

The Academic as Comedian: Humour in Michael Frayn's *The Trick of It*²

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Abstract: Michael Frayn's comic novel *The Trick of It* (1989) explores the relationship between academia and creative writing and the derivative, secondary nature of literary research. Through its main academic character and only narrator, Frayn's text recurrently identifies the role of a scholar with the role of a humourist in that both share a higher-than-average degree of self-awareness and detailed knowledge about the world. Through such identification, present in the novel both implicitly and explicitly, *The Trick of It* underscores the secondary and limited nature of academic work, yet it also gives an ultimately positive image of it. By pairing academic research and humour, Frayn's novel shows that literary scholarship is as a discipline that, much like humour, can enlarge our understanding and enjoyment of whatever it refers to.

Keywords: academic fiction, humour, Simon Critchley, Michael Frayn, Sigmund Freud

According to Janice Rossen, Michael Frayn's *The Trick of It* is one of the best British novels dramatizing two frequent characteristics of academic fiction: a scholar's excessive personal investment in their work (Rossen 1993, 145) and the mutual dependence of literary scholars and writers, since the former require creative writing to carry out their research and the latter need positive academic criticism to obtain literary recognition (Rossen 1993, 180-181). Written entirely as a series of letters that Richard Dunnett, a young British literature professor, sends to an Australian colleague, Frayn's novel tells the story of how Richard meets, courts, and marries his field of expertise, the novelist JL. Although he is at first both anxious about meeting her and interested in testing a few of his ideas, it is soon clear that Richard's curiosity is mixed with resentment and jealousy. He believes that "it's a blooming shame" that

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academics have to work on mere fictions, that “honest working folks like us, in our great concrete knowledge factories, have to *report*, have to *learn*, have to *know*, have to *expound* these shrugged-off nothingness” [emphasis in the original] (Frayn 1990, 9). As the story evolves, such spiteful and hostile approach to his job turns into an obsession with creative writing, which he tries to pursue himself to no avail. By the end of the novel, Richard realises that his only contributions to literature are the letters he has been sending to his Australian colleague. The novel finishes, however, on a rather tragic note: his addressee admits to having lost them and we leave Richard experiencing a deeply felt sense of personal and professional failure in the midst of a marriage verging on divorce.

Albeit through JL and Richard's marriage the novel grants a certain degree of interdependence between academics and novelists, it underscores the scholar's secondary and even precarious position. Readers see JL weeping and changing one of her novels substantially to please her husband/critic's expectations, but she does so only once and temporarily, as she obtains positive critiques from publishers and other scholars and finally submits her original text. By contrast, as the story is told entirely through Richard's unreliable perspective, the novel contains many of his resentful comments. These describe the second-class nature of his work, which is further emphasised by his own inability to write fiction: “Writing on the back of things again! I suppose that's what my entire life consists in” (Frayn 1990, 54). In these comments, he also complains about the unequal and unfair relationship – to Richard's mind – that exists between scholars and writers, a claim which the structural irony of the text clearly portrays as absurd and pretentious, for writing about other people's work is the essence of literary research, but not so of creative writing:

I read every word she writes, even though not a single one of them is about me. She reads not a single word I write, even though most of them are about her. (Frayn 1990, 50)

Considering these statements together with the fact that, as Richard fears throughout the novel, he finally fails to make any significant contribution to literature and “disappear[s] off the face of the earth [...] leav[ing] little trace behind” (Frayn 1990, 152), it seems that *The Trick of It* presents a rather bleak image of academia as merely secondary or even unnecessary. However, that

rather desolate picture is described within a very funny novel³ displaying a multi-layered use of humour, which, as I will argue, also conveys a positive vision of the role of scholarship. Through Simon Critchley's idea of humour as a form of philosophical inquiry rather than a mere stylistic choice, which is most helpful in understanding Michael Frayn's practice, I hope to show that even though the novel's humour partly emphasises the secondary nature of academic work and its less sympathetic aspects, it also affirms its valuable and rightful position.

Critchley's starting definition of humour is similar to many theories of humour based on incongruity: humour is produced by "a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented", a discrepancy "between expectation and reality" (Critchley 2002, 1). But to that original definition he adds, inspired by Henri Bergson, that for there to be a distorted picture, there needs to be an undistorted version of the same. In other words: if there is no social congruity, there is no comic incongruity (Critchley 2002, 4). Consequently, humour indirectly reveals "the depth of what we share" (Critchley 2002, 18), which may include moral, cultural, social norms and customs as well as more general conditions like our physical and intellectual limitations, thus making us "become philosophical spectators upon our lives" (Critchley 2002, 18). The way humour recalls those shared conditions may vary, however, as it can do so to celebrate them, which Critchley calls a comedy of recognition (2002, 11), or to challenge, criticise and attack them. To understand its implications in depth, therefore, humour requires a conscientious analysis of what is at stake in spontaneously "getting the joke". Following this framework, which is also common to most distinctions between satire and comedy and other humour-related discussions, first we need to classify humorous scenes in the novel, depending on whether they are directed to attack or criticise a target different from the humourist or whether they include the humourist himself in the jest.

Throughout the novel, all the instances that intend to criticise or attack particular targets take the form of vituperation. As instances of humour they render the object of humour incongruous – often through exaggerated and preposter-

3 The 1990 Penguin Books edition includes fragments of several reviews that call attention to the novel's comic tone when dealing with serious topics. Anthony Burgess's review, originally published in *The Observer* (24th September 1989), highlights precisely the novel's combination of tragedy and comedy: "The Trick of It, at the end anyway, very nearly made me weep. And yet it is one of the few books I have read in the last year that has provoked laughter".

ous comparisons – and, in so doing, they reveal some kind of underlying congruity, or undistorted picture. In these cases, they mostly expose and criticise the high levels of competition that characterise academic life.

Significantly enough, Richard's insults are directed to anyone he feels threatened by. When he meets a man at JL's house in London whom he immediately perceives as a romantic/professional competitor, he turns him into a grotesque figure: "Is it a long journey back to wherever it is? asked Dirty Books solicitously (one look at his feet and you knew his specialty was eighteenth-century erotica)" (Frayn 1990, 52). Similarly, later on in the novel, when his then-wife, JL, jeopardises his comfortably solitary life by rekindling the contact with his estranged family, Richard mocks her as "some maniac with a metal-detector, digging forgotten old aunts and half-cousins of mine out of the earth" (Frayn 1990, 109). Likewise, he describes his family as "creatures creeping about" who are "about a thousand times larger and five thousand times more destructive" than centipedes (Frayn 1990, 92-93).

It seems, then, that it is precisely because he feels threatened that all the references Richard makes to fellow scholars are insults – except for those about his Australian addressee, of course. This is most remarkable in the case of the other academics who also work on JL's oeuvre, whom he wants to consider "comrades in arms" but cannot help seeing as mere "rivals" (Frayn 1990, 7). One he names "Vlad, the Impaler" in order to signify that he "sweeps his specimens off on joint family holidays in Tuscany before he puts them into the killing-bottle and pins them into his collection" (Frayn 1990, 7). The other, Dr Spoff is "a human personification of the Society for the Propagation of Feminist Fiction", whose name he comically twists to Dr Sloff, "a small town in the Western Ukraine [...] which is noted from its provincialism" (Frayn 1990, 119), and to Dr Smoff, "a form of laxative porridge" (Frayn 1990, 120-121).

These insults are funny inasmuch as they create absurd comparisons and images and, in doing so, give insight into the world of scholars. Underlying Richard's insult to Professor Katc from Chicago, Vladimir's real name (Frayn 1990, 146), is the pressure that academics experience to publish (or perish). It seems that he becomes "Vlad, the Impaler" because he manages to publish more than Richard, who actually admits to struggling with naming things (Frayn 1990, 88; 160). In the case of Dr Spoff, the insult seems to imply a clash of ideas or an intellectual disagreement, another frequent conflict in both academic life and fiction.

Richard's comic insults reveal, then, the high levels of competition inherent to academic life and their effect on academics – be this competition due to the pressure to achieve economic stability (tenure), an irresistible urge to acquire intellectual prestige, or a combination of both. In fact, although they do not include Richard as the object of humour, they reflect more on Richard than on the people insulted, as he himself admits at one point in the story (Frayn 1990, 40). They expose a weakened character who refuses open confrontation of ideas with Dr Spoff and who uses humour as a form of veiled aggression to channel his own frustration and envy for another scholar's productivity. Thus, through Richard's rather unhealthy approach to his work and his recurrent dismissal of his colleagues, the novel raises awareness of the pernicious effects of competition in academia.

But Frayn's novel also describes multiple incongruous situations that make Richard himself the object of humour. Among these we find the absurdity of taking turns to sip from the same glass of water as a seduction strategy or the recurrent comparison between publishing and the experience of fatherhood:

Ten pounds five ounces, our little monster – I've just weighed the typescript [...] Did your baby have to be sent away for typing? [...] I talk about "our" book, and dandle it fondly on my knee. I even occasionally change a dirty spelling. (Frayn 1990, 99-101)

There are other examples in the novel of this second type of humour, such as Richard's momentary inability to write on a train ride (Frayn 1990, 69), or when he struggles to spell *peripeteia* correctly under the effects of alcohol (Frayn 1990, 83). In some, it is Richard himself who creates the comic situation, whereas in others, such as the example of his inability to write on a train ride, he is merely the butt of the joke. All of these cases, however, can be considered what Critchley calls a comedy of recognition, for their use of incongruity – a discrepancy between how things are and should be or we expect them to be – reminds us of shared truths and conditions with no critical intention (Critchley 2002, 11). Whereas in Richard's comic insults one could hint at a certain critical stance towards unhealthy levels of academic rivalry, here we find humorous scenes that simply reflect on daily situations and human limitations. These include the effects of alcohol and the movement of a train, the fact that most people expect seduction to be creative and include some kind of aphrodisiac component, and that books are ultimately not like children – even if our love for them leads us to believe the contrary.

As seen thus far, Frayn's novel presents readers with two main different types of humour, comic vituperation and (self-)ridicule, and what most of these humorous situations and statements have in common is Richard's sharp eye for comic distortion. Particularly in the case of the instances of self-ridicule, they reveal the narrator/protagonist's over-awareness of the norms that are being violated and/or the expectations that are not being fulfilled. In this respect, Richard can be considered a fictionalisation of a melancholic character who has reached a high level of self-knowledge and that is frequently found in comedians such as Woody Allen.⁴ Moreover, he even recreates, quite literally, the workings of humour understood as a super-ego's kind reminder to the ego of its own limitations. As Critchley puts it: "in humour, we see the profile of 'super-ego II', a super-ego which does not lacerate the ego, [...] [but] liberates and elevates by allowing the ego to find itself ridiculous" (Critchley 2002, 103).⁵ Tellingly, Richard shows a split personality that dissociates the paternal task of the super-ego – the reminding of norms and limitations – from the ego's reaffirmation of its own perfection. He projects the first role on the anticipated reactions of his Australian addressee and takes upon himself the task of defending his decisions and actions.

Such comic ego-vs-super-ego interaction appears in the letter in which Richard relates how he and JL sleep together for the first time. Told in the form of a fake dialogue between Richard and his Australian penfriend, we first read Richard's account in which it seems it was just a casual encounter that neither of them had seen coming. However, with the introduction of the anticipated reactions of his colleague (or super-ego personification), we find out that Richard had carefully planned to seduce JL for a while:

4 "In melancholy [...] there is a splitting in the ego between the ego and a critical agency, the Über-Ich, the 'over-I' or 'super-ego' that stands over against the Ich, sadistically denigrating it. [...] The subject becomes an abject object, and when the melancholic talks about himself it is as though he were talking about some loathsome thing. This is why melancholics talk so obsessively about themselves; in a sense, they are talking about somebody else. [...] One is reminded of Woody Allen's endless monologues, where he complains about himself in the most voluble manner, a technique of self-objectification and splitting of the ego brought to dramatic perfection in *Play It Again Sam*, where the super-ego who lacerates and consoles the abject Allen ego is literally objectified in the person of Humphrey Bogart" (Critchley 2002, 97-98).

5 Simon Critchley reworks here Freud's brief 1928 article "Humour". In it, Freud addresses humour as "a contribution to the comic made through the agency of the super-ego" (Freud 1928, 5). His theory stems from an understanding of humour as the triumph of pleasure in the face of adversity, and the role of humourists as paternal figures whose role is diminishing suffering for both themselves and others.

– Hold on a moment, I can imagine you saying at this point.

What is it?

– On a point of academic interest. This descent upon her lips is merely one simple move in a whole campaign. What interests the outside world, surely, is not the tactics but the strategy. At what point did you actually decide on this course of action?

What course of action?

– Making a pass at her?

The dismissive coarseness of our expression is inappropriate. I was not making a pass. [...] This was mutual. Nor did I decide. I knew. We both knew. She knew that I knew and I knew that she knew.

– When?

What?

– When did you know?

I'll tell you. We knew as soon as I met her at the station. [...]

– Yes, yes, yes (you interrupt). But what about the bottle?

What?

– The bottle of whisky. Are you telling me you put it into her room, or imagined that you might put it into her room, or whatever you or your unconscious did or didn't, *after* you met her? When she was already occupying the room?

Obviously not. I imagined putting the bottle of whisky into her room when I collected the key from Administration.

– Before you went to meet her at the station?

Naturally. (Frayn 1990, 22-23)

This passage is comic in that it discloses Richard's incongruous behaviour in a rather benevolent manner, and once again such incongruity reveals a shared human condition, namely, our ability to deceive ourselves about the power that the lower passions can have over us. But most importantly, as it mirrors the way humour operates, this scene is also meta-comic, and thus gives insight into the internal workings of a comic mind.

The two types of humour that have been discussed so far, humorous vituperation and self-ridicule, have enriched our understanding of the novel at the level of character description and interaction and confirm that we are dealing with a comedian, a humourist character/narrator. But in the manner of Sterne's *Tristram*

Shandy, the insightfulness of Frayn's approach is that, through his main character's split comic personality, humour also becomes metafictional. Richard brings up incongruities that reveal our expectation that literature can (re)create reality and the simultaneous awareness that it is a limited attempt. This is particularly noticeable in Richard's account of his chaotic second visit to his future wife in London. He tries to create an illusion of reality – the suspension of disbelief which is the key to most realistic literature – through an accurate, step-by-step representation of what he felt and experienced. In doing so, however, he is very much aware that, paraphrasing Wordsworth, this is all being recollected in tranquillity (Frayn 1990, 63) and it does not represent reality in reality's own terms:

You're holding your hand to your head again, I can see, very silently and patiently. You can't understand a word of this. No, well, I should think not. Nor can I – and I'm there in the middle of it all. [...] But one of the difficult things about battles, I can tell you, whether you're fighting them or whether you're describing them afterwards, is that people don't stop to introduce themselves (Hallo, there! I'm Colonel Bollockoff, 753rd Infantry Division. You must find all this awfully confusing, but what we're trying to do is to out-flank you to the right, and then drop a small tactical nuclear weapon on top of you...). (Frayn 1990, 62)

Again, this reflection takes the form of a fake dialogue between Richard and his colleague that reflects on Richard's behaviour, in this case, his (lack of) skill as a writer of fiction. Through the form of this humorous dialogue, Richard brings up incongruities that seem to imply that realistic literature is impossible. Yet, this implication has to be measured against the fact that, by the end of the novel, Richard is moved to tears by his wife's literary recreation of his mother – thus proving him wrong in thinking that realistic fiction is impossible and/or made-up nonsense:

And suddenly the tears came to my eyes. It was the blueness of the scarf that did it. So stupid. There never was such a scarf, or such a night. They were made-up things. And yet somehow I was glad to find my mother young again, running along the street, with a home to run to, and a blue scarf, and the droplets of fog trembling

in her hair. Was it my mother I was weeping for, or the words?
It was the way words caught her, the way they honoured her. Like
sunlight haloing and honouring a cloud. (Frayn 1990, 162)

The bottom line is then that Richard would like to (re)create reality, but fails to do so, not because the task is completely impossible, but because he is a scholar, that is, a privileged reader who knows *too much* about how literature works. His failure at writing, therefore, is presented as a direct consequence of his academic frame of mind. His melancholic over-awareness of rules, norms and limitations mirrors his probing, scholarly personality and vice versa. Significantly enough, the two roles of Richard's internal discussion take on two distinctive personae in these passages; his ego naïvely believes he can recreate reality through creative writing, whereas his super-ego takes a rather scholarly personality who constantly reminds him of the fictionality of literature:

Hold on, though, you think. [...] Because, with your usual acute eye for the text, you have noticed a tiny discrepancy in the account above. [...] The phrase "brief handshake", it's true, doesn't fully cover the events outside the guest-room door. They were extended by one of those off little things that are so difficult to give any account of afterwards – the kind of snaggle in the narrative that you leave out when you tell the story. (Frayn 1990, 17-18)

From these humorous scholarly interruptions we can gather several conclusions on the novel's stance on academic work. First of all, they reflect once again the secondary and derivative role of academia that the novel highlights, since they are invariably written as commentaries and responses that come after actions and descriptions. The novel thus stresses that scholarly research is always written as a response to literature, whereas it is hardly ever the case that fiction is written as a response to an academic work. This creates an ongoing irony in the story: even though Richard resents his condition of commentator, as quoted before, he cannot avoid behaving as such. And the final irony of the story lies in his realisation, after the letters have been sent (and lost), that it is precisely this type of derivative work that he should collect and publish.

Written in the form of interruptions and responses, academic work is also represented as slowing down the development of the story, further trumping

the already-difficult task of writing literature. However, these parentheses also enrich the narrative by adding details to the story and revealing the internal workings of fiction, such as its silences and rearrangements of time. They function in the way that the best academic writing works, by enlarging our understanding of texts. As instances of humour, they reveal literature's inescapable limitations as a human product that tries to (re)create reality. Yet, these are not brought up to leave readers merely pondering on those limitations, but rather to affirm a different type of enjoyment, one that focuses on literature as an object. In Freudian terms, they insist that the "wounds dealt by the outside world" are "merely occasions for pleasure" (Freud 1928, 2). Arguably, this reflection on the nature of literature could be reached through means other than humour. The difference lies in that, through humour, the text makes such a point more "quietly, practically and discreetly" and avoids the "clumsiness of a theoretical discussion" (Critchley 2002, 18).

By making these connections between academic writing and humour, *The Trick of It* shows that although academic work is indeed secondary and derivative, it is also incisive and (can be) very entertaining. Just as academic work seems unnecessary and derivative, so is humour – it seems entirely gratuitous and needs implicit, shared congruities outside itself to work. Similarly, like humour, academic research is inquisitive and insightful. By making academic work funny, therefore, Frayn's novel ultimately restores the value of the discipline, apparently discredited by the emphasis on Richard's failure and his frequently reprehensible behaviour. The novel suggests that academic work is a penetrating form of analysis which, at its best, increases our enjoyment of texts.

Richard's complex melancholic personality shapes Frayn's novel, constantly merging the role of the academic with that of the humourist. As we have seen, such a double role as a comic academic or an academic comedian affects the narrative structure of the novel. This connection between academia and humour is also explicitly acknowledged through Richard's own voice in the novel. He realises he has a "weakness for the ludic touch", that he has been "a comic novel" (Frayn 1990, 78) and constantly emphasises JL's serious nature against his own comic spirit: "I do the jokes and the salad; she does the bread and the sincerity" (Frayn 1990, 89). Significantly enough, Richard repeatedly insists that his wife should include some sense of detachment, of "ironic self-awareness" in her novel (Frayn 1990, 115) and it is precisely when Richard's suggestions about the novel are rejected (Frayn 1990, 116) that we see JL laugh

for the first and last time, which reads very much like her revenge on Richard by using his favourite means of deprecation.

Frayn's multi-layered use of humour, therefore, is a complex and very rich literary representation of humour as "practically enacted theory" (Critchley 2002, 18). On one level, it serves to reveal and address critically the high levels of competition that plague academic life; on another, it is used to reflect on the nature of fiction. Even more, it works as a mirror of the reflexive and enjoyable nature of academic work. Following Elaine Showalter's suggestion, then, we can rightly count *The Trick of It* among the best academic novels, for it innovates within the subgenre, addresses academic competition and experiments with fiction itself (Showalter 2005, 4-5), but it also gives insight into the nature of our academic endeavour.

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