Miss Gusset was clever enough to express a certain admiration for the Marchioness, but Miss Graves suddenly finds that her mistress has serious shortcomings. "Yes," she agrees, "her Ladyship is a dear, amiable creature, but I cannot think how she can bear the eternal screaming of that noisy bird." Mrs. Million, however, "appears to be a most amiable woman." Now it is Miss Gusset's turn to vent her resentment on her mistress. "Quite perfection," she answers; "so charitable, so intellectual, such a soul! It is a pity, though, her manner is so abrupt; she really does not appear to advantage sometimes." Miss Graves agrees that the Marchioness also lacks a certain refinement in considering the feelings of others. The two women now proceed to criticize the dress, the manners, the friends of their mistresses. Disraeli's "toadeys" are torn between resentment of other toadeys, which forces them to extoll the mistresses who are the instruments of their superiority to these others, and resentment of their mistresses, because of their very dependence on them.

It is clear that the type of comedy we are confronted with in these cases is not the comedy of the bourgeois gentleman, but rather that of Dandìn and Sotenville, of Sganarelle and Dom Juan or of Orgon and Madame Pernelle. In the relation of Mrs. Million and the blue blood of England, it is the comedy of Dandìn and Sotenville, the comedy of vanity and resentment that is being enacted; while in the rivalry of Mathilde and the Maréchale for Julien, whom Stendhal himself likens to Tartuffe, we encounter a modern version of the unavowed rivalry of Orgon and his mother. As the old hierarchies are broken down in the modern world, the differences between classes and persons and the superiority of one group to another become more and more metaphysical, more and
more a matter of opinion. The apparent objectivity with which they seemed formerly to be invested disappears. Opinion is no longer determined by established conventions, which seem to be grounded in a fixed and immemorial reality; on the contrary opinion overthrows established and “irrational” conventions and establishes itself as the supreme source of all value. A conflict inevitably arises between “l’opinion que l’on a de soi-même,” as Valéry expresses it (Teste, ed. cit. p. 82), and “l’opinion que les autres ont de vous,” which is the “matière première” of the first. The individual is torn between his own claim to superiority and his need to have this superiority recognized by others, between his opinion of himself and the opinion others have of him, between a boundless “superiority complex” and a slavish “inferiority complex.” In such a situation Jourdain’s naïve admiration for his superiors is impossible. It is through the nobility that Jourdain seeks to establish his superiority to his bourgeois family and friends and

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8 Cf. a telling analysis of the relation of self-esteem to “approbativeness” (the desire to elicit an approving judgment from others) in the third lecture of Lovejoy’s Reflections on Human Nature (Baltimore, 1961), pp. 100–2:

“Self-approbation is supported by the approbation of others; it is easier to feel satisfied with your qualities or your acts or performances if your fellows appear to think highly of them. On the other hand self-esteem may take the form of an indifference to or contempt for the opinion of other persons, or of some classes or types of other persons. The individual esteems himself the more because he is, or believes himself to be, unconcerned about the esteem of his neighbors. (. . .) And whereas it is obvious that approbativeness tends in the main to compliance with social, that is, external, requirements and standards, the desire for self-esteem—in certain though by no means all forms—may manifest itself outwardly in bumptiousness, aggressiveness, defiance of social conventions and rules. It is, in short, sometimes a revolt of the individual against his own approbativeness, which he feels, puts him into a humiliating position of subjection to other men—that is, to their judgments or feelings about him. It is, in this form, an attainment which the Cynic and Stoic schools in antiquity conceived to be an essential part of moral excellence, exemplified best of all in the traditional pictures of Diogenes as a model of the supreme and godlike virtue of “self-sufficiency”; though as Diogenes was also rather ostentatious about it, Plato and others, according to the familiar stories, intimated that his professed scorn of other men’s opinions of him was only a way of ‘showing off’. To proclaim your freedom from approbativeness is plainly to manifest approbativeness—to make it evident that you wish to be admired by others for your indifference to their admiration.”
he freely confesses his admiration for and dependence on the approval of the nobility. It is likewise by identifying themselves with their mistresses that Miss Gusset and Miss Graves seek to establish their superiority each over the other, but at the same time they resent their dependence on their mistresses. Through the sly criticisms they ultimately make of them, they reveal that they are in fact the rivals of their mistresses, that they at once accept and deny the superiority of these “superiors.”

In the comedies of Molière this characteristically modern situation is incarnated in several fundamental types of comic structure. The hero may choose an idol whom he uses as the instrument of his superiority to the world, for whom he loudly proclaims his admiration and for whom he demands the admiration of others, while at the same time trying to maintain a secret control over this idol—secret not only from others but even from himself—so that in the end it may be he, the hero, who is truly superior to the world. In our chapter on Tartuffe we emphasized the very real material power on which Orgon’s relation to Tartuffe rests. In many respects Les Femmes savantes presents a similar structure. The poets and scholars whom Philaminte and her daughters fawn upon are in fact the instruments by which these women would, in a roundabout way, establish their superiority.

In this type of situation the hero is confounded the moment his “instrument” expresses and reveals his independence. And this independence is manifested in two ways, the second of which follows necessarily from the first: by the instrument’s acting or willing independently of the hero and by his being independently of the hero. Orgon is confounded when Tartuffe turns out to have desires of his own and to be other than Orgon took him to be. Similarly Philaminte is confounded when Trissotin turns out to have desires of his own and to be other than she took him to be. Tartuffe desires not to do Orgon’s will but to possess his wife, and he is discovered to be no saintly man but a vile intriguer. Trissotin likewise desires not what Philaminte wants him to desire but a substantial dowry,
while he is discovered to be a bad poet and an opportunist. Similarly in Dostoievski’s Possessed, Mrs. Stavrogin is confounded by her creation, Stepan Verkhovenski, when the latter develops a will of his own with respect to Dasha and when he proves unable to compete for public acclaim with the fashionable and successful Karamzin. In all these cases the hero’s plan is thwarted by the revelation that his idol is both independent and inferior. The independence of the idol undermines the hero’s concealed affirmation of himself through him, while the exposure of the idol’s inferiority, of the contempt in which he is actually held by others, deprives the hero of the approbation he sought to acquire through him. At the same time, however, the humiliation of the idol is also the source of a secret joy and triumph for the hero, for this idol is also a rival.

We saw in previous chapters that a compound of idolatry and rivalry, of adoration and hatred, characterizes the relations of many of Molière’s couples: Orgon and Tartuffe, Sganarelle and Dom Juan, Philaminte and Trissotin, Alceste and Célimène, Dandin and the Sotenvilles. Some of these comic heroes exhibit no elation at all at the discomfiture of their idol. Orgon and Philaminte, for instance, are not sufficiently threatened with being eclipsed by their idols for their latent rivalry with them to come to the fore. They remain throughout the creators and patrons of their idols as well as their disciples. (This is also, in the main, the case with Mrs. Stavrogin.)

Among others, however, the rivalry is more overt, and this in proportion as the idol already commands, in the idolator’s eyes at least, the admiration and respect that the idolator wishes for himself. Molière incarnates this situation in a slightly different comic structure from that of Tartuffe or Les Femmes savantes. Thus in Le Misanthrope Alceste cannot pretend that his choice of Célimène as a mistress was made independently. It was patently mediated by others, by the Orontes and the Acastes and the Clitandres, and Alceste is painfully aware of this fact, even though
he will not admit it openly to himself. Not surprisingly, therefore, his fury at Célimène’s humiliation at the end of the play is tainted by a scarcely veiled exultation. In George Dandin the conflict of love and hate, of idolatry and rivalry is even clearer. Dandin’s constant desire is to humiliate his idols, the Sotenvilles, but he can do this only by undermining at the same time his own existence, since it is on his acceptance by them as superiors that he has grounded his own value. If Dandin had realized that the Sotenvilles have their superiors by whom they in turn are held in contempt, he would have turned on them in fury and delight and screamed that he had been cheated.

This is what happens in Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya. Vanya’s love of Serebrakov’s wife Yelena reveals both his dependence on him and his rivalry with him. In Act II Vanya wonders why he never wooed Yelena when it would have been possible to win her—before she became the Professor’s wife: “I met her first ten years ago, at her sister’s house, when she was seventeen and I was thirty-seven. Why did I not fall in love with her then and propose to her? It would have been so easy! (. . .) Oh, how I have been deceived! For years I have worshipped that miserable gout-ridden professor.” Vanya does not answer his own question, but Chekhov expects us to answer it for him. (The sentimental productions of Chekhov that are so common, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries, do not, alas, give us much guidance in finding the answer.) Vanya is incapable of desiring at first hand. He can desire only through Serebrakov, and his entire existence is consumed by his rivalry with a man whom he adores and at the same time resents for the very reason that he adores him. To some degree—the same degree to which Dandin sees through the vanity of titles and ranks—Vanya frees himself from the slavish adoration which his mother still has for Serebrakov, precisely because he cannot bear the superiority with which he himself has invested the professor. Indeed his desire to humiliate the professor is whetted and exacerbated by the very admiration his mother has for him. Vanya’s “freedom,” however,
is merely the outward appearance of an even deeper enslavement than that of his mother. His envy and resentment of his idol constantly urges him to destroy the image that he himself has actively helped to build up. Serebrakov must be invested with enormous prestige so that Vanya can glory in his relation to him, and at the same time the more Serebrakov is illuminated by this prestige, the more unbearable it is to Vanya, who is then tormented by the desire to destroy it. His final cry of rage at his idol is both a triumph of revenge and an agony of self-destruction: “For twenty-five years I have been sitting here with my mother like a mole in a burrow. Our every hope was yours and yours only. By day we talked with pride of you and your work, and spoke your name with veneration; our nights we wasted reading books and papers which my soul now loathes. (. . .) We used to think of you as superhuman, but now the scales have fallen from my eyes and I see you as you are! You write on art without knowing anything about it. These books of yours which I used to admire are not worth one copper kopeck. You are a hoax! (. . .) Wait! I have not done yet! You have wrecked my life! I have never lived. My best years have gone for nothing, have been ruined, thanks to you. You are my most bitter enemy!” The wonderfully farcical shooting scene in Act III sums up the whole of Vanya’s relation to Serebrakov. Vanya shoots but misses. His hatred of Serebrakov leads him to shoot, but he must miss or he will deprive himself of the power to affirm himself by belittling his idol. On the other hand his missing also confirms, as he himself realizes dimly, the very inferiority which his contempt denies. His entire existence, as symbolized in the shooting incident, is a set of gestures that never make any contact with reality. He cannot act or will or be in his own right: his whole life is lived, as Dandin’s is, in function of another being whom he cannot destroy without also destroying himself.4 It is characteristic of much mod-

*Among many similar situations in Stendhal, one might recall the case of the Comte de Nerwinde in Lamiel. Nerwinde, it will be remembered, had formed a liaison with Lamiel, known at that time as Mme de Saint-Serve, but he was incapable of loving or enjoying her. He used her only in order to
ern literature that the idol who mediates between the hero and all his thoughts and desires is not even aware of or concerned with those whom he mediates. He may well be obsessed by a mediator-idol of his own. Serebrakov has his own problems of vanity, and he genuinely cannot understand Vanya's attitude. This indifference, which is already a notable trait of *Le Misanthrope* and which becomes more and more marked, as we move by way of Rousseau and Dostoievski toward the present age, emphasizes the utter subjectivity of the comic hero. He is the creator of his own anguish. Andrey's sisters, in the *Three Sisters*, cannot understand why their brother boasts of his position on the local Zemstvo. They do not know that, if he is forever impressing them with the dignity and importance of his place on the Zemstvo, it is because he himself is perpetually judging himself for not being a professor at the University of Moscow. Andrey cannot bear to be like everybody else. He insists on being considered and judged as an exceptional being, even if it means being condemned by his judges. Andrey therefore impress others: "L'essentiel, c'est que, par sa figure et l'esprit que je lui souffle, elle me fasse honneur dans le monde." But Lamiel charms, not with any wit that Nerwinde has given or can give her: she charms because she is supremely natural and unconcerned, utterly ignoring the dreary tone of correct society and the witticisms that make no one laugh. "Avec son air doux et gai, elle est l'audace même; elle a le courage plus humain que féminin," says the old baron de Prévan, "de braver votre mépris, et c'est pourquoi elle est inimitable." Nerwinde, on the other hand, cannot bear Lamiel for the very reason that she is happy and free. Secretly he is jealous of her success and popularity, so that we are not surprised when one day he tries spitefully to humiliate her in front of his friends—those very friends whom he was using her to impress! "Eh bien, messieurs, dit un jour le comte de Nerwinde à ses amis qui admiraient son bonheur, je ne me laisse point charmer par ce qui vous éblouit; que ce soit un avantage ou un malheur du caractère que le Ciel m'a donné, je ne suis point dupé de cette Mme de Saint-Serve, de cette beauté rare que vous me gâtez comme à plaisir avec tous vos compliments. J'ai les moyens assurés de rabattre sa fierté; tel que vous me voyez, depuis deux mois, c'est-à-dire depuis la première semaine qui a suivi mon retour à Paris, nous faisons lit à part" (Chap. 13). This outburst of vanity has the inevitable effect of degrading Nerwinde himself. Everyone now wants to teach Lamiel, the astonishing creature who can be happy even without love, what Nerwinde had obviously been inadequate to teach her. She becomes more popular and more admired than ever. Nerwinde's attempt to humiliate Lamiel thus results, like Dandin's attempts to humiliate the Sotenvilles, in his own humiliation.
creates his judges and argues with them. He sets up an imaginary court and acts out his own prosecution and defense. You despise me, he makes his sisters say, because I am not a professor at the University of Moscow, but I think it is a noble thing to be a member of the local Zemstvo. In the loneliness of his study, however, he prepares the case for the prosecution: I am nothing, a failure, etc. Unable to bear his own mediocrity, unwilling to recognize that his lot is no different from that of anyone else, and that he is quite undistinguished even in his “failure,” Andrey constantly seeks to provoke others into judging him and attributes to others the judgments that they constantly fail to pronounce, the concern with him that they do not have. The silence of the world is the source of his anguish, and it is this “indifference” that he tries to convert into an obsessional preoccupation. This mediocrity would be distinguished on account of his very mediocrity!

Chekhov is one of those modern writers who have not romanticized this situation and who have presented it uncompromisingly as funny. In this respect he joins hands over the centuries with his great predecessor, for Molière’s Misanthrope is the first profound statement in modern terms of the world’s silent indifference to those who no longer have any significant place in it or relation to it.

Alceste, as we saw in our chapter on Le Misanthrope, is he who reveals his enslavement to the world in the very act of asserting his independence of it. In reality it is not Alceste who is indifferent to the world; it is the world that is indifferent to Alceste. Alceste’s loud protestations of autonomy, his perpetual criticisms, his endless complaints about the insincerity and vanity of others are meant to be heard, and to provoke a reaction. Je veux qu’on me distingue. It is in fact Alceste who is devoured by vanity, by such enormous vanity that he is unwilling either to be just like everybody else or to recognize that his own value depends in any way on the opinion that others have of him. But Alceste cannot really constitute a world unto himself. He cannot deny the existence of those others whose minds he cannot control and whose very being robs him of
the autonomy and absoluteness to which he lays claim. This autonomy and this absoluteness are inevitably his autonomy and absoluteness with respect to others. Alceste must therefore first provoke, then seize hold of and control, the judgments of others. The more he realizes his need to possess in this way the freedom of others, the more loudly he denies it, and at the same time the more insatiable his desire for control becomes. The greater his desire for the approbation of others, the deeper his awareness of their independence; the deeper his awareness of their independence, the more exacting his desire for approbation. No amount of compliments and distinctions can ever satisfy Alceste, for behind them all he sees only the freedom to give them. The silence of the world is intolerable to him, for he must be recognized and distinguished, but in every compliment that is paid him he hears only an underlying silence, the silence of the other who remains independent even as his mouth speaks words of praise.

Through *Le Misanthrope* we are brought to see that proclamations of indifference and misanthropy and the modes of behavior that accompany them, such as living in a barrel or always threatening to go off to a desert place, are theatrical, comic in the purest sense. At the same time however, Molière also shows us that the subjective experience of the misanthrope is one of bitterest anguish. It is a mark of Molière’s greatness and of his profound insight into modern life that he understood and portrayed both aspects of Alceste, the anguish and the comedy, the subjective reality of his suffering and the objective insignificance of his being. The objective comic view is the superior one, precisely because it does not exclude but embraces and transcends the subjective one.

Many writers after Molière could no longer sustain the seventeenth century author’s clear distinction between objective reality and the comic hero’s experience of that reality. This does not imply that those who came after Molière necessarily saw less clearly than he. The protests which Alceste makes against the society of Célimène do not contain, in the form in which they are made,
the questions which Molière himself raises about his society. Molière does already question the objective social order of his time, but he distinguishes between his questioning and that of Alceste. Alceste’s protest against the court of Célimène is clearly seen as subjective and it does not reach its object, although this object is indeed seen—from the author’s perspective—as questionable. The insubstantiality of the “objective” order of society has become so glaring by the eighteenth century, however, that even the author cannot adopt any firm point of view. All he can do is present the hero’s protest and society’s rejection of it, each of which is understandable only in relation to the other.

In a work such as Prévost’s *Manon Lescaut*, for instance, there is no objective key. To try to decipher a fixed meaning in this work is to miss the meaning it really has. This meaning is inseparable from the form of *Manon Lescaut*. The entire story is told from the perspective of the hero himself; we never know more than he, we are as hard put to interpret the signs as he is, and we see the other characters as well as all the events of the story through his eyes. The narrator makes it clear at the beginning that he will report Des Grieux’s words as faithfully as he can. Even the author’s preface leaves us in doubt as to whether Des Grieux’s story is a “terrible example of the force of passion” in the sense that passion itself is a seeking of illusory goals, or in the sense that the passionate individual seeking real goals must be crushed by a society based on and dedicated to empty and illusory forms. At the same time Prévost carefully advises us, and, significantly enough, reminds us by repeating the narrator-audience device of the first part of the book at the beginning of the second part, that what we are reading is a subjective account of events. Des Grieux’s own puzzlement when confronted with certain “incomprehensible” and contradictory signs also reminds us of this. Prévost gives us Des Grieux’s story of his adventures and only Des Grieux’s story, but he does not claim that this story is unequivocally *true*. The significance of the events recounted by Des Grieux is so far from being unam-
ambiguous that it is not even clear to him. Can his passion for Manon, for instance, be understood on a single level of meaning?

Structurally the story of Des Grieux’s passion resembles that of Alceste for Célimène. Like Alceste, Des Grieux falls in love with the “wrong woman.” Like Alceste, he would like his mistress to be simple and faithful and to have few or no relations with the outside world, and yet his love, like that of Alceste, grows and thrives on Manon’s “frivolity” and on her very infidelities. After the first infidelity his love becomes a veritable madness and, when she comes to see him at St. Lazare, he finds her “plus aimable et plus brillante que je ne l’avais jamais vue” (Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut; texte et orthographe de l’édition de 1753 [Paris, “Les Phares,” 1946], p. 37). Far from diminishing the love he has for her, Manon’s relations with the world elevate her, as they elevate Célimène, and make her more precious in her lover’s eyes. Des Grieux’s love takes on the aspect of a kind of cult. She becomes everything for him, while he becomes practically nothing. In the famous conversation with Tiberge, Des Grieux himself formulates his adoration of Manon in religious terms (ed. cit., p. 82) and everything he says here is confirmed subsequently (p. 100). He declares that he does not deserve the grace of being loved by a creature as perfect as Manon (p. 135), that he is nothing compared to her and that it is not for him to question the actions of such a divine being. His final triumph, the possession of Manon, is expressed in terms of a kind of religious asceticism (p. 172).

To the very degree that his passion for Manon grows, however, in the very measure that he elevates her above him, Des Grieux’s resentment of her also deepens. The development of his hatred, his frustration, his anguish, and his resentment accompanies the intensification of his love after the first infidelity (pp. 29–30, 31) and after each subsequent one or menace of one. Hatred and love feed on each other in this relation as they did in Alceste’s love for Célimène; adoring Manon, Des Grieux feels more intensely the
need to possess her and thus to humiliate this mistress who is also a rival; at the same time his need to humiliate her confirms her superiority and forces him to adore her.

Des Grieux is afflicted at times with Alcestian misanthropy. On several occasions, in particular after Manon abandons him, he feels an intense desire to flee the world, to renounce forever a society of cruel and heartless people. His misfortunes indeed confirm, as they did for Alceste, the wickedness and valuelessness of the world and his own immeasurable superiority to it. At the same time, however, Des Grieux himself does many wicked things: he lies, he deceives, he steals, he even murders. To maintain the image of his superiority to the world he has therefore to invent another myth, the myth of what we might call his “noumenal” person. According to this myth, his intentions are pure whatever acts he may perform; and even if his intentions at any given moment are not pure, he himself transcends these momentary aberrations by condemning himself for having had them. In the midst of all his evil-doing, Des Grieux can thus maintain the image of his own moral superiority, though, of course, he has to tell his story, to present his noumenal person to the public in order to have it appreciated, approved and confirmed by others—whereby the “noumenal” Des Grieux becomes something of a “phenomenal” one! The Des Grieux who does all the evil acts is the phenomenal Des Grieux, and the phenomenal Des Grieux is regulated by accident. It is thus accident that provokes the world to judge him—he himself, his highest self, is not interested in the world—and by judging him the world reveals its moral inferiority to him, and is confirmed in its pettiness and contingency. As Alceste desires to lose his lawsuit so as to confirm his own superiority to a society that has chosen to base itself on form rather than substance, so Des Grieux appears to seek the condemnation of his society in order to transform this condemnation into a sign of his own superiority to it.

Despite external and structural similarities in the relation in which the two heroes stand to their society and to their mistresses,
however, there are significant differences between the two cases. Where Célimène is the center of her society and is accepted, indeed sought after by every member of it, Manon is rejected by hers. In this sense Alceste’s desire to win a place in his society is manifested unambiguously in his love for Célimène, whereas Des Grieux’s very love for Manon implies at one and the same time his rejection of his society and his love of it. Des Grieux’s love for Manon is love for a creature who is rejected by society, and yet his love for her grows as she appears to triumph in society. But in fact Manon’s triumphs have the same ambiguity in themselves as Des Grieux’s love for her. Those who desire her at the same time degrade her, and she in turn degrades those who desire her.

The role of accident in Prévost’s novel is also ambiguous. Alceste, as we saw, presents his love for Célimène as both accident and choice. Accident, however, has no real role in Molière’s play. It has only subjective reality in Alceste’s mind as a pretext which conceals the objective reasons for his choice of Célimène. In Prévost’s novel accident plays an extensive and important role. The entire action of the story is propelled by a series of accidents. On one level these accidents can be, and are, used by the hero to absolve himself of responsibility, much as Alceste uses the “accident” of his love for Célimène. On another level, however, accident has in Manon an objective reality. It is both pretext and truth, for Prévost saw the social relations of his time as themselves arbitrary and accidental. In what sense of accident is it accident that brings together persons as diverse socially as Manon and the Italian Prince, or the fugitive lovers and a rich fermier-général? The ambiguity of the novel precludes an answer. Prévost does not commit himself to an unequivocal criticism of his society. He is not identical with his hero, nor, however, is his relation to him as clear as Molière’s relation to Alceste.

With Rousseau there is complete identification of the author and the literary spokesman. The comedy of Molière becomes the reality of Rousseau. The structure of Alceste’s relation to the
world in *Le Misanthrope* is repeated once more in Rousseau's relation to his world, but the terms of the relation have again changed. The dissolution of the world of Célimène, Acaste, Oronte and Clitandre, which was already announced, as we saw, in Molière's comedy and which had gone even further in Prévost's novel, has now, by Rousseau's time, been completed. The world of Rousseau's society is a world that wills itself as pure form, a world that seeks to sustain itself by organizing all behavior and all relations in it into set formal patterns. In this world Rousseau inevitably appeared as a comic figure, an intriguer, and a hypocrite. In the champion of sincerity, humility, and the simple life Rousseau's contemporaries found a man devoured by pride and obsessed by the desire to impress others. And all this was in a sense true. Isolated in a world of forms, longing for some real, rather than purely formal, relation to his fellows, terrified by the incomprehensibility of the signs of which formal relations are composed—the polite phrases, the protestations of affection, the honors, the looks of admiration or of interest—not knowing whether they were true or simply conventional, Rousseau, like Alceste, became fascinated with that which constantly escaped him. In the *Confessions* and the *Dialogues* he refers continually to voiles, impostures, mystères, énigmes effrayants, masques, ténèbres impénétrables, obstacles, to which he opposes other words like voir, pénétrer, démasquer. Confronted with a world which he experiences as masked, veiled, enigmatic, constantly withdrawing from him, Rousseau is seized with a desire to pull aside the veil, to tear off the mask. The only way he can achieve any relation to society, in short, is—paradoxically—by destroying the forms on which it rests. Society is thus at one and the same time the goal of his desire and the obstacle to its fulfillment, in the sense that while the individual, for Rousseau, finds his true fulfillment only through his relations with others in society, the society he knew and lived in stood in the way of such a fulfillment. Rousseau therefore spent his life in vain endeavors to achieve a
relation to others that was at once, in the conditions of the salon society of his time, necessary and impossible, desirable and intolerable, longed for and dreaded. Rousseau was not unaware that this paradox made every one of his gestures ambiguous. (Whence his fear of an enormous plot of international proportions to unmask him).

The points of similarity between Rousseau and Alceste are so obvious that they may be rapidly summarized: the adoration of the world and the contempt for the world, the longing for affection and the misanthropy, the constant gestures of departure from the world and the links that are constantly maintained with it. Just as Alceste wants to lose his lawsuit, or Des Grieux to provoke the condemnation of the world in order thereby to prove his own superiority to his judges, so Rousseau provokes the world to the point that he can imagine an enormous plot against him, involving the most eminent persons in Europe, in order both to experience himself as part of society and, by debasing his judges, to dissociate himself from it. With Rousseau as with Alceste, it is not the world that is obsessed by the individual, it is the individual who is obsessed by the world. In a striking passage of his introduction to the *Dialogues*, Rousseau himself refers to his anguish at the silence of a world that seems to be constantly and secretly scheming against him, in a way which leaves no doubt that the world of others has become his God and his transcendence: “Le silence profond, universel, non moins inconcevable que le mystère qu’il couvre, mystère que depuis quinze ans on me cache avec un soin que je m’abstiens de qualifier, et avec un succès qui tient du prodige; ce silence effrayant et terrible ne m’a pas laissé saisir la moindre idée qui pût m’éclaire sur ces étranges dispositions” (*Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Pleiade, Vol. 1 [Paris, 1959], p. 662). The “silence de ces espaces infinis” which filled Pascal with fear and awe has here become the silence of the world and the awful mystery of the *Deus absconditus* has become the mystery of the Other. Rousseau himself describes this mystery as something
“qui tient du prodige.” It is in fact on his relation to the world that he both has to and is unable to found his being. His intermittent gestures of revolt themselves make this clear. “N’ai-je donc connu la vanité de l’opinion,” he asks himself in a remarkable passage at the end of the Dialogues, “que pour me remettre sous son joug aux depend de la paix de mon âme et du repos de mon coeur? Si les hommes veulent me voir autre que je ne suis, que m’importe? L’essence de mon être est-elle dans leurs regards? ( . . . ) Pouvoir donc est-il nécessaire à mon bonheur éternel qu’ils me connoissent et me rendent justice?” (ibid., pp. 985–86).

The structure of Alceste’s relation to the world as Molière drew it in Le Misanthrope reappears once again in the literature of the nineteenth century, but once again the terms of this relation have changed. Alceste’s protest can be understood as the lament of a disgruntled and displaced robin over a social significance that he no longer possesses in the new world of the absolute monarch of the seventeenth century and as his futile and comic attempt to recover this lost significance. But the dissolution of the world of the court itself, which is fairly openly suggested in Molière’s play, makes of the comic hero a Janus-figure. To the degree that the comedy is seen from the point of view of a society that is itself losing contact with reality and dissolving into formalism Alceste’s protest can foreshadow the later protest of Rousseau against the pure conventionality of human relations in the society of his time. In Molière’s case, however, the author could still stand back from his hero to the extent that he still had a relation to society, in this instance to the Court, even though he was beginning to question this relation; in Rousseau’s case, the very nature of his relation to society was to question it. The identification of the author with his hero was consequently far greater. Indeed it was complete. In the nineteenth century the relation between the author (and consequently the hero) and society is totally disrupted. Even Rousseau’s questioning, which in itself still con-
stituted a kind of relation to his society, now turns inward and ceases to be a genuine questioning. Few of the Romantics had the real concern with social problems or the realistic grasp of them that Rousseau shows in a text such as the Second Discourse. The questions asked by the writer are no longer directed at any specific historical form of society but become generalizing and abstract. Paradoxically, however, the more general the nature of the questions, the more subjective is the nature of the questioning. The historical reality of society becomes the subjective concept of “the world,” the individual’s relation to society becomes “the human condition.”

The myth of passion, the loudly advertised uniqueness of the hero, the desire to go off to the desert with the beloved, the rejection of the world, and the adoration of the world are recurrent themes in the literature of Romanticism. The Romantic hero alternately adores and condemns his mistress, just as he alternately adores and condemns the world, passing inevitably in the fury of pride and fear, from the one extreme to the other, experiencing himself now as totally absolute and autonomous, now as totally contingent and dependent, now as a God-like plenitude of being and now as a worm-like absence of being, constantly affirming his independence, constantly discovering his dependence, and con-

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8 In his article “Don Juan and the Baroque” (Diogenes, 14, Summer 1956, pp. 1-16), Jean Rousset points to the same rapprochement of author and hero in the case of Romantic versions of the Don Juan legend as compared with versions produced in the seventeenth century. “One constant in the Don Juans of the seventeenth century,” he writes (p. 10), “is that their authors are not their accomplices, in spite of their acceptance of inconstancy. They do not confuse themselves with Don Juan, even when they no longer acknowledge the point of view of permanence. Molière maintains a distance between himself and his Don Juan, even though this distance has decreased since Tirso. (. . .) On the other hand, Romanticism—and all of the modern period following it—upset the significance of the Don Juan as conceived by the baroque and, particularly, altered his relationship with his authors. The latter were to conceive of a Don Juan in their own image, their accomplice and their brother. (. . .) We were to see Hoffmann, Byron, Musset and Baudelaire confusing themselves with their Don Juans, and consequently glorifying and absolving him.”
stantly denying this dependence in order to reaffirm his independence. The pathos of Vigny's *Chatterton* with its general indictment of an uncomprehending world has its counterpart in the Kafka-like pages of the *Journal* with their bitter and strangely modern-sounding condemnation of *le sale espoir* (the illusions of Romanticism) and their transformation of an ugly and oppressive world into the God before whom we have to bow our heads. The poet would be God and have the world for his slave and admirer; the failure of this dream of dominion transforms the world into Moloch and the poet into its abject slave. All the Romantics want to be distinguished, different from others and superior to them. But to ask to be distinguished is to admit a degrading dependence on one's inferiors. A common solution to this dilemma is to cause a scandal (*épater le bourgeois*), without of course intending to—or at least this is how it is to appear—and thus to provoke a judgment, by which one is at once distinguished and at the same time confirmed as superior by the very vindictiveness and stupidity of the judges who pronounce the inevitable condemnation. The infantile nature of this behavior has been beautifully demonstrated by Madame Magny in a chapter on the Surrealists in her book *Histoire du roman français depuis 1918* (Paris, 1950). But its presence is not always perceived. In a paper read to the Johns Hopkins Philological Society in 1962, René Girard pointed out that the murder of the Arab by Meursault in Camus' *L'Etranger* is never satisfactorily explained by the author. It has the appearance of an accident, but if it were only an accident, it would not be enough to give a general and universal significance to the novel and to Meursault's condemnation by the judges at the end. On the other hand, if it is intentional, Meursault must be held to deserve his punishment according to the law of the land, which holds for all, and the judges cannot be considered particularly vindictive or cruel; for Meursault is not in fact condemned for the moral crime or emotional
inadequacy of not crying at his mother's funeral—no judge could condemn a man on those grounds—but for the capital crime of murder. The trouble is that, far from everybody's being concerned with Meursault's existence—with knowing, for instance, how he felt at his mother's funeral—no one ever shows the slightest interest in the man. The device used by Camus is in reality one that recurs in countless Romantic works. The murder is intended to attract the interest of an intolerably indifferent world, to transform a mediocre and undistinguished character into a distinguished victim, but at the same time it must not appear intended, for the little man is to be noticed and singled out by the world without having to ask to be noticed and singled out. Camus-Meursault is in fact the man who is obsessed by an indifferent world and who makes it appear that the world is obsessed by him. Naturally enough he can do this only through the device of the "accidental" murder, for without the murder society would never have noticed Meursault. In the same way the world's persecution of Des Grieux is not provoked by him, but is the result of a series of "accidents." Likewise Alceste sees the situation caused by his refusal to give the customary presents to the judges in his lawsuit as an example of the world's persecution of the virtuous. Whereas Molière points out through Philinte, however, that it is up to Alceste to decide whether he really wants to fight his case, both Prévost and Camus allow the reader to imagine that their heroes are entirely innocent victims.

The modern writer is not entirely to blame for failing to reach the clearness of vision that characterizes Molière. One must suppose that other factors, factors to some degree outwith the artist's control, have intervened to make the comic perspective progressively more difficult to achieve in modern times. If we consider even those recent writers who have seemed to us to share Molière's comic perspective, we find that the comedy is darker and more bitter in their works than it is in the plays of Molière. Madame
Bovary is not as hilariously funny as *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, although the comic structure is very similar, and there is an element of cruel irony in the novels of Stendhal, and even more so in those of Dostoievski, that is absent from the works of Molière with which we have compared them. Similarly it would seem that something very considerable must have happened to transform Alceste into the utter nonentity that Meursault is.

We noted earlier that the "open" type of comedy, represented in the work of Molière by *Les Précieuses ridicules* or *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, was less common in modern literature than one might at first have expected; and that the "closed" type, in which the hero is actually the rival of his idol, whom he worships and denies at the same time, was far more prevalent. We suggested that the reason for this lay in the dissolution of the earlier hierarchical social order and in a growing perception that differences, which were previously believed to be founded in an objective reality, are formal, conventional, "ideal" (to use Saint-Simon's term), in short, imaginary. "La pantomime des gueux" is seen as "le grand branle de la terre" and everyone is observed to have "sa petite Hus et son Bertin" (Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*). In these conditions, as Diderot's astonishing text implies, the choice must be either to change the existing social order and to construct a new one in accordance with the real equality of men, as the social revolutionary hopes to do, or to accept the unreality of social distinctions and to seek for oneself an imaginary place in an imaginary hierarchy. Every little Rameau will then aspire to be a little Bertin, and the result will then be the progressive denial of the objective, the acceptance of the subjective as primary reality, and the identification of the realm of the imaginable with the realm of the real. Everyone in these circumstances becomes potentially a superior and a rival to every one else, and the anguish and misery of the individual locked in this world of subjectivity becomes at one and the same time more and more imaginary and more and more unbearable. The pain increases, as it were,
in proportion as its objective cause disappears. If we compare
the world of the Restoration as it is portrayed in the work of
Stendhal with the world of the ancien régime as it appears in the
comedies of Molière, we shall be struck by the interpenetration
of the social classes in Stendhal. To the very degree that there

*Toqueville, in his Democracy in America, gives a profound and prophetic
analysis of this situation as it was understood by an acute observer in the
1830's. The following passage is taken from Part II, Book 3, Chap. 16 of the
Henry Reeve translation, “Why the national vanity of the Americans is more
restless and captious than that of the English” (edition of London, 1862,
Vol. 2, pp. 269-70): “In aristocratic countries the great possess immense
privileges, upon which their pride rests, without seeking to rely upon the
lesser advantages which accrue to them. As these privileges come to them by
inheritance, they regard them in some sort as a portion of themselves, or at
least as a natural right inherent in their own persons. They therefore entertain
a calm sense of their own superiority; they do not dream of vaunting privileges
which every one perceives and no one contests, and these things are not
sufficiently new to them to be made topics of conversation. They stand un·
moved in their solitary greatness, well assured that they are seen of all the
world without any effort to show themselves off, and that no one will attempt
to drive them from that position (...).

“When on the contrary social conditions differ but little, the slightest
privileges are of some importance; as every man sees around himself a million
people enjoying precisely similar or analogous advantages, his pride becomes
craving and jealous, he clings to mere trifles, and doggedly defends them.
In democracies, as the conditions of life are very fluctuating, men have almost
always recently acquired the advantages which they possess; the consequence
is that they feel extreme pleasure in exhibiting them, to show others and con­
vince themselves that they really enjoy them. As at any instant these same
advantages may be lost, their possessors are constantly on the alert, and make
a point of showing that they still retain them. (...)

“The restless and insatiable vanity of a democratic people originates so
entirely in the equality and precariousness of social conditions, that the
members of the haughtiest nobility display the very same passion in those lesser
portions of their existence in which there is anything fluctuating or contested.
An aristocratic class always differs greatly from the other classes of the nation,
by the extent and perpetuity of its privileges; but it often happens that the
only differences between the members who belong to it consist in small tran­
sient advantages, which may any day be lost or acquired.

“The members of a powerful aristocracy, collected in a capital or a court,
have been known to contest with virulence those frivolous privileges which
depend on the caprice of fashion or the will of their master. These persons
then displayed towards each other precisely the same puerile jealousies which
animate the men of democracies, the same eagerness to snatch the smallest
advantages which their equals contested, and the same desire to parade ostentatiously those of which they were in possession.” (Italics added throughout).
is greater movement from one class to another, the signs of
distinction are more grossly insisted on, and as the signs of dis­
tinction are more grossly insisted on, the substance of these
distinctions becomes thinner and thinner. The new aristocracy
is more consciously "aristocratic" than the old ever was, precisely
because it feels itself constantly judged not only by the old but
by its own servants (one thinks of Madame de Fervacques or the
Duchess of Miossens), while the old aristocracy adopts many of
the so-called bourgeois virtues in order to justify itself before the
bourgeoisie (the "patriarchal" nobles of Balzac's novels). The
old aristocracy can no longer simply be itself. Even where it is
contemptuous of the new ways, it does not escape them. Mathilde
de La Môle is also "proving" something to others; her very refusal
to follow the new style, her attempt to maintain the old aristocratic
style is itself theatrical.

As the area of rivalry, fear, and resentment is gradually extended
until it embraces almost the whole of society, it becomes in­
creasingly difficult to get outside it. The follies of Don Quixote
take place against a large background of common sense; the
comedy of Malvolio's sickly vanity is observed and laughed at by
every other character in the play. In the work of Molière, this
common sense background is still present. Cathos and Magdelon,
Harpagon and Argan are alone in their madness. Against them
Molière sets the rather limited but healthy "horse sense" of serv­
ants, the real and concrete desires of young lovers, the honnêteté
of the raisonneurs and the—admittedly enigmatic—wisdom of
certain of his women characters. Madame Jourdain, stout, solid,
and sensible, is a necessary foil for her fantastical and romantic
husband. Toinette, buxom and beaming with good health, sets
Argan in his proper light. It is true that there is hardly a single
honest character in George Dandin. Against the vanity and
sadistic resentment of Dandin and the Sotenvilles can be set
only the scheming hypocrisy of Angélique and her maid and the
cold cynicism of Clitandre. But George Dandin, like La Comtesse
d'Escarbagnas, which is in many respects fairly close to it, is set in the provinces and the comedy of provincial life is watched by an urbane Parisian audience of honnêtes gens. It is this tacit opposition of Paris and provinces that provides the perspective from which the comedy can be perceived.

If the superiority of the capital be made subject to doubt, however, if the suspicion be aroused that the capital is not really very different from the provinces, George Dandin will become a very dark comedy indeed. Petersburg and Moscow are not in fact portrayed in The Possessed nor Paris in Madame Bovary, any more than the capital is portrayed in George Dandin, and to some degree these novels can be considered provincial comedies in the same way that George Dandin can. Nonetheless we are vaguely aware, as we read the novels, that the distinction between capital and provinces is finer in the world of the nineteenth century than it was in the world of the seventeenth, and we are more acutely conscious than Molière's audiences probably were that we shall ourselves be dupes if we imagine that not being provincials allows us to escape the ridicules of Homais or Emma Bovary, of Mrs. Stavrogin or of the Governor's wife. Not only are the same comedies, covered by a thin veneer of elegance, enacted in the capital—Proust is one of the great teachers here—the lower inhabitants of the capital ultimately try to humiliate their country cousins, thus joining the two realms of capital and provinces, town and country, in one vast structure of vanity and resentment. Even in Madame Bovary this can be observed in Léon's changed attitude to Emma after his—rather wretched—period of study in Paris. Léon feels as superior for having lived in the capital as the Comtesse d'Escarbagnas does for having spent a few days at Court. This interpenetration of capital and provinces, which resembles the interpenetration of the classes during the last century of the ancien régime and the even greater fluctuations of the Restoration, had not yet occurred in Molière's time. The comic perspective in Molière’s play was thus more
firmly established by the social structure itself and was more easily reached by his audiences than is the case with the two nineteenth-century novels. Just as good solid bourgeois and noblemen alike could laugh at the antics of Jourdain, so provincials and courtiers alike could laugh at the antics of Dandin and the Comtesse d'Escarbagnas. Since each group felt sufficiently confident of itself and since neither was dependent on the other for recognition, the spectacle of the social climber was funny to both.

Time has corroded the social hierarchies that constituted the objective, historical condition of the comic perspective in Molière's own age. The privileged perspective of the capital and of the honnêtes gens has turned out to be insubstantial and ephemeral, and at the same time the once simple and self-reliant population of the provinces has increasingly sought to vie with its urban counterpart. Very few have not become Dandins or Sotenvilles in one degree or another. In these conditions the vantage point from which George Dandin can be laughed at is no longer given by the social structure itself, it has to be acquired. Once it has been acquired, the objective truth of the comedy may be more clearly perceived than it was by Molière's own audiences. In the absence of an historical perspective, the comedy of George Dandin, for instance, could well appear more universal to a modern reader than it did to the audience that watched it three hundred years ago and that judged it from its own social perspective, but at the same time the point of view from which such a modern reader might perceive the universality of the comedy would inevitably be more ideal than it was for Molière's audiences. The comedy would then be at once funnier and grimmer than it was for the seventeenth-century audience, and to the degree that the vantage point from which it was being viewed was purely intellectual and mental, it would become very grim indeed, for the reader would have nothing but his own awareness of vanity and stupidity to set against an empirical world that he sees as completely given over to foolish cruelties and empty sufferings. This situation ac-
counts for the rather black and depressing humor of *Madame Bovary* or of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, for instance. The entire world of *Madame Bovary*, with the single exception of the great doctor who was Charles Bovary’s teacher, is engulfed in stupidity, mean­ness, heartlessness, and vanity. Pretentiousness and folly are no longer the exception, as they still appear to be in Molière, they are now the rule, and it is the man of wisdom and moderation who is isolated in the world, along with dumb and, for this reason alone, authentic creatures, such as Catherine, the old farm servant, who makes a brief but memorable appearance at the scene of the country fair in *Madame Bovary*.

Molière’s own work, however, already shows signs of the inroads of modernity. In his most troubling and complex comedies the world of common sense has worn somewhat thin. *Le Misanthrope*, for instance, manifests a considerable narrowing down of the solid background of common sense with respect to simpler comedies such as *Le Malade imaginaire* or *L’Ecole des femmes*. Célimène, Oronte, Arsinoë, and the two marquesses are not quite as deranged in their vanity as Alceste, but their world is not a healthy one either. Even as a world of empty forms and conventions it is not an alternative to the madness of Alceste. The members of this world are themselves unable to sustain the formalism on which their society rests. The vanity of the men ultimately forces them to insist that Célimène declare her hand and pronounce whom she really prefers among them, but this is the one demand that is inadmissible in a world of forms. It is as though all the courtiers of Versailles had demanded to know where they really stood in the King’s favor. The collapse of the united front of Célimène and her society against Alceste reveals clearly enough that the world of Paris and Versailles, which appears to provide a foil for the follies and vanities of the comic hero, is itself undermined by folly and vanity. Its cohesion is only apparent; behind the façade of elegant order there is the same seething of destructive pride and anguish as there is behind
Alceste's façade of righteousness and frankness. Philinte and Eliante are the only authentic characters in the comedy, but they are in a sense isolated from society, belonging to no society but their own. Once again, of course, the public of supposedly honnêtes gens can be considered as distinct from Célimène and her group, and as closer to Philinte and Eliante. As compared with George Dandin, however, the comic perspective is already becoming more and more ideal. In George Dandin the world of honnêteté which provided the perspective on the comedy could be identified with the world of Paris and Versailles. In Le Misanthrope we find that the world of honnêteté has shrunk further, since it now excludes part of the society of the town and the Court, a rather considerable part, one would guess. Le Misanthrope is, after all, a comedy set in the high society of Paris. We cannot regard as insignificant the fact that the only two authentic characters in this society cut very lonely figures indeed.

The question of perspective is acute, we should insist, only in the most difficult and problematic of Molière’s comedies. In them, however, we can discern the shape of the future. We have already referred to the extreme ideality of the perspective in Flaubert's masterpiece and to the effect that this ideality had on the form of his humor. A brief look at Pushkin's Eugene Onegin will, I hope, make even clearer the importance of the objective conditions of the comic writer’s activity.

Pushkin's verse novel is a beautifully ironical exposure of the

7Pushkin's Eugene Onegin not only bears a striking thematic resemblance to Molière's Misanthrope, it occupies a similar position in its author's development to that occupied in Molière's development by Le Misanthrope. It was in and through Eugene Onegin that Pushkin overcame the Romanticism in his own heart, just as in and through Le Misanthrope Molière conquered that part of him which was Alceste. Pushkin's emancipation from certain aspects of Romanticism can be followed in his changing attitude to Byron, his judgment of Hugo and his relation to writers like Shakespeare, Scott, and Goethe. Cf. B. P. Gorodetski, Dramaturgia Pushkina (Moscow and Leningrad, 1953); also Pushkin i Teatr; dramaticheskie proizvedenia, stati, zamietchi, dnieviki, pisma, ed. E. Ivanovna, N. Litvinienko, A. Klinchin (Moscow, 1953).
destructive illusions of Romantic love and of the rhetorical emptiness of Romantic misanthropy, though Pushkin also shows that the false attitudes and illusions of his Romantic characters, their inability to achieve authenticity, cannot be considered apart from the narrowness and vacuity of the world they live in. His heroine, like Emma Bovary later, is bewitched by Romantic novels which she begins reading in imitation of her mother, who had in turn taken up the habit in imitation of her brilliant Moscow cousin Princess Aline (II, 30):

She took to novel reading early,
And all her days became a glow
Of rapturous love for the creations
Of Richardson and of Rousseau.

(II, 29)

On Tatyana the reading of novels has a much deeper effect than it had on her mother or her aunt, both of whom learned very quickly to accept that radical distinction between poetry and fact, between literature and life, which Belinsky considered characteristic of Russian society. Tatyana learns through novels of a larger world beyond the estates of her father and his neighbors. She learns to desire what neither the boorish friends of her father nor any mild village idealist can give to her. Unlike her sister Olga, she is not attracted by Lensky, the enthusiastic young dreamer who comes home to his village after drinking in deep draughts of Kantian idealism and literary romanticism in Germany. Lacking any concrete experience of the world or any acquaintance with people of wider interests and deeper aspirations than those of the landlords who visit her father’s home, she immediately fixes all her longings on Onegin, associating the strange new neighbor with all the heroes of her favorite novels:

The lover of Julie Wolmar,
Malek-Adhel and de Linar,
Werther, who played the rebel’s part,
And that sleep-bringing paragon,
The still unrivaled Grandison.\(^8\)

(III, 9)

Ironically, but compassionately, Pushkin predicts the inevitable fate of his delightful but dreamy heroine. The hero she is in love with is a fiction. Onegin himself is, in his own way, a victim of the sterility and emptiness of Russian life. He too is filled with ideas and aspirations garnered from books, ideas and aspirations that are absolutely unrelated to the real conditions of Russian society and cannot be realized in them. Onegin's whole being has been poisoned by a spurious education. He is filled with cynical self-pity, and behind the "interesting" image of the intelligent young aristocrat there is only a sterile preoccupation with self:

*On the influence of novels, the second of Belinsky's articles on Onegin, the ninth in the Pushkin series, should be consulted. I quote at some length a particularly relevant passage: “The very endeavour of a person to develop independently, extraneously of society, imparts to him a sort of singularity, a freakishness which, in its turn, also bears the stamp of society. That is why with us gifted people richly endowed by nature are often unbearable, and that is why with us only genius can save a man from vulgarity. By the same token we have so little genuine and so much *bookish, conned* sentiments, passions and strivings; in short, so little truth and life in sentiments, passions and strivings, and so much verbal flourish instead of them. The general spread of reading is bringing us untold benefit; herein lies our salvation and the lot of our futurity; but it also, on the other hand, breeds much harm (. . .) Our society (. . .) is the fruit of reform (. . .) It began in the same way as our literature: by the imitation of foreign forms devoid of all content, either our own or foreign, for we had rejected our own without being capable of adopting, leave alone understanding, the foreign. The French had tragedies—so we must needs begin to write tragedies too; and Mr. Sumarokov combined in his own single person Corneille and Racine and Voltaire. The French had a famous fabulist La Fontaine and the selfsame Mr. Sumarokov, according to the testimony of his contemporaries, threw La Fontaine into the shade with his Russian parables. Similarly, in the briefest space of time, we begot our own homebred Pindars, Horaces, Anacreons, Homers, Virgils, etc. Foreign works were full of amorous emotions and amorous adventures, and we must needs fill ours with the same. But there the poetry of books mirrored the poetry of life, the rhyme of love was a reflection of the love that formed the life and poetry of society: with us love only found its way into books and there it stayed (. . .) And so, many people with us like to talk about love, to read and write about it; but as to loving . . . that is an entirely different matter (. . .) The worst of it is that that other matter necessarily gives birth to a*
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But oh, Tatyana, dear Tatyana!
The tears are gathering in my eyes;
Already to a modern despot
You’ve given yourself as sacrifice.

(III, 15)

The prediction is, of course, fulfilled.

Onegin is incapable of love. Like Alceste, he has experienced the deceitful superficiality of human relations—though, unlike Alceste he has also experienced them in himself—and he has turned against the world in dark misanthropy (IV, 1-10). But Pushkin allows his reader to entertain no illusions about the nature of Onegin’s boredom and disgust with life:

Lord Byron with his happy wand
Has clothed in dark Romanticism
Incorrigible egotism.

(III, 12)

third, rather ugly matter. When life and poetry lack a natural vital bond of unity their disparately-hostile existence gives rise to a spurious poetically and exceedingly morbid, ugly reality. One part of society, true to its innate apathy, peacefully dozes in the slough of gross materiality; but the other, numerically still the smaller, though already fairly considerable, takes great pains to create for itself a poetical existence, to combine poetry with life. It does so in a very simple and innocuous manner. Seeing no poetry in society it takes it from books and works out its life accordingly. Poetry says that love is the soul of life: therefore, we must love! The syllogism is correct—it is backed up both by the mind and by the heart itself! And so our ideal youth or our ideal maid seeks an object with which to fall in love. (... ) The ensuing comedy contains everything the heart desires: sighs, and tears, and dreams, and walks in the moonlight, and despair, and jealousy, and rapture, and vows—everything except genuine feeling. No wonder that the last act of this mountebank comedy always ends in disillusionment—and in what?—in your own feeling, in your own capacity for loving! And yet this bookish tendency is quite natural: was it not the book that turned the kind, chivalrous and sensible country gentleman of La Mancha into the knight-errant Don Quixote? (... ) How many Don Quixotes did we not have between the generation of the twenties and the present time? We had and still have the Don Quixotes of love, science, literature, convictions, Slavophilism and God knows what else! They are too numerous to mention! Above we spoke of the ideal maids; and what a lot of interesting things could be told of the ideal youth!” (V. G. Belinsky, Selected Philosophical Works [Moscow, 1956], pp. 274-76.)
Later in the tale Tatyana finds that Onegin’s favorite reading, indeed his only reading, for he has renounced everything else, is in fact Lord Byron, his hero, the romantic world-conqueror Napoleon. In his country home she finds well-thumbed and underlined copies of Don Juan and The Gaiour together with

Lord Byron’s portrait and a stand  
With a small iron figurine  
With hat on, forehead dark, oppressed,  
And arms tight-folded on his breast.

(VII, 19)

With innumerable deft touches of this kind Pushkin explores Onegin’s romantic misanthropy. The point he wants to make is so important, however, that he drives it home vigorously in an astonishing stanza in Chapter Four:

Then whom are we to love and trust in  
And count on never to abuse  
Our love, but measure all our actions  
With the same yardstick that we use?  
Who will not slander us, but take  
The greatest pains for our dear sake?  
Who never bores us, but exalts  
Us always, even for our faults?  
You restless seeker of a dream.  
It is yourself you must adore!  
Don’t waste your labor any more,  
Reader, for you yourself would seem  
The object to be placed above  
All else, and worthiest of your love.

(IV, 22)

The so-called misanthrope is an impostor. Reviling the world for its hypocrisy and deceitfulness, Onegin is shown to be himself utterly inauthentic; he is constantly striking attitudes, acting parts.
The guests at the brilliant reception in the last chapter see him enter and wonder:

What will he be? Melmoth to-day?
World-citizen or Quaker, say?
A patriot, some fanatic soul,
Childe Harold? What is now his role?

Onegin’s vanity and destructiveness are insisted on in several episodes of the novel. He deliberately sets out to turn the head of Olga, the fiancée of his friend Lensky. Not because she attracts him—she does not—but out of pique and self-hatred. He cannot bear the happiness which is the lot of his naïve young friend, and he resents the entire world of the Larins with its simple dreams, simple contentments, simple sorrows, and simple ignorance. Incapable of happiness himself, Onegin seeks to destroy that of those around him, to fulfill in the world outside him the nothingness and despair within him. Lensky challenges Onegin to a duel, but when he finds that Olga still loves him he regrets his challenge. Being young, however, he is ashamed to withdraw. Onegin knows that Lensky cannot withdraw and that he himself ought to apologize in order to close the ridiculous affair. If he really is as superior to the world as he claims to be, he need not care what is said about him. But in fact, this is the one thing Onegin does care about, though, as with Dom Juan, his obsession with the opinion of others also causes him on many occasions to flout it. Zaretsky, an old gossip, having been drawn into the affair, Onegin cannot turn back:

“( . . . ) one of course detests
And ought to scorn his jeers; but then,
the mocking words of foolish men. . . .”
On just such social thinking rests
That honor which we all revere,
The very axis of our sphere.

(VI, 11)
So the hero who purports to despise public opinion kills his young friend for the sake of public opinion.

At the end of the novel Onegin meets Tatyana again. She has married a wealthy, high-born, and important general and has become one of the leading ladies of the brilliant society of St. Petersburg. Now at last, having rejected her condescendingly in her country village, Onegin “falls in love” with her. Is his love authentic? Pushkin leaves the question unanswered. The novel expresses, it does not seek to resolve, the ambiguity of the hero’s own emotions.9

It is strictly impossible to separate love and vanity in Onegin. There is some reason to believe that the death of Lensky and the travels on which he immediately set out have done something to him. To Byron, whom he reads in the French translation of Amédée Pichot, are added now Gibbon, Chamfort, Herder, Manzoni, Rousseau, Fontenelle, and Bayle, “the arrant skeptic.”10 He himself declares that he has seen through his empty independence and his futile attitudinizing, that he longs for a real relation with another human being. This declaration is itself ambiguous, however. It would have been true in a sense at any time in his life. He had always longed for a meaningful relation with others (his affection for Lensky is evidence of this), but his

9 “Can we unmask him?” Pushkin asks later (VIII, 7). Pushkin never hands us his hero in a nutshell. When Tatyana visits Onegin’s home, she learns something of what he is, but Pushkin expresses her insight in the form of a series of questions: “Is he from Heaven or from Hades? / This strange and sorry character, / Angel or fiend, as you prefer, / What is he? A mere imitation, / A Muscovite in Harold’s cloak, / A wretched ghost, a foreign joke / But with a new interpretation, / A lexicon of snobbery / And fashion, or a parody?” (VII, 24) As if to ward off too easy acquiescence in these suggestions, Pushkin adds in the following stanza: “Has she the answer to the riddle / And has she found the word?” In his comments on Onegin in the Pushkin Speech, Dostoevski singularly flattens Pushkin’s profound, yet laconic and ironical, portrait of his hero, his “strange companion,” by accepting unilaterally the definition of Onegin as a “parody.”

10 Translators disagree as to who the arrant skeptic is, the Bayle of the Dictionary or the Beyle who was Stendhal. While Pushkin is known to have been an admirer of Stendhal, it seems more likely that in the present context the reference is to Bayle.
disgust with a world of ignorance and cant having turned to proud contempt for it, he had become virtually incapable of any relations with others and had in fact come to believe that he desired none. Onegin’s cynicism had always masked the bitterness of frustrated hopes and dreams. But in the struggle with the world even those hopes and dreams, which in better conditions might have been simple and direct, had become tainted with the exasperated egotism of the alienated individual. Onegin’s desire for Tatyana may well, therefore, be in large measure a desire to re-establish his superiority to her, to conquer her in the eyes of the world and feed his own egotism, as Tatyana says it is. But this motive of vanity in no way excludes its opposite. In the accomplished and experienced Tatyana of St. Petersburg, Onegin rightly sees the woman he can love, for Tatyana, having experienced the world as he has, and having concealed the deepest longings of her heart beneath a mask of social grace and convention, is now in a position to understand and love him not as Saint-Preux or Werther, but as the man he really is. The ambiguity of Onegin’s love for Tatyana is entirely rooted in her social being. His vanity is piqued by her social experience and poise, by her self-control and her understanding; but these very qualities of experience and understanding are also what inspires in him a real love and respect, a longing to share his life with her, such as he could not have felt for the simple country girl with her romances, her day-dreams, and her superstitions. Unfortunately this very experience of the world which raises Tatyana to a level of understanding commensurate with Onegin’s, also makes her less simple and less trusting than she had been before. Perhaps she was not, as she claims bitterly, “better” in the country, but she was certainly purer and more innocent. She is too much a woman of the world now not to discern the vanity in Onegin’s profession of love for her, and she is also too much a woman of the world not to mingle in this discernment her own pique, wounded pride, and vengefulness:
I do not doubt,
Onegin, that you still recall
The garden and the avenue
Where fate once brought us, me and you,
And that long sermon you let fall.
I listened to you, still and meek—
Today it is my turn to speak.

(VIII, 42)

There in the country far from gossip
And standards based on idle show
I did not please you. For what reason
Must you today pursue me so?
Why have you marked me for your game?
Is it not that I've a name
And riches and because you see
Me move in great society?
Because my husband, wounded in
The wars, is petted by the court
And they would all observe the sport
If such a contest should begin,
So that, if you could drag me down
You'd gain some scandalous renown?

(VIII, 44)

Tatyana's experience of the world, her realism and understanding, the qualities that now draw Eugene to her, to the degree that his love is genuine, are also the qualities that allow her to read the ambiguity of his motivation and to see that there is no place in the world as it is for their love.

Tatyana would gladly give up all the luxury and glitter of her life in Petersburg

For our wild garden and the joys
Of my old books—the modest lands
Around our house, and all the scene
But there is no going back. The self-conscious, worldly, and discerning woman whom Onegin now loves cannot at the same time be the trusting, naïve, and unselfconscious child of the far-off estate. Tatyana understands Onegin as she did not understand him before. That is why she can say with perfect truthfulness that she still loves him; indeed she loves him more, for she loves him knowing him, but, knowing him, she also knows their love cannot come to anything. There is no escape for Tatyana and Onegin out of the social world which has made them what they are, which has at last brought them together and which at the same time, as Tatyana at least realizes, requires that they part.

At the end of Onegin the wheel has turned full cycle: The God of the silent and remote village garden has become the slave of the brilliant Petersburg drawing-rooms. The passionate letter in which Onegin declares his love and places his public reputation at Tatyana’s mercy corresponds to the earlier letter in which Tatyana professed her love and placed her reputation at Onegin’s mercy. (The parallel is brought out nicely by Tchaikovsky when he uses the same theme for the two letter arias.) Onegin’s refusal of Tatyana in Chapter Four on the grounds that their marriage would rapidly languish in boredom, unhappiness, and tears—which was quite true at the time—is paralleled by Tatyana’s refusal of Onegin in Book Eight on the equally valid grounds that when a woman flouts society and leaves her husband she can bring happiness neither to herself nor to her lover. (It is not hard to see how closely Anna Karenina follows up the theme of Onegin.) When Tatyana begged for Onegin’s love, it was he who understood that their union was impossible, as indeed it was.

(VIII, 46)
Now that Onegin begs for Tatyana's love, it is she who has the deeper insight and who has to teach him that their union is impossible. His respect for her is entirely justified by her very refusal of him. "There are romances," writes Belinsky (op. cit., p. 245), "the very idea of which consists precisely in the fact that they have no ending, because there are events in real life that have no denouement, there is existence without aim, creatures difficult to define, baffling to everybody, even to themselves, in short, what the French call les êtres manqués, les existences avortées."

Pushkin's romance is shot through with delicate irony. It is no longer as straightforwardly comic as the plays of Molière. If Pushkin conquered his romanticism in this work as Molière conquered that part of him which was Alceste in Le Misanthrope, the victory was even less than in Molière's comedy a clear victory of simple truth and common sense over falsehood and illusion. There are several little cameos of old Russian life in the novel, which the author sets against the romanticism of his hero and heroine, but these are not genuine alternatives. Tatyana's mother gave up her handsome sergeant of the Guards along with her novel reading and settled down to a measured life on the estate of the good and simple man to whom she had been betrothed against her will, making pancakes at Shrovetide and going twice a year to confession. Her husband is described as "a simple squire without caprice" (II, 36) who "loved his wife sincerely / And never gave her cause to frown, / But spent his days serene and trustful, / Attired in a dressing gown" (II, 34). He stands for a way of life that is irretrievably lost, a life of quiet and dull acceptance, lived according to ancestral custom. He has no understanding of the restless desires of the younger generation. For this reason he cannot protect his daughter from the influences that cause her unhappiness:

Her father, who was good and kind,
Had long ago been left behind
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By modern ways, but in the main,
Although he thought books light and vain,
He did not think them any harm.
And when a man has never read,
The books his daughter takes to bed
With her will cause him no alarm.

(II, 29)

Tatyana's old nurse, like her father, accepts time-hallowed ways. She is appalled and terrified when Tatyana confides that she is in love and crosses herself energetically. Love for her is a madness from which we must be protected. Young people do not marry for love, she tells Tatyana, but according to the plans of their parents.

The character of the father and that of the old nurse are drawn by Pushkin, as similar figures were drawn later by Tolstoy and Chekhov, with great affection and compassion, but not without irony. Pushkin knows, as Molière knew when he created Dom Louis or Dom Carlos or Dorine, that the old order is doomed and that the emancipation of the individual cannot be avoided. Nor does he conceal what is narrow and cruel in the old ways. Perhaps there is some idealization of them. On the whole, however, the picture of Russian country life and of the simple people in particular is beautiful and moving in its plain truthfulness. Tatyana's old nurse is distressed by the child's confession of love, but she does not gild the reality of her own betrothal under the good old system of the marriage-broker:

( . . . ) By God's will, my Vanya
Was but a boy, if truth were told,
And I was just thirteen years old.
The marriage-broker kept on pressing
The matter for a fortnight; oh,
What tears I shed you do not know,
The day my father gave his blessing;
They loosed my braids, and singing low
Led me to church. I had to go.

(III, 18)

As for Onegin's contemporaries, those who, like Acaste and Clitandre, sneer at his constant play-acting, discerning very clearly the vanity that lies behind his professed contempt for them, they are no more superior to him than Célimène and her group are superior to Alceste. If one of the guests at the ball comments shrewdly on Onegin's theatricality, he is answered by another:

Why do you speak with such disfavor
About him? Is it that we all
So love to meddle and to censure?
Or that unfettered spirits call
Forth either rage or mockery
From every vain nonentity?

. . . . . . . . . .

Or do the mediocre seem
The only subject for esteem?

In Eugene Onegin there is only the dying world of the old nurse and Tatyana's father, the inessential world of Moscow society, and the illusory world of the hero and heroine. There is no longer an available position in society itself, such as is represented in Le Misanthrope by Philinte and Eliante, which allows us to consider the behavior of the principal protagonists as in some sense exceptional or "abnormal."

This is equally true of Chekhov. In Chekhov, as in Pushkin, the old family servants represent a world that is moribund. In the Three Sisters, Andrey and his sisters dream of Moscow and how much better things are there. At one point Andrey asks the old servant Ferrapont if he has ever been to Moscow or wanted to go there. The old man replies simply that it was not God's will that he should go to Moscow. Similarly in The Cherry
After Molière, it is old Feers who provides the contrast with the restless seeking, wandering, and suffering of his educated masters. But when they close the house up and go away, they forget all about the old man and leave him abandoned there in the ancestral home on which they have turned their backs for ever.

Immediately the empirically real social perspective from which Molière presented the follies and vanities of Jourdain or Philaminte or Argan narrowed to the already somewhat ideal perspective offered by an Eliante and a Philinte, his comedy lost something of the gross heartiness that characterizes Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, Les Femmes savantes, La Malade imaginaire, and even Tartuffe. The virtual absence of any such perspective in Eugene Onegin obliged Pushkin to renounce this hearty type of comedy altogether. Eugene Onegin remains a comedy, but it is a comedy of irony, not a full blooded satire. Pushkin's vantage point already has a greater quality of ideality than Molière's had, even in Le Misanthrope, and Chekhov's has more ideality still (whence the excessively romantic interpretations that bedevil many modern productions of Chekhov). The perspective from which Pushkin portrays the illusions of his beloved Tatyana—his vierni ideal, his true ideal—and of his strange companion—moi sputnik strannij—Onegin, is an ideal one in which the freedom

It is not altogether surprising that Bert Brecht, with his astonishing satirical talent, was a socialist, and that he worked at a time when the socialist movement seemed to offer a concrete ground for confidence in the future. Brecht was able to rediscover all the heartiness of Molière's heartiest satire and all the verve of his farce in part, at least, because his association with a broad and empirically real workers' movement provided him with a firm platform from which he could look upon the follies, affectations, and impostures of the decadent "ruling classes." Brecht, of course, is more combative than Molière was, for the victory of socialism in which he believed so intensely had not yet been won. It would be an error to discount his political faith in any discussion of his comic genius, or even of his dramatic techniques. How justified this faith was, is another question. What seems certain is that genuine satirical comedy becomes less and less possible as the writer loses faith in humanity and human life, as his public becomes more and more infected with inauthenticity and hypocrisy. Irony seems to occupy an intermediate position between satire and the bitter, self-mocking parody that flourishes in times of despair.
and uniqueness of the individual will have been truly achieved and will no longer be a blind for sterile imitation and resentment of others. The perspective from which Chekhov views the vanity, boredom, restlessness, and inauthenticity of his characters is likewise a kind of ideal future, which he himself is the first to poke fun at. "It may be that posterity, which will despise us for our blind and stupid lives, will find some road to happiness," says Astrov, the doctor in Uncle Vanya. Astrov himself, however, is not only profoundly pessimistic about the future, he resembles all the other characters in the play in his pursuit of vain illusions. As Alceste prefers Célimène to Eliante, Astrov prefers the elusive

12The interpretation of Eugene Onegin given here is somewhat schematic. I am painfully aware that, for the purpose of my argument, I have simplified a work in which a complex and deeply experienced reality is expressed with marvelous poetic economy. I myself prefer Belinsky's interpretation of Onegin to Dostoievski's, although it is perhaps to the latter that the interpretation sketched here might seem to bear the stronger resemblance. (Belinsky's study of Onegin can be found in V. G. Belinsky, Estetika i Literaturnaiia Kritika v dvukh tomakh [Moscow, 1959], Vol. 2, pp. 434–501. This work contains all his other articles on Pushkin. The two articles on Onegin have been translated and published in V. G. Belinsky, Selected Philosophical Works [Moscow, 1956], pp. 211–98. Dostoievski's interpretation of Onegin is found in his Pushkin speech, published in his Diary of a Writer, for August 1880. There are, besides, many allusions both to Pushkin and to Onegin elsewhere in the works of both writers.) To correct this impression, I should like to quote a passage from a letter Belinsky wrote to his friend Botkin on September 8, 1841, published in translation in Belinsky, Selected Philosophical Works, ed. cit., pp. 169–79. This letter, which goes some way toward explaining Belinsky's intimate understanding of Pushkin's text, expresses something of what I myself tried to say about Onegin on p. 291 of the present text. "We made friends, quarrelled, made up, quarrelled again and made up again, were at loggerheads, loved one another madly, lived and fell in love by theory, by the book, spontaneously and consciously. That, I believe, is the false aspect of our lives and our relations. But must we blame ourselves for this? We did blame ourselves, we swore and took vows, but it was no better, nor will it ever be. Our constant cherished (and rational) dream was to sublimate our whole lives to realities, and, consequently, our mutual relations as well; and well: the dream was but a dream and such it will remain; we were phantoms and will die phantoms, but it is not our fault and we have nothing to blame ourselves for. Reality springs from a soil, and the soil of all reality is society. ( . . . ) Society regards us as peccant tumors on its body; and we regard society as a heap of fetid dung. Society is right, but we are still more so. ( . . . ) We are men without a country—nay worse—we are men whose country is a phantom and
and “interesting” Yelena to Sonia with her simplicity and devotion. But the concrete situation in Uncle Vanya is already very different from that in Le Misanthrope. Eliante is a real alternative for Alceste. She is his equal in every way and a perfectly suitable match. Sonia, however, stands to Astrov rather as Tatyana stands to Onegin when they first meet. She does not understand him. Her life, good, simple, and pure as it is, is remote from his. Of the frustrations that eat at Astrov’s heart she has no glimmering. Similarly, Chekhov both affirms and mocks Trofimov’s belief in progress in The Cherry Orchard. Trofimov is right when he cries out in Act II: “The whole of Russia is our orchard. The earth is great and beautiful and there are many, many wonderful places on it. Just think, Anya: your grandfather, your great grandfather and all your forefathers were serf-owners—they owned living souls (. . .) and it has perverted you all, those who came before you and you who are living now. (. . .) We are at least two hundred years behind the times.” But Trofimov too is enslaved to dreams and illusions. Happiness for him is always somewhere in the future and he never sees it before his very eyes. “I can see happiness, Anya,” he says, “I can see it coming. (. . .) Yes, the moon is rising. (A pause) There it is—happiness—it’s coming nearer and nearer. I seem to hear its footsteps. And if we don’t see it, if we don’t know when it comes, what does it matter?

no wonder that we are phantoms ourselves, that our friendship, our love, our aspirations, our activity is a phantom. (. . .) You see what it is, my dear: we realized directly that there was no life for us in life, and since, by our natures, we could not live without life, we plunged headlong into books and began to live and love by the book. (. . .) However, our natures have always been higher than our intelligence, and therefore it became tedious and trivial to be constantly hearing the same thing from each other and we got bored to death with one another. Boredom passed into annoyance, annoyance into animosity, animosity into discord. Discord was always rain for the dry ground of our relations and brought forth a new and stronger love. (. . .) But the stock was soon drained and we relapsed back again to the old, to our personal interests, hungering for objective interests as manna from the skies; but these interests did not exist, and we went on being phantoms and our life was a beautiful content without a rationale.”
Other people will see it!” With his blind faith in the future, Trofimov has forgotten about the world around him. He is incapable of experiencing ordinary desires that have real objects and that can be satisfied. His idealism is grotesquely comical. “Varya’s afraid,” he says to Anya, “afraid we might suddenly fall in love with each other. (….) She’s so narrow-minded, she can’t grasp that we are above falling in love. To rid ourselves of all that’s petty and unreal, all that prevents us from being happy and free, that’s the whole aim and meaning of our life. Forward! Let’s march on irresistibly toward that bright star over there, shining in the distance! Forward!” Perhaps only Anya really escapes from the inauthenticity that inhabits all those whose destinies and desires have been shaped by the Cherry Orchard. But even the luminous faith and love of her words to her mother at the end of Act III are shot through with a vein of irony. “The cherry orchard’s sold, it’s quite true, there isn’t any cherry orchard any more,” she exclaims, “it’s true … but don’t cry, Mamma, you still have your life ahead of you, you still have your dear, innocent heart. You must come away with me, darling, we must get away from here! We’ll plant a new orchard, even more splendid than this one—and when you see it, you’ll understand everything, your heart will be filled with happiness, like the sun in the evening; and then you’ll smile again, Mamma!” There is a chance that Anya will be able to create a more real existence for herself than those who surrounded her youth were able to do, but her mother’s life has already been wasted in perpetually fleeing from reality. She does not have her life ahead of her and her “dear, innocent heart” is already somewhat worn with use.

The writer is not alone to blame for the weakening of his faith. The objective conditions of his experience, the world itself, in short, gives him less and less cause to have faith in it as it becomes progressively more corrupt and inauthentic, as the contradictions in its pursuit of “freedom and happiness” become more and more patent. From Molière’s time to our own the process by
which wider and wider sections of humanity have been engulfed in
inauthenticity has continued unabated. Compared with Molière,
Stendhal had to look hard to find any vantage point from which
he could satirize the society of his time, and he found it where
it was least expected, not in Paris, but in the provinces, not usually
among men but among women. Stendhal’s vantage point is al­
ready so different from that of the majority of his readers, that
he could only hope he would be understood by future generations.
It is already far more personal, far less social than Molière’s. With
Flaubert even the oases of authenticity, out of which Stendhal
constructed his perspective on society, have dried up. There is
virtually nothing left in the society of Flaubert that is authentic
or genuine. In these circumstances the superior position from
which the writer obtains his comic view of the world isolates him
even further from it, instead of reuniting him to it; it aggravates
his misanthropy and his disgust instead of curing them. His
transcendence of the world becomes the very source of his anguish
and his loneliness, for he is the first to experience the futility of
a superiority that allows him only to see the utter vanity of every-

18 Astrov’s conversation with Sonia in Act II of Uncle Vanya illustrates this
point very clearly. Astrov sees the absurdity and vanity of his society but he is
himself sick, unable to reach the world and frustrated because he cannot im­
pose on it his own ideal patterns. “I like life as life”, he says, “but I hate and
despise it in a little Russian country village, and as far as my own personal
life goes, by heaven! there is absolutely no redeeming feature about it. Haven’t
you noticed if you are riding through a dark wood at night and see a little light
shining ahead, how you forget your fatigue and the darkness and the sharp
twigs that whip your face? I work, that you know—as no one else in the
country works. Fate beats me on, without rest; at times I suffer unendurably
and I see no light ahead. I have no hope; I do not like people. It is long since
I have loved anyone.” To Sonia’s desperate question: “You love no one?” he
replies with a cruel egoism reminiscent of Onegin’s first encounters with Tat­
yana: “Not a soul. I only feel a sort of tenderness for your old nurse for old
time’s sake. The peasants are all alike; they are stupid and live in dirt, and the
educated people are hard to get along with. One gets tired of them. All our
good friends are petty and shallow. ( . . . ) Those that have brains are hysteri­
cal, devoured with a mania for self-analysis. They whine, they hate, they pick
faults everywhere with unhealthy sharpness. ( . . . ) Simple, natural relations
between man and man or man and nature do not exist.”
thing around him, including himself. The sly superiority of a Marivaux ends in the agony and madness of a Céline. Brilliant flashes of comedy are still possible for writers like Flaubert and Céline, but it is a bitter and angry humor that soon reveals the loathing and self-loathing behind it. Emma Bovary is cured of her illusions only to be filled at the moment of her frightful death by a terrible vision of universal futility, irony, and nothingness. "Emma Bovary, c'est moi," Flaubert declared in a celebrated epigram. Flaubert's relentless pursuit of his heroine is in fact the mirror of his own despair.

Earlier writers found a basis for that faith in human life and in human beings, without which there can be no comic liberation, in the world around them. Molière grounded his in the honnêtes gens of his time, whatever their shortcomings, in his robust family servants, in his solid and sensible bourgeois characters, in his young lovers. Even the craftiness of valets has a healthy and positive side to it in Molière. Stendhal found his, with greater difficulty, in the provinces of France and in the small cities of Italy, and he coupled it with a certain confidence in the future, with an idealistic radicalism that comes out not only in his satire of the "ruling classes" or in his political views, but in the biting social criticism of texts like Rome, Florence et Naples or certain chapters of Lucien Leuwen, and in a character like Palla in La Charteuse de Parme. But Stendhal is already very skeptical of the future. "Prenez un petit marchand de Rouen ou de Lyon, avare et sans imagination, et vous aurez un Américain," Lucien says to his radical friend Gauthier. The world of the future often appears to Lucien a world of petty meanness, vanity, and vulgarity. "Je ne suis pas fait pour vivre sous une république," he declares; "ce serait pour moi le triomphe de toutes les médiocrités, et je ne puis supporter de sang-froid même les plus estimables. Il me faut un premier ministre coquin et amusant comme Walpole ou M. de Talleyrand." In the end Stendhal himself comes close to a kind of romantic quixotism when he finds that only rank
idealists and madmen are admirable and authentic beings. "Excepté mes pauvres républicains attaqués de folie, je ne vois rien d'estimable dans le monde," Lucien tells Gauthier; "il entre du charlatanisme dans tous les mérites de ma connaissance. Ceux-ci sont peut-être fous: mais du moins ils ne sont pas bas." It is true that Stendhal quickly corrects his hero and warns him to wait until he has a little more experience of the world before he presumes to decide on such momentous issues. Lucien's love for Madame de Chasteller will in fact deepen his understanding of what the authentic values in human life are, but the attitude he expresses at this point remained a constant element in Stendhal's own view of the world.

Nevertheless, neither Stendhal with his mocking realism nor Chekhov with his irony ever attempted to satirize the whole of humanity; they did not turn their wit against the human condition itself. They had no naive optimism, but they continued to look for something substantial and real against which to set the follies of those whom they ridiculed. In recent times, however, human existence itself has become more and more frequently the cause of disillusionment and disgruntlement and the object of the writer's angry witticisms. Such total condemnation and mockery of humanity transforms the author into the very character that Molière made the butt of his satire in Le Misanthrope. The author's own activity, literature itself, becomes, like Alceste's attacks on the world, a form of parasitism, a connivance with and participation in the very inauthenticity and absurdity it exposes. How the writer is to recover that rudimentary confidence in the goodness of human life that seems to be the necessary condition for the creation of great comedy, is, of course, another question, one which each man must answer for himself if he wishes to be something more than a successful peddler of despair.
The objective historical conditions in which Molière worked were extremely favorable to his comic genius. He stood, historically speaking, at the crossroads of the old and the new, and he saw the old with the eyes of the new and the new with the eyes of the old. He could laugh with the society of the Court and the honnêtets gens at the outmoded pretensions of Cathos and Magdelon, the resentful rivalries of Dandin and the Sotenvilles, the grotesque impostures of Orgon and Tartuffe, or the “Jansenist” revolt of Alceste. At the same time, however, his satire of the old order embraces the new order as well, for the absolutism of the seventeenth century was in the end a compromise solution of the conflicts at the heart of French society. It brought a temporary and provisional equilibrium, but the conflicts it was designed to control were not disposed of; they assumed new and more complex forms and the absolutist compromise itself soon appeared as a formal, and therefore inadequate, answer to the problems of the time, just as the ideology of honnêteté, which accompanied the absolute monarchy, was rapidly recognized as an abstract theory which did not really correspond to social reality. For this reason Molière’s satire reaches more than its immediate objects. Indeed, the greatness and richness of works like Le Misanthrope, Dom Juan, or Amphitryon rest on a vision that is capable of embracing both the outworn order of the author’s immediate past and a present order that was itself already showing signs of being bypassed by events and reduced to an empty formalism. Are the proud and tyrannical heroes of these comedies representatives of the new or of the old? Is Dom Juan an old style grand seigneur or a new-style individualist? Is Jupiter a superb anarchist or is he the monarch himself, the upholder of law and order? Is Alceste a disgruntled robin or is he the very image of the Acastes and the Orontes as it is reflected in the prophetic mirror of the author? These comic heroes are in fact both. Their impostures and contradictions are discerned from the point of view of an ordered and structured society, and yet at the same
time they are revealed as the inner image of that society. As Molière came closer to this marvelous dialectic of order and revolt, of individual and society, he found it harder to portray within the plays themselves the position from which they were to be viewed. The audience is required to look on the protagonist from the point of view of the antagonist, on the antagonist from the point of view of the protagonist, and then again on both from a point of view which is not really given in the play and which includes and transcends that of protagonist and antagonist alike. In the achievement of this final perspective, the comedy achieves the liberation that is its deepest purpose.

For Molière this liberation was positive. It did not simply raise the audience to a new and futile superiority, for it implied a transcendence of all illusory superiorities. The possession of truth does not feed our vanity; on the contrary, it raises us out of our vanity and restores us to reality. In the very act of laughing at illusion we recognize the difference between reality and appearance, truth and illusion, and we side, whether we want to or not, with reality against appearance, with truth against illusion. So it is that the better we understand the comedy, the more realistic our own vision will be. Molière himself always tried to see things honestly and truthfully. He did not romanticize his Sotenvilles and his Dandins, his Dom Juans and his Jourdains, but he did not spare himself either, and he did not romanticize Alceste and Arnolphe. His own position was often that of la Cour et la Ville, which, as he realized, expressed far more accurately than that of a Sotenville and a Dandin, of a Dom Louis or of a Dom Carlos, the objective reality of the world in which he lived, but in Le Misanthrope, for instance, he showed that he was able to go beyond the position of la Cour et la Ville to a still more realistic and comprehensive one—one in which la Cour et la Ville are themselves seen in their contingency. Le Misanthrope uncovers the discrepancy between the forms of the new social life of the so-called honnêtes gens and its reality, between the ideal of honnêteté
that was professed by society and the actual behavior of men and women in society. As we pointed out in our chapter on this play, there are few honnêtes gens at the court of Célimène.

In our own day we still have much to learn from Molière's unflinching honesty. Every time we laugh at one of his comedies we are "instructed," as he would have said, for our laughter to-day commits us, as it committed the audiences of three hundred years ago, to siding with truth and to rejecting lies and imposture. Molière is a great comic writer in large measure because he always tried to see both the world and himself as they really were, to lay bare every illusion, every form that had no real substance, every trick that men play on others and on themselves.