

# Ridiculously Modern Marsden: Tragicomic Form and Queer Modernity

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## I

In 1921, painter and poet Marsden Hartley published a book of critical essays entitled *Adventures in the Arts: Informal Chapters on Painters, Vaudeville, and Poets*, bearing a dedication to Stieglitz and introduced by the critic and younger Stieglitz protégé Waldo Frank. Prior to the Armory Show of 1913, through his 291 gallery and the journal *Camera Work*, Stieglitz had been the leading advocate of modern art in America, and in 1909, Hartley had met Stieglitz, finding in him a mentor, a financial supporter, and an exhibitor of his work. Sales of paintings and patronage organized by Stieglitz allowed Hartley to complete his artistic education in Europe, with lengthy residences in Paris and Berlin and contact with the most advanced artists and writers of the European avant-garde, from Gertrude Stein to Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc. In 1921, in a time of particular financial hardship for Hartley, Stieglitz had organized a then unprecedented event, an auction of Hartley's unsold work at the Anderson gallery, raising enough money to allow the painter to return for several months in Europe. Even in the 1930s, when the relationship between Hartley and Stieglitz had cooled, Hartley had nothing but praise for the older man in the draft of his autobiography: "I don't know whether Stieglitz will care for all this –" Hartley acknowledged, "but it doesn't matter – it all had to go down on the page. Whatever may be the point of view now – there is no alteration and no criticism on the part of myself and there never will be."<sup>1</sup>

Stieglitz also made Hartley's work the backdrop to one of the most famous photographs in modern art history: Stieglitz's iconic photograph of Marcel Duchamp's notorious *Fountain*, the provocative readymade that the French artist had submitted to the 1917 exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, which sequestered the work away in a utility closet or had it removed from the building, depending on which story you believe. In the photograph that Stieglitz allowed to be published in the New York Dada journal *The Blind Man*, co-edited by Marcel Duchamp, Mina Loy, and Beatrice Wood, details from Hartley's painting *The Warriors* – a large canvas with horsemen viewed from behind – can be seen behind Duchamp's rotated and signed toilet fixture.

*The Warriors* was one of a larger series of works that Hartley had executed in Berlin during the months just before the outbreak of World War I and in the first year of the war. In this period, Hartley produced some of his most important and problematic works, including *The Warriors* and his series of paintings incorporating the signs and symbols of German military display, including his elegiac works for a young soldier whom Hartley loved, Karl von Freyburg, who was killed early in the war. Referring to these works in his catalogue statement for a 1916 exhibition in the 291 gallery, Hartley famously disavowed any thematic or affective interest in his subject-matter:

The Germanic group is but part of a series which I had contemplated of movements in various areas of war activity from which I was prevented, owing to the difficulties of travel. The forms are only those which I have observed casually from day to day. There is no hidden symbolism whatsoever in them; there is no slight intention of that anywhere. Things under observation, just pictures of any day, any hour. I have expressed only what I have seen. They are merely consultations of the eye – in no sense problem; my notion of the purely pictorial [sic].<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most immediate reason for Hartley's exaggerated stress on their abstract pictorialness is that they could be taken to express pro-German sentiment during wartime; though the United States had not yet entered World War I, the tide of popular feeling was against Germany. A 1913 Lee Simonson caricature clearly discerned in Hartley an enthusiasm for German militarism: the artist is dressed in a Prussian blue uniform and goose-steps while carrying a cubist flag. Yet a journalist reviewing the exhibition noted the ambiguity of the modernist idiom of the paintings and raised the possibility that they might even be making fun of the military spectacle:

A snarl of triangles, squares, rectangles, flags of all nations, in glaring solid, primitive colors, shuffled together, produces a picture puzzle that absolutely defies you to say that it isn't a battle. Most unneutrally, as some will think, the American artist has sprinkled the battle canvases with Iron Crosses, though German connoisseurs with whom I spoke stoutly protested that Mr. Hartley's paintings were pro-German. In fact, some of them apparently thought just the opposite. There was here and there just a suspicion that these critics thought German battles were being ridiculed.<sup>3</sup>

As both his own autobiographical statements and later scholarship has revealed, Hartley's statement disavowing a more than pictorial interest in his subject-matter was misleading in a number of ways. It is clear that these works expressed intense homoerotic attractions both to war victim Karl von Freyburg and to the collective spectacle of massed soldiers in parade. In the 1930s, when Hartley was working on his autobiography, he was more forthcoming about the sexualized energies that were held in tension by the gaudy, jaunty, geometrized idiom of his German paintings. About a huge pageant held for the coming wedding of the Kaiser's daughter, thus, Hartley wrote:

It was of course the age of iron – of blood and iron, every back bone in Germany was made of it – or had new iron poured into it – the whole scene was fairly bursting with organized energy and the tension was terrific and somehow most voluptuous in the feeling of power – a sexual immensity even in it – when passion rises to the full and something must happen to quiet it. (1997, 87)

The formal turbulence of his German paintings, he suggests, followed from a disciplining of his own excited, aroused body, an identificatory mimesis with the upright and controlled bodies of the soldiers marching in formation. Only the painter's eyes betrayed his childish excitement in the face of this masculine spectacle of uniformed men. Again about the princess's wedding, he writes:

It was all glamour and stimulus for the boy inside – and the boy was at least thirty-five by then – and how thick and fast life had come all at once . . . . The coming face to face with so much life and art all at once – was all but blinding – but I have blue eyes and blue eyes can take in all things and not be disturbed by them – except to be ecstatically disturbed – which is their way of being passionate. (90)

The paintings were, in a sense, the objectified projection of eyes whose visual field has been disorganized by an intense focusing of affect through a single bodily organ, like an aroused tumescence of vision. In turn, they might be said to allegorize the experience of modernity as homoerotic anamnesis, sublimating through visual abstraction the spectacle of a militarized Berlin to its emotional essence, occasioning recollection of the eternally youthful spirit within the temporally mature artist. Across the displacement from Berlin to New York, and through the reflection of the urban spectacle's emotional immediacy in the retrospective medium of painting, Hartley's own American modernity unfurled itself in a gayly eccentric, discombobulated jumble of colors, shapes, emblems, and signs – even when, as we know, its content was mournful and elegiac. (I will return to Hartley's projection of an internally divided experience of the modern self onto the axis of lived time and recollection in my discussion of his homoerotic poetry at the conclusion of this essay.)

In Stieglitz's photograph, a complex formal and material dialogue between Duchamp's *Fountain* and Hartley's *The Warriors* was implied by their juxtaposition: a dialogue between sculpture and painting, between the industrial readymade and the artistic handmade, between the concave volume of the urinal and the exaggerated flatness of the canvas, between the analogous conical shapes in both works, between the scatology of Duchamp's work and the more sublimated idealization of the horsemen and horses' muscular buttocks in Hartley's, between the suavely ironic aroma of French "civilization" in Duchamp and the mystical fumes of German *Kultur* in Hartley. When we consider this overlay, it is easy to see that Stieglitz's trained eye might have been captured by the echo of the shapes and the possibility of framing the object of his photograph within an internal frame provided by Hartley's picture. Wanda Corn suggests that Stieglitz's setting *Fountain* against a relatively abstract visual work like *The Warriors* and emphasizing the urinal's formal, sculptural qualities served actively to disavow the sexual content of the object.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, however, the montage of the two works goes beyond merely formal interactions, even beyond the more subtle negative implications of formal repression, since in fact it extends visibly and conceptually into the thematic substance of the two work. Indeed, Corn notes that both works, in different ways, evoke trans-Atlantic artistic and cultural relations (77). We might add to these as well: intercultural and cross-gendered *erotic* relations, which were mutually problematic for the sexualized American nativism that Stieglitz and his critical acolytes advocated.<sup>5</sup>

Stieglitz's posing of Duchamp's *Fountain* at an elevation just below the horse's tail of the topmost rider – the word "pose" is not too strong for Duchamp's anthropomorphic piece of plumbing – redoubles and comically exaggerates the sexual double entendre already implicit in Hartley's painting. If Hartley's rigid, abstract riders, with their plumed helmets, trope on the homoerotic imagery of an erect, ejaculating penis, registering the homosexual painter's fervent excitement before the military spectacles he witnessed in Berlin just before World War I, then Duchamp's *Fountain* becomes the monstrous, hyperbolic, and derisory explication of Hartley's sexual subtext. It mockingly sprays a grey-white blob of paint, nominally the horse's tail, towards the splayed buttocks of the rider, through the celibate gap of space between the two works. In her excellent study of gender and theory in the Stieglitz circle, Marcia Brennan suggests that the photograph presents "the issues of gender and sexuality surrounding *Fountain* as decidedly unfixed and polysemous."<sup>6</sup> Yet Brennan's interpretation, I would argue, underestimates the degree to which Stieglitz's hierarchical vision reasserted itself against the polymorphous perversity of these ambiguous objects. In the "coupling" implied by the photograph, Hartley's painting clearly becomes the passive partner in the sexualized play of modernist artworks.<sup>7</sup>

Hartley's homosexuality, like that of his fellow painter Charles Demuth, was an eccentricity known and tolerated among the Stieglitz circle, but ambivalently. William Carlos Williams sums up the attitude of Hartley's friends towards him: "We none of us took him seriously – except in his work."<sup>8</sup> In his encomiastic introduction to Hartley's *Adventures in the Art*, Waldo Frank sets his criticism within a thick bed of Freudian and Emersonian rhetoric, but in characterizing Hartley's "tragicomic" aesthetics, he comes close to blurting out that he believes that Hartley's artistry, like his person, expresses the immaturity of the homosexual man, supposedly a type retarded in an earlier stage of sexual development:

Tragedy and Comedy are adult. The child's world is Tragicomic. So Marsden Hartley's. He is not deep enough – like most of our Moderns – in the pregnant chaos to be submerged in blackness by the hot struggle of the creative will. He may weep, but he can smile next moment at a pretty song. He may be hurt, but he gets up to dance.

In this book – the autobiography of a creator – Marsden Hartley peers variously into the modern world: but it is in search of Fairies.<sup>9</sup>

In faintly praising the colorful cheer he finds in Hartley, Frank betrays that both the pleasures and weaknesses he perceives in Hartley's work are, in his view, rooted in sexual immaturity – that is, in Hartley's homosexuality. For Frank, Hartley never goes deep enough into the matter of art, is too emotionally superficial and changeable, to bring to fruition the “pregnant” chaos of life. Both his tears and laughter passively register the reception of outward stimuli, but never measure up to the active, masculine role of the critic, which Frank defines tellingly as the intrusion of his own body into the artist's “fluid” personal form:

When the creator turns critic, we are in the presence of a consummation . . . . For the intrusion of the world he interposes his own body . . . . Criticism is nothing which is not the sheer projection of a body . . . . Criticism is to the artist the intrusion, in a form irreducible to art, of the body of the world. (Frank, xiii-xiv)

Like all criticism, Frank suggests, Hartley's critical judgments in *Adventures in the Arts* are subjective impositions of his body and must be read autobiographically. But the critical body that Hartley's book documents is enervated, immature, passive, girlish, childish. It delights in bright surfaces but is incapable of deep penetration. It pursues “fairies” – like itself, immature, childish products of the imagination – amidst the bright-colored spectacles of modernity.

In the torrents of Frank's pompous prose, the tasteless double entendre of the word “fairies” – already vulgar parlance at the time for an effeminate man – ends his introduction of Hartley with a shocking thud. But if in a more sophisticated and allusive manner, so too, in Stieglitz's otherwise stately composition of the *Fountain* photograph, one senses a nudging manly joke, a faint snigger of laughter for those in the know. Was Hartley being made an object of comedy by his supporters? Did Stieglitz find Hartley's work, with its almost religious obsession with military masculinity, faintly ridiculous and find in Duchamp's transgressive irony a means to tease his gay friend? And was Stieglitz merely giving a good-natured wink to a painter he liked personally and supported professionally, or was he, like Frank, responding to a more unsettling aspect of Hartley's artistic language and rhetorical address – a queer ridiculousness standing in the way of Hartley's serious artistic intentions, or still more troubling, a thoroughly modern ridiculousness, rooted in Hartley's consciousness of homosexual difference, which *expressed* his artistic seriousness and motivated the modernistic energy of his artistic idiom?

## II

In short, I am suggesting that we consider ridiculousness – its verbal and visual embodiment in comic types, styles, forms, and modes of address – as one of the specific ways in which modernity may be artistically expressed. Of course, it is hardly the case that the modern age has a monopoly on ridiculousness. In his fleeting remarks on comedy in *The Poetics*, Aristotle defines the object of comic mimesis as the specifically ridiculous: “Comedy . . . is an imitation of persons worse than the average. Their badness, however, does not extend to the point of utter depravity; rather, ridiculousness is a particular form of the shameful and may be described as the kind of error and unseemliness that is not painful or destructive.”<sup>10</sup> Aristotle's delineation of the ridiculous clearly expresses its social dimension and its mediate position within the spectrum of moral judgments. The ridiculous is a reduced state of shamefulfulness, one that neither provokes intense indignation nor pain, rather only a laughing discomfort at human folly and weakness of character according to the background of social norms. One might say, looking ahead to the reception of Hartley within the Stieglitz circle, that the perception of the ridiculous helps stabilize contradictory attitudes of distaste and tolerance, suspending the contradiction in laughter rather than demanding rejection or other more consequential action on moral grounds.

This general social function, however, says nothing about the particular expression of modernity the ridiculous may perform. Here, we can gain some insight by a brief detour through some key nineteenth-century texts that brought the ridiculous to prominence as an outgrowth of modern ways of feeling and thinking: the theory of the ridiculous in the *School for Aesthetics* of the German romantic writer Jean-Paul Richter, the essays on laughter and caricature of the poet Baudelaire, and the novella "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man" by the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

In Course VI of the 1813 edition of the *School for Aesthetics*, Jean-Paul Richter offers an anthropological and metaphysical conception of the ridiculous, based in "spiritual finitude," and hence an eternal aspect of all creation lower than a perfect God. "There will always be an angel to be laughed at," he concludes, "even when one is the archangel."<sup>11</sup> Yet in his discussion of the ridiculous, Richter ties it more specifically to self-consciousness and the potential of the individual mind to accentuate its internal distance from positions within the social and moral hierarchy, both high and low. Not only does reflection and irony make an individual capable of perceiving the ridiculous, but it also can potentially reflect back upon the individual, rendering him or her ridiculous as well in the eyes of others. Jean-Paul thus links the category of the ridiculous inextricably to reflection and subjective freedom of a modern sort. The ridiculous is a way the intellect lives in the world:

The ridiculous increases with the intelligence of the ridiculous person. The man who raises himself above life and its motives prepares for himself the most sustained comedy, since he can attribute his own higher motives to the lower efforts of the mass and thereby make these absurd. But the most wretched person can reciprocate all this by attributing his own lower motives to the higher effort. (Richter, 79-80)

To the first case, the man who attributes high motives to the low, we might give the name of Don Quixote, who projects his own noble chivalric dreams onto the shepherds, thieves, prostitutes, and innkeepers of the contemporary Spanish landscape; the social types of his day are rendered ridiculous by his fantastic dressing, but above all, so too is Don Quixote himself. To the latter case, we might anachronistically assign the name Pere Ubu, Alfred Jarry's ludicrously cynical tyrant, who reads his own grossness and lowness into all those around him. Yet Richter does not content himself with describing such general types. He also relates the emergence of the ridiculous in aesthetics to the demands of a specifically modern textual production and reception – the massive proliferation of writing that springs from the bureaucracy of the modern state, the university and academies, journalism, and the commercialized book market:

A whole mass of course, learned reporters and reports, and the heaviest bales of the German book trade, which in reality crawl along in an annoying and disgusting way, at once assume wings as works of art if anyone imagines (and thereby lends them higher motives) that they have been written for parodic amusement. (Richter, 80)

Taking this in somewhat more abstract terms, we could say that Richter thus conceives the ridiculous as a mode by which the intellect, exercising its internal freedom, turns the textual products of modern society into artistic artifacts – *ridiculous* ones, to which the proper aesthetic response is laughter.

Baudelaire's theory of the comic, formulated in his essay "On the Essence of Laughter" and his surveys of caricature, also situates the comic in human finitude, more specifically human fallenness or sin. "Laughter," writes Baudelaire, "is satanic: it is thus profoundly human. It is the consequence in man of the idea of his own superiority. And since laughter is essentially human, it is, in fact, essentially contradictory; that is to say that it is at once a token of an infinite grandeur and an infinite misery . . . It is from the perpetual collision of these two infinities that laughter is struck."<sup>12</sup> Laughter in Baudelaire's view is an expression of doubleness and contradictoriness, as the laugher recognizes in others the condition of human weakness and failing while feeling in himself a sense of superiority and pride. In general, Baudelaire argues, "the comic and the capacity for laughter are situated in the

laughter and by no means in the object of his mirth” (154). Yet it is the doubleness of the feeling of the comic, he suggests, that makes laughter convulsive: the laughter both identifies with the comic object as fallibly human and feels superior to it, and the moral contradiction tears through him as physical waves of laughter. Indeed, Baudelaire provides for the absolute state of this self-division the possibility of a fully self-reflexive laughter, the laughter’s self-consciousness taking itself as the comic object: “The man who trips would be the last to laugh at his own fall, unless he happened to be a philosopher, one who had acquired by habit a power of rapid self-division and thus of assisting as a disinterested spectator at the phenomena of his own ego. But such cases are rare” (154). In fact, given the reflexive nature of this Cartesian laughter, we might say that for Baudelaire, the ridiculous physical scenario of falling retreats as mere accident behind the *essential* ridiculousness of the self-divided mind watching its own processes of reflection, the mechanisms by which a self falls ever deeper into its own incapacity to know itself, in the proud self-regard of self-consciousness, which it ludicrously takes to be a glorious power to think. Given the condition of original sin, of “spiritual finitude,” self-reflection carries with it the index of its own necessary failure, and its only capacity is to know its own essential incapacity. Self-reflection, for Baudelaire, is an essentially ridiculous mental act.

In her suggestive commentary on these writings, Michele Hannoosh argues that the comic and caricature in Baudelaire’s critical essays should be understood with the larger context of his meditations on modernity and metropolitan life. In particular, both the Baudelairean comic specifically and his conception of urban modernity more broadly disclose changes in subjective life experienced as self-division and doubling, the simultaneous experience of internal and external perspectives by the same self. Thus, Hannoosh suggests:

Crucial features of the idea of modernity, such as the city and its emblematic inhabitant, the urban stroller, or *flâneur*, must be reconsidered in terms of the dualism and ambiguity by which Baudelaire characterizes the comic. The modern city is the space of an image of his own dualism, self-ignorance, and otherness, his status as subject and object, implicated in the same urban experience he seems to control. The theory of the comic invests the idea of modernity with reciprocity, the subject’s status as laugher and object of laughter, self and other.<sup>13</sup>

The carefully composed mask of the dandy, the spectacles of fashion, the erotic strategies of the coquette and prostitute, reflections in shop windows and in the glances of passersby – these are a few of the many manifestations of nineteenth-century urban modernity that register this subjective doubleness in Baudelaire’s writing, along with the types of caricature and comic representation. Moreover, the dynamic of self-division that Baudelaire sees as the essence of the comic also relates comic consciousness to the phenomenon of urban crowds. The divided self is, within itself, a crowd of selves; the redoubling of self-consciousness prepares the modern subject for immersion within the crowd around it, where it may suspend its self-division in an ecstatic communion with the crowd. Thus, in a moral dialectic typical of Baudelaire, the restoration of wholeness and the experience of the sacred passes through an extreme point of degraded fragmentation, the acme of the satanic condition of self-consciousness, in the proud laughter of fallenness.<sup>14</sup> This suggests that Hartley’s trajectory in the Berlin paintings from ecstatic-erotic immersion in military pageantry to the eccentric comedy of his visual forms might be interpretable as an analogously dialectical structure.

Dostoevsky’s 1877 short story “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man: A Fantastic Story” likewise situates the question of the character’s ridiculousness within a theological meditation on pride, self-consciousness, and human fallenness. The narrator is an utterly ludicrous piece of self-consciousness, the convolution of his self-deprecating self-regard being the source of an ever-deepening sense of ridiculousness:

In the past I used to be terribly distressed at appearing to be ridiculous. No, not appearing to be, but being. I've always cut a ridiculous figure. I suppose I must have known it from the day I was born. At any rate, I've known for certain that I was ridiculous ever since I was seven years old. Afterwards, I went to school, then to the university, and – well – the more I learned, the more conscious did I become of the fact that I was ridiculous. So that for me my years of hard work at the university seem in the end to have existed for the sole purpose of demonstrating and proving to me, the more deeply engrossed I became in my studies, that I was an utterly absurd person. And as during my studies, so all my life. Every year the same consciousness that I was ridiculous in every way strengthened and intensified in my mind. They always laughed at me. But not one of them knew or suspected that if there were one man on earth who knew better than anyone else that he was ridiculous, that man was I. And this – I mean, the fact that they did not know it – was the bitterest pill for me to swallow. But there I was myself at fault. I was always so proud that I never wanted to confess it to anyone.<sup>15</sup>

Very briefly, this narrator, "a modern Russian progressive and a despicable citizen of Petersburg," (729) experiences a growing sense of indifference and meaninglessness, a sense that nothing really exists. One night, having reached a point of exasperation, he is returning home with the intention of killing himself. In the streets, he is interrupted in his brooding meditations by a distressed little girl, whom he drives off rather than helping her. Later, at his apartment, a revolver ready for his suicide, he continues to ponder his own motives in driving off the girl and, deep in thought, he falls asleep instead of carrying through with the suicide. In his sleep he dreams of an earthly paradise and speaks with its residents. Yet, having witnessed a vision of perfection, he concludes the dream by corrupting paradise, causing its "fall," by introducing a lie, which brings the whole dreamed world to mortal ruin. When he awakens, he has a fervent desire to live, to repair the effect of his lie, to tell about his dream, and to change his life on the basis of what he has seen. It is this very act of narrating, of speaking and confessing, that makes him ridiculous to his friends, who laugh and make fun of him. But he is resolved to accept his condition of ridiculousness, to tell his story again and again, and to pursue the reality of his dream, however fantastic it might be, as long as he lives.

One of the key aspects of the narrator's ridiculousness, however, is not so much theological as linguistic; in the contrast he draws between the abstract language of modern science the narrator has learned to use and the nearly incomprehensible, mystical language of feeling in which the people of his dream communicate. Ludicrously, in his subsequent confession, the man wants to speak about paradise, but finds that he is forced to communicate in the language of a fallen world that understands nothing of paradise. Thus he admits:

I do not know how to establish a heaven on earth, for I do not know how to put it into words. After my dream I lost the knack of putting things into words. At least, into the most necessary and most important words. But never mind, I shall go on and I shall keep on talking, for I have indeed beheld it with my own eyes, though I cannot describe what I saw. It is this the scoffers don't understand. (738)

The ridiculous man cannot invent a new language to approximate the mystical dream-language. Instead, he comically underscores his own fallen modernity in his self-conscious incapacity to communicate in any other way than through incongruous, exaggerated, inappropriate talk. He babbles and tells us that he is babbling; he self-consciously embraces ridiculousness as a narrative and stylistic strategy to point to an incommunicable reserve of truth. With Dostoevsky, we thus find ourselves on a new artistic threshold of the aesthetics of the ridiculous, the emergence of a modernist artistic strategy of ostentatious self-ridicule courting the reader's mockery and incomprehension as a seal of its own authenticity.

### III

Marsden Hartley's artistic relation to the ridiculous is complex, and although in his work he provides a number of essayistic, visual, and poetic references to the comic and to laughter, any "theory" of the ridiculous we might attribute to him must be derived from this network of examples. I wish to suggest, however, that Hartley utilized a strategy of the ridiculous as a personal idiom with which to address various aspects of modernity, including his homosexuality, his relation to key cities such as New York and Berlin, and his positioning of himself within the modernistic possibilities of the new art and poetry.

In an important statement of poetics from 1919, "The Business of Poetry," Hartley advocated greater attention to comic poetry, implicitly suggesting that comedy's potential to mobilize the intellect and evoke lighter modes of feeling than tragic pathos makes it an especially appropriate form of expressing modern life. The comic artist has a rare gift and represents a special type:

I personally would call for more humor in poetry. If it is true with poetry as with the play, that almost anyone can write a drama or a tragedy, while the comedy man is rare, this would at least account for the lack of charming humor in verse. Satire is delectable, as Henry James has shown. Even the so serious-minded Emily Dickinson had her inimitable gift of humor. She did the best kind of fooling with "God." An intellectual playfulness with great issues she certainly had to an irresistible degree.<sup>16</sup>

Hartley goes on to suggest that art must take its cue from "the mechanism of the time." In our condition of technological modernity, of "radio-telephony" and overseas plane flights:

We cannot feel as we do and attempt Keats' simplicities, or Keats' lyricism even. We have other virtues and defects. We are not melodists. Cacophonists, then? We do not concentrate on the assonant major alone. We find the entire range of dissonance valuable as well as attractive. Or is it all a fierce original harmonic we are trying to achieve? (319)

Notably, Hartley casts his response to the challenge of technological modernity as a question of feeling, of communication, and of style. Although the term "dissonance" could embrace a spectrum of expressionistic possibilities, it seems clear that the "cacophony" that he has most closely in mind involves exaggerated *comic* gestures of idiom and style, especially those of intellectual complication.

In his essay on Emily Dickinson in *Adventures in the Arts*, Hartley thus emphasizes her "celestial frivolity," her intellectual play with God that he had praised in "The Business of Poetry" essay. More surprising, however, is his reading of vaudeville as an *intellectual* comedy, precisely in its by-passing of dramatic imitation and its abstract concentration on the comic shapes traced by the moving bodies of the actors:

The stage should be swept of actors. It is not a place for imitation and photography. It is a place for the laughter of the senses, for the laughter of the body. It is a place for the tumbling blocks of the brain to fall in heaps. I give first place to the acrobat and his associates because it is the art where the human mind is for once relieved of its stupidity. The acrobat is master of his body and he lets his brain go a-roving upon other matters, if he has one. He is expected to remain silent. He would agree with William James, transposing "music prevents thinking" into "talking prevents silence."<sup>17</sup>

Hartley, however, continues by making his own acrobatic leap of thought to affirm a kind of talking that is valuable precisely insofar as it approaches the condition of pure verbalization, the "idle talk" that for Martin Heidegger, whose *Being and Time* was published only a few years later, was the very epitome of inauthenticity: "In so many instances, [talking] prevents conversation. That is why I like tea chit-chat. Words are never meant to mean anything then. They are simply given legs and wings, and

they jump and fly. They land where they can, and fall flat if they must" (173). For Hartley, it is in animated chatter that words become the abstract tokens of shape and movement, akin to the acrobat's or the vaudeville performer's eccentric body, so that paradoxically, it is not the "dramatically" significant conversation but rather the acrobatic nonsense of chit—chat that is the comic index of superior intellectuality. Moreover, Hartley's aesthetic equation of vaudeville acrobatics, teatime verbal gymnastics, and modern comic art takes on a homoerotic shading when we consider an aside he makes slightly earlier in the essay:

There are more dancing men of quality this season, it seems to me, who are obscured by dancing women of fame, and not such warrantable artistry. Perhaps it is because male anatomy allows of greater eccentricity and playfulness. There are no girls who have just such laughing legs as the inimitable Frances White. It is the long-legged American boy who beats the world in this sort of thing. (170)

Acrobatic chit-chat with a long-legged boy is more artistic than tea-talk with the ladies, it seems. Yet the fullest statement that brings together these various elements of Hartley's modernistic language, nonsense, laughter, intellectuality, homosexuality, and comic ridiculousness is the last essay in *Adventures in the Arts*, "The Importance of Being 'Dada'."

The title, of course, alludes to that masterpiece of gay comic verbal acrobatics, Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Wilde's play unfolds a plot of masquerade and unknown identity, spinning out a complicated comic intrigue woven around the name "Ernest." Jack Worthing, a country squire, uses the name Ernest when he comes to London, and sheds the virtuous exterior he must maintain in the country. Gwendolyn, who is in love with Jack/Ernest, seems to be especially attracted to his name, Ernest, which for her is the most beautiful name in the world. Along with several other confusions and twists of identity around the name, it finally turns out that Jack, who was an abandoned child, is actually of a good family and his real name is – Ernest. Accompanying the question of who really possesses the name and identity of Ernest, Wilde's comic plot plays on the comic pun of "earnestness" as a quality: seriousness, sincerity, trueness of heart and intention. Joel Fineman has neatly suggested that in this diverging comic play of name and quality, Wilde enacts a "paradoxical alternation and oscillation of the subject . . . which Lacan would call *autodifférence*," noting that "Ernest will himself be earnest only when he isn't, just as he will not be earnest only when he is."<sup>18</sup> The name Ernest can be possessed only as an empty sign, and the quality it signifies can be embodied only under an assumed name, a mask or metaphor of the original name. The fact that the real Ernest assumes the name of "Jack," which connotes a rake or jokester, despite "Jack's" serious country squire persona, suggests that this oscillation is inseparable for Wilde from the comedy of identity and language, whose dissonances are not "earnest" but ridiculous, and provoke laughter rather than tears.

An intriguing comic play of names exists for Hartley himself, suggesting that his allusion to Wilde's "Ernest" touched close to his own issues of personal identity and its vicissitudes. Hartley had been christened "Edmund," but in 1907, at the age of thirty, he adopted the name "Marsden," which was the maiden name of his stepmother (Weinberg, 131). His fond memory of his stepmother, and, implicitly, his desire to identify himself more closely with her through the signifier of her family name, was especially associated with her sense of humor and his father's laughter, which Hartley believed gave the old man a long life. He recounts being taken along during his father's courtship of his stepmother:

I remember even yet those moors, even though I was only eleven, and my father went over on a visit taking me with him, spending most of the time with Martha Marsden, our second mother. Martha was to become a wonderful woman for my father and a dear memory to us all, for besides being "true blue" she had a killing sense of humor and made my father laugh the rest of his time out – which was twenty-five years later – dying at the age of eighty-five. (Hartley, 1997, 199)

Hartley's essay "The Importance of Being 'Dada'" redoubles Wilde's comic gesture, while reversing its value signs. If "Ernest" is a meaningful name that falls short of the quality it signifies, then "Dada" is a meaningless name that fails its own meaningfulness. If the punning name "Ernest" signifies a seriousness that it is impossible for Wilde's character to embody seriously, then for Hartley, "Dada" signifies a nonsensical lack of seriousness which, paradoxically, the artwork can only comically fail to achieve, by ending up meaningful despite all. By implication, the artwork, even when it has nonsensical laughter as its basis, ends up being an earnest matter:

Having fussed with average intelligence as well as with average stupidity over the various dogmatic aspects of human experience such as art, religion, philosophy, ethics, morals, with a kind of obligatory blindness, I am come to the clearest point of my vision, which is nothing more or less than the superbly enlightening discovery that life as we know it is an essentially comic issue and cannot be treated other than with the spirit of comedy in comprehension. It is cause for riotous and healthy laughter, and to laugh at oneself in conjunction with the rest of the world, at one's own tragic vagaries, concerning the things one cannot name or touch, or comprehend, is the best anodyne I can conjure in my mind for the irrelevant pains we take to impress ourselves and the world with the importance of anything more than the brilliant excitation of the moment. (Hartley, 1921, 248-249)

This, in a sense, is Hartley's confession of a ridiculous man, in which he confesses that he finds his "tragic vagaries" as laughable as the rest of the world, and that he is one with them insofar as he, like they, take Marsden Hartley as an object of laughter. For Hartley, the comedy of modern existence – his own, first and foremost – lies in the inextricable entanglements of the serious and the ridiculous, which is really what is most laughable about it.

#### IV

In conclusion, I would like to discuss briefly two works, one in verse, the other in paint, that offer self-portraits of Hartley and put into artistic practice the reflexive presentation of the modern self, the homosexual modernist, as ridiculous man – worthy of "riotous and healthy laughter . . . at one's own tragic vagaries." The poem is a short, untitled work included in Hartley's collection of the 1920s called *Bach for Breakfast*. The editor of his poems, Gail R. Scott, notes that this poetry was connected to Hartley's "struggles . . . to eschew what he saw as obsessive subjectivity and the need to find clarification in both poetry and painting."<sup>19</sup> The collection also included a quotation from Spinoza's *Ethics*, from the fourth book, which deals with the emotions and their relation to freedom. In general, Spinoza offers an analysis of how humans can be enslaved by their emotions, rendered passive by passion, but he also affirms bodily pleasure, mirth, and active feeling as the opposite of pain, melancholy, and sorrow. With this background, we can see that in his poem, Hartley is analyzing his own enslavement to passion, yet also gaining a mirthful perspective on himself through self-conscious, ironic distance, rendering his gestures, speech, and physiognomy in broad, caricature-like strokes:

Holding in reserve  
a certain tendency to speed  
accentuation,  
mistaking nevertheless the pistol shot  
for the race,  
paying the huge penalty of ultra-previous  
enthusiasms, love squashed flat  
into patterns of adoration,

all flatness misconstrued for  
serene quantitative –  
"I see, in time, there is yet  
time to make it round,  
pumpkins in round heaps of fire,  
bodies made round"  
    his hat still sitting,  
    rakishly,  
    above his ears. (Hartley, 1987, 96)

The poem depicts a man animated by sexual desire, trying to check his impatience to get past the wooing and down to the act, going too fast at the outset and failing to reach the goal. It is structured around two basic oppositions: rushing and taking time, and flatness and roundness, which metaphorically translates the first pair to a visual language. One might say that if one could take one's time, one could make it round, could have a full experience of sexual love; but in rushing it is flattened out into a physical press of bodies. The final image captures the comic ambiguity of this hurried, perhaps even anonymous sexual act, which has its visual corollary in a drawing by another homosexual artist in Stieglitz's circle and a friend of Hartley, Charles Demuth. In one of his 1916 *Turkish Bath* series, Demuth depicts a bare-chested man, "his hat still sitting, / rakishly, / above his ears," either not yet fully undressed or not yet fully dressed, facing the viewer with a smile. Jonathan Weinberg's comment on Demuth's drawing applies equally to Hartley's poem: "The hat works like the famous shoes on the otherwise naked Olympia of Manet – it forces us to think about the character's state of undress, to wonder why he wears a hat but not a shirt. We could say that the picture is about dressing and undressing, but doing so with such impatience that the normal order for putting on or taking off clothes is disrupted" (Weinberg, 97). Hartley's scene is less explicit, but I believe that something like Demuth's bathhouse figure is the only partly disclosed subtext of the poem. It specifies Hartley's experience of male homosexual desire as a species of the modern ridiculous, its division of self-consciousness, its profane "fallenness" projected temporally onto this laughably disheveled figure, captured, almost, but then not quite, *in flagranti*, and perhaps even tipping his hat to poet and mirror in unwarranted pride.

I will conclude with one of Hartley's best-known images, his 1939 painting entitled *Sustained Comedy*. This painting is generally considered a self-portrait, but clearly a symbolic one, since it turns Hartley into a much younger blond man, a sailor or circus clown, covers him in tattoos and surrounds him with symbolic entities. According to Bruce Robertson, the symbolism and an inscription on the back that reads "Sustained Comedy – [*crossed out*] / Portrait of an object [*crossed out*] / 'O Big Earth' – / or – the sustained travesty" indicate a dark, grim tone to the work.<sup>20</sup> Robertson also points to two late poems that correspond to the symbolic imagery of the painting, "Trapezist's Despair" and especially "He Too Wore a Butterfly," which mentions the butterflies, the woman, the ship, and a Christ tattooed on the chest. But I think one can exaggerate the darkly allegorical nature of the painting if one does not acknowledge the ludicrousness of the figure and its context in a much longer meditation in Hartley on the ridiculous as an artistically productive identity. Both poems also refer back to Hartley's appreciation of the acrobat, whose resonance for the modernist artist is his comic relation to nonsense, his suspension of the symbolic dimension in the abstract language of pattern, in the "sustained comedy" of his physique and movement. In light of "He Too Wore a Butterfly," one might see the strange acrobat/sailor/transvestite figure of "Sustained Comedy" as another, late avatar of "Marsden," the wife of Hartley's father, who keeps age and death at bay with her good humor and provocation of laughter:

He wore a butterfly upon his flanks as though he  
felt the fear of being musclebound,  
or, saying to himself – “I must have the breath of  
spring upon my beam” – that smiling morning of a man  
and – as if the sea had crowded all its waves  
within his eyes, making him think of numberless  
casual afternoons, the lashes curling up to let the  
floods of evening in,  
staving off for later years the pale textures of  
immitigable distance. (Hartley, 1987, 171)

Indeed, if we recognize that not only is this bizarre self-portrait surrounded by and marked by butterflies and flowers, but also, in the made-up mask of a face, itself bears the physiognomy of a moth or butterfly, we can read the painting as a metaphor of comic metamorphosis of suffering into laughter. Through his “sustained comedy” of transmuting homosexuality into art, Hartley endures his own metamorphosis into a ridiculous human butterfly, his quivering thoughts the sensitive antennae of all-too-fleshly pains and delights.

If this interpretation of the picture’s imagery is plausible, then another poem of the late 1930s, “Go Lightly,” suggests that the painting may ultimately imply that, for Hartley, to sustain the travesty, to draw out the comedy of his existence as a gay artist, is a positive goal and that the life-giving force of laughter has the last, consoling, nonsensical word. This is the comedy of the sexual instinct shared by moth and man alike, with self-conscious “fallenness” returned to innocence in the spectacle of the “evening moth” venturing out to sip the delicate honey of his chosen flower:

Evening moth  
sips at mouth  
of some flowers,  
his feet touching  
spirit-like  
their lips –  
go lightly, said moth  
to himself  
for delicate is honey  
of the evening.

morning is filled  
with humming;  
if you put your ear  
to the telegraph pole  
you can hear the world  
saying bon jour  
to the world.

this mysticism  
of the antennae  
reaching out, as tendrils  
of the vine  
bringing certain laughs  
to the troubled  
soul. (Hartley, 1987, 150).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Marsden Hartley, *Somehow a Past: The Autobiography of Marsden Hartley*, ed. Susan Elizabeth Ryan (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1997), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Marsden Hartley, "1916 Catalogue Statement, 291 (Photo-Secession Galleries)" in *On Art*, ed. Gail R. Scott (New York: Horizon Press, 1982), 67.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Jonathan Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice: Homosexuality in the Art of Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, and the First American Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 156.

<sup>4</sup> Wanda C. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 77.

<sup>5</sup> As Debra Briker Balken has noted: "Whereas Duchamp advocated the 'equality of the sexes' – a standpoint that resulted in the cross-sexual references and blurrings of gender in many of his works – Stieglitz, his artists, and their champions would insist, after 1915, on a rigorous distinction between the masculine and the feminine, on the biological opposition of the sexes, as a means of articulating the hallmarks of an authentic, true American art." Debra Briker Balken, *Debating American Modernism: Stieglitz, Duchamp, and the New York Avant-Garde* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 2003), 35.

<sup>6</sup> Marcia Brennan, *Painting Gender, Constructing Theory: The Alfred Stieglitz Circle and American Formalist Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2001), 58.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, this sexual punning across the range of gender positions was found in the works of many of the artists around Stieglitz and New York Dada, including the sexualized mechanomorphs of Francis Picabia, Marias de Zayas, and Morton Schamberg, the organic abstractions of Georgia O'Keefe, and the broader work of Duchamp himself. However, as a critical essay of Stieglitz circle critic Paul Rosenfeld suggests, in Hartley's case, uncertainty about Hartley's gender position translated into critical doubts about whether his embodied forms could really be sufficiently representative of an authentic American modernity. Rosenfeld argues that artists such as Chase and Whistler and Sargent, and writers like Henry James and Mark Twain have been overly focused on self-advertisement through style. Hartley shares this vice and in an openly sexual, embodied form: "To be sure he belongs to an age other than theirs. His time is not impressionist, but new-baroque. It has referred the universe to the human body and felt the human body in the objects present to the senses. As men have done in all baroque ages; as Greco, as Bernini, as the edifier of the Cathedra Petri in St. Peter's in Rome did in their times, so Hartley too, in his, stresses in what he shapes the sexual interests of the mind. Nevertheless, via the large cucumbers, bananas, pears, goblets, lilies, and rubberplants in his compositions, chosen doubtlessly because of a physical resemblance to the painter himself to express his ego, there comes to us an accent not really different from that borne by the stuffs of the men of the older American school." Paul Rosenfeld, "Marsden Hartley," in *Port of New York: Essays on Fourteen American Moderns* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924), 95-96.

<sup>8</sup> Williams, from an unpublished autobiographical manuscript, cited in Townshend Ludington, *Marsden Hartley: The Biography of an American Artist* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Waldo Frank, "Introduction" to Marsden Hartley, *Adventures in the Arts: Informal Chapters on Painters, Vaudeville, and Poets* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1921), xvi. Paul Rosenfeld echoed Frank's gendered phraseology in his essay on Hartley. He singled out, indeed, Hartley's "daintiness"

for praise, yet argued that this very quality of deft, vivacious handling of surface kept Hartley from another form of artistic “intimacy,” more creatively masculine, that comes of a deeper immersion in the material: “Only the painter has not immersed himself sufficiently deeply in his material. He has not been able to lose himself in his ‘object.’ It has not presented itself to him with the marvelous intimacy with which it presents itself to the great artist” (Paul Rosenfeld, “Marsden Hartley,” 93).

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. James Hutton (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1982), 49.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Paul Richter, *Horn of Oberon: School for Aesthetics*, trans. Margaret R. Hale (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1973), 87.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “On the Essence of Laughter” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1995), 153-154.

<sup>13</sup> Michele Hannoosh, *Baudelaire and Caricature: From the Comic to an Art of Modernity* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 4. On Baudelaire, caricature, and modernity see Ainslie Armstrong McLees, *Baudelaire’s “Argot Plastique”: Poetic Caricature and Modernism* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> Moreover, this dialectic reveals an underlying connection with the temporal dynamics of the commodity, fashion, and desire for the new that is characteristic of modern urban life. Paul De Man, in his celebrated discussion of irony in “The Rhetoric of Temporality” takes as his key example precisely Baudelaire’s “The Essence of Laughter,” which characterizes the divided and self-dividing nature of ironic self-consciousness in terms of the self’s risible awareness of falling, its entanglement in the sinful fallenness of self-awareness. De Man goes on to suggest that Baudelairean irony does not merely give rise to a quasi-spatial hierarchy of higher and lower states of consciousness, but also to a particular temporality: the reiterative, repetitive, endless time characteristic of modernity, the rhythmic alternations of spleen and ideal. De Man concludes: “Irony divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse into the inauthentic. It can know this inauthenticity but can never overcome it. It can only restate and repeat it on an increasingly conscious level, but it remains endlessly caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the empirical world.” Paul De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 222.

<sup>15</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man: A Fantastic Story,” trans. David Magarshack, in *Great Short Works of Fyodor Dostoevsky* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 717.

<sup>16</sup> Marsden Hartley, “The Business of Poetry” (1919), in *The Collected Poems of Marsden Hartley, 1904-1943*, ed. Gail R. Scott (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1987), 318.

<sup>17</sup> Marsden Hartley, “Vaudeville,” in *Adventures in the Arts*, 173. For an excellent treatment of Hartley’s “light figures,” derived especially from circus and other popular spectacle, see Justus Nieland, “Marsden Hartley’s Light Figures,” *Modernism / Modernity* 11.4 (2004): 621-650. Paul Rosenfeld, referring to Hartley’s painting of the early twenties, echoes Hartley’s own critical tropes of lightness, but turns them subtly against Hartley to accuse him of a kind of defensive frivolity: “[A] sort of delightful whimsicality has put in its appearance, too. It is a sort of quaint humorousness, reminiscent of the extravagant conceits, the cerebral enormities of Emily Dickinson, another new Englander. (What a pair they would have made!) In Hartley’s art it takes the form of capricious inventions, blue and yellow bananas tumbling like circus-clowns; light complicated rhythms; a form of

cold dandified blue whirling while on it there tumble contrariwise three fat rosy pears; quaint conceits of painting that cause two brown silk window draperies to fall like the skirts of the Boston dames of a generation ago; little patterns of paper dragons, chocolate drops, gardenias and swagger-sticks on a background of red that throbs like a circus drum. But some grip there is one misses. The painting is too much merely a beauteous flow. It is a little as though the artist had made a compact with life, had agreed not to permit himself to feel deeply for the sake of avoiding the stings" (Rosenfeld, "Marsden Hartley," 99).

<sup>18</sup> Joel Fineman, "The Significance of Literature: *The Importance of Being Earnest*," in *The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition: Essays Toward the Release of Shakespeare's Will* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991), 35.

<sup>19</sup> Gail R. Scott in *The Collected Poems of Marsden Hartley*, 331.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce Robertson, "Marsden Hartley and Self-Portraiture," in *Marsden Hartley*, ed. Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 154.