

Truewit and Sir Epicure Mammon: Jonson's Creative Accidents

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COMEDY, whether a primitive comic play or a complex one of high seriousness, presupposes disjunctions of several kinds. The simplest are those relating to action: there are mistakes, confused identities, circumstantial accidents and like differences between our expectations about normal human behavior and what in fact happens in comic situations. The verbal parallels to disjunctive actions are evasion and double entendre, nonsense, jargon and dialect that surprise expectations about how words are normally used and what they signify. In ordinary discourse a common language assumes a social order or set of conventions accepted by all the speakers of that shared language as the referential principle which gives meaning to their words. Such a principle may have the form of mores, traditions, or ethical ideas; still, it acts always as an abstract authority for the truth of what is said. In comedy often enough this presupposition is deliberately turned upside down: an anti-social bias of one sort or another is a feature of the comic character and uncommon referents are a disjunctive element in his comic language. Problems of dramatic interpretation arise from the fact that language acquires additional meanings from the intents of differing speakers. From the viewpoint of decorum, a speaker in a comedy ought to have no motive demanding our recognition that he is thinking, feeling, or behaving in any way contrary to his type. Because his anti-social speech is autonomous, we must first discover his private referents in order to know his intent. When all goes in accord with this fundamental linguistic theory, his referents will direct his speech to coincide with

his comic type — an expression of some unsocialized idea in dramatic form. Like disjunctions in the action, then, these in language are intentional. No matter how figurative or cryptic or disordered comic languages may be, we expect that they are contributing to a deliberate design of characterization, or plot, or theme, or structure in the whole play.

Jonson does not always respect theory, neither this general one that underlies all verbal comedy, nor his own famous "humours" theory that insists on a decorum or correspondence between speech style and character. There are occasions in his plays when disjunctions appear to be unintentional, when words seem to evade accountability to any dramatic function and to create meanings and effects neither anticipated nor supported by other of the play's elements. Speeches are given and exchanged whose meaning is neither part of an harmonic whole nor a contribution to a calculated dissonance. At such times words seem to be their own governors, all sound without referent, free from the guiding reins of the playwright. This is not to say that Jonson's complex stylistics are undisciplined, or that there is a specific line in a passage dividing essential from superfluous words. It is to notice rather that often his plays affect us in ways we cannot quite explain, even after his rich style has been analyzed. The cause, I suspect, is to be traced to his conscious or unconscious gluttony for words, freed from both the rules governing language in ordinary discourse and freed from the stringent dramatic necessities Jonson usually gave them.

His own instructions that his plays were to be heard¹ certainly hint at his predilection to exercise a love of verbal pyrotechnic at the expense of other dramatic elements. Muriel Bradbrook's suggestion that Jonson pays a penalty for his delight in words points to my similar observation that his words often defy accountability to function: "Sometimes . . . a curious, finely dissected diction was the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost his critical detachment and was content to lose it."² Disjunct from both the design

of the play and the decorum of character, language is set free with the power to create more or other than Jonson may have intended. Our final sense of Sir Epicure in *The Alchemist* and of Truewit in *Epicoene* seems to be the result of the unintentional words Jonson let them speak. Linguistic exuberance allows them to transcend the limits of their roles, unleashing effects and meanings that Jonson gives no indication of having noticed. Truewit's superabundant words make him begin as a character and end as a style; for him Jonson pays dearly. Sir Epicure's delight in words is a positive gain, however criticism may reckon the cost to craftsmanship. He reaches through his own rhetoric to become a character greater than either mere type or style can suggest. Both figures, like their plays, are of course utterly different. They are all the more useful, therefore, as illustrations of so imprecise a subject as unplanned meaning or effect.

The decorum of style to character and the distinction between critic and satirist are concerns that become acute in relation to Truewit. Certainly the city wit, as opposed to, say, his near relatives the clever servant of Terence or the dandy in Restoration comedies, is almost entirely a verbal invention. We therefore expect Truewit's linguistic precosity and perhaps even his prolixity. He is an intellectual sprite whose talk weaves through and around that of the other humours, each of whom follows his bent oblivious of the others. Jonas Barish thinks the resulting fragmentation of dialogue was consciously intended by Jonson and does not therefore lead to critical disjunctions between style and character.³ Truewit's prose style, Barish says, simply reflects the disjointedness of the mind in action, not knowing where it will go until it gets there. Yet it is precisely this quality of improvisation that cannot be confined to judgments about Truewit's prose style. Indeed, Truewit's eventual loss of identity seems to be the result of guilt by improvisation.

As both the critic-observer of the action and the inventor of the plots, Truewit starts out in need of careful integration

lest in these roles he be too easily identified purely as Jonson's spokesman. Taken as a whole, he is a detached, breezy, intelligence flexing itself for wit's own sake. The ingenu Dauphine's inheritance means nothing to him and tormenting Morose is an exercise on a natural (or unnatural because grotesque) butt. He is uninvolved in the consequences of his pranks since he has nothing to win or lose. In the familiar metaphor of the play as closed circle, he perches on its rim, dangling his cleverness into the lives of other characters simply to catch them in their own epicoene nets.⁴ Too readily, however, Truewit descends from his observational perch and assumes as many other roles as his mood and the situation suggest, changing his style of speech with each pose. There is facetious morality in Truewit's first speech of the opening scene when he surveys the Gentleman Clerimont preparing for his day's social program.

Why here's the man who can melt away his time, and never feels it! What between his mistress abroad and his ingle at home, high fare, soft lodging, fine clothes, and his fiddle; he thinks the hours have no wings, or the day no post horse. . . . Were you struck with the plague this minute . . . you would then begin to think, and value every article of your time.

The content and form of indirect address are signals to us of Truewit's privileged status as critic. At the same time, the negligent tone, maintained while he continues his lecture on the frippery of the times, cancels the criticism. Then, dismissed by Clerimont as a "tedious fellow who has read Plutarch's *Morals*," Truewit turns gallant and begins to gossip with equal energy and more detail than he had expended on preaching. He tells Clerimont about the arrival in town of a College of new women. Similar alternations between instructions and their antithesis or between gay proposals and deprecations of them characterize his other role-playing. He first describes an Ovidian life of seduction, and then exposes it as fraudulent. Or for instance, he praises the practises of vanity:

I love a good dressing before any beauty o' the world.
 O, a woman is then like a delicate garden; nor is there
 one kind of it, she may vary every hour . . . practise
 any art to mend breath, cleanse teeth, repair eyebrows;
 paint and profess it. (I, i)

And in the next speech denigrates cosmetic arts by calling
 a thing by its least flattering name:

A lady should, indeed, study her face, when we think
 she sleeps; . . . Is it for us to see their perukes put
 on, their false teeth, their complexion, their eyebrows,
 their nails? You see gilders will not work, but inclosed.
 (I, i)

Something of the same mild scorn for the fashionable
 enters into his "thundering" to Morose about "the incom-
 modities of a wife" (II, i). But the speech is less noticeable
 for its implied criticism than for the sheer volume of
 imaginary matrimonial ills: the opportunity to harass the
 future husband is a spur to invention. Each idea does not
 trigger a greater, more fabulous one, as we shall see is the
 case with Sir Epicure's inventions. The march of ideas is
 horizontal, each elaborating the one preceding, either by
 parallelism or antithesis or both:

If, after you are married, your wife do run away with
 a vaulter, or the Frenchman that walks upon ropes, or
 him that dances the jig, or a fencer for his skill at his
 weapon; why, it is not their fault. . . . If she be fair
 young and vegetous, no sweetmeats ever drew more flies;
 all the yellow doublets and great roses in the town will
 be there. If foul and crooked. . . .

(I, i)

Deafening Morose is Truewit's immediate objective: intrigue
 itself is his larger one. Yet he is utterly disinterested in
 any consequence: first and last he celebrates his humour.
 Within moments, however, his vanity asserts itself, for
 telling Dauphine and Clerimont of his interview with Morose
 becomes nearly as important as was the interview itself.
 Their lack of enthusiasm over his success annoys him:

Why do you not applaud and adore me, sirs? why stand
 you mute? are you stupid? You are not worthy of the
 benefit.

(II, ii)

In short, recounting his chicanery would seem to indicate that Truewit is interested in its outcome and thus is interacting with the other figures. Yet making the duller wits into an audience confirms that neither of these is a valid assumption. Or when the gossiping trio talk again in IV, i, their common subjects — the Collegiates, fashions, the uses of leisure — ought to give cohesion to their conversation. Yet Truewit speaks in monologue for whole pages at a time, repeats the very same views already aired in I, i and II, i, and then plays the author's agent-provocateur by baiting the minor characters Daw, La Foole and the Otters.

Truewit seems to emerge from all this as an inconsistent moral critic for the author-satirist, and an inconsistent observer-actor in the drama. Barish sees the problem as follows.

If the common denominator through all of these numerous rhetorical postures remains that of the negligent young wit, disdainful of excessive linguistic precision, it is nevertheless true that Truewit speaks through so many masks that one is not sure when, if ever, he is speaking in *propria persona*.⁵

The assumption here that a *propria persona* is lurking beneath the many rhetorical masks leads directly to the problem I raise. Truewit should have a *propria persona*, but those rhetorical postures make me doubt that he does. It is true that he has no one equivalent to the quirk of a humours character that defines his one style of speech. It is also true that neither as satirist nor as critic does Truewit ever provide us with the touchstone of a natural idiom that would allow us to measure departures from it by other characters as revelations of their moral defect. To say that the common stylistic denominator of the true wit is an intellectually oriented diction is to see wit disembodied and style, the *metier* of the city wit, operating independently of personality.

This is a difficult point to illustrate since a free-floating mentality is a positive description of Truewit. Moreover, the lack of a body to house his observing intelligence can scarcely be considered a particular handicap in a play in

which sexual neutrality is endemic. The essential distinction is rather that whereas all the characters deny corporeality, each except Truewit has one personality which we may define as a role. And each speaks and behaves according to a set of identifiable referents that establish the limits of that role. A further subtlety that asks to be taken into account is that all of the personalities are to some extent tainted by folly. Logically then Truewit, the least corporeal, the disengaged critic who ridicules folly, is a Fool.⁶ Again, there would be no inconsistency in presenting the Fool as non-person were he not compromised by the delight he takes in this all-fool society, a delight which moves him to participate in it. Whenever he does so, however, he needs to relinquish his privilege as non-person and don a personality. He is therefore continually moving inside and outside of this epicoene world rather than, as I suggested earlier when talking only of the action, perched on its rim. He tests a set of referents, scorns it, abandons it, exchanges it, toys with it, does everything short of adopting it.

Truewit can have no *propria persona* other than that of the mimic who forfeits any possible identity by perpetually imitating others'. Mimicry nonetheless is the playwright's business and a character's appropriation of it raises questions that remain unsolved in *Epicoene*. Were he consistent to his theories, Jonson's purpose in mimicking mimicry should be to deride it for its immorality. In that case we could not except Truewit from the general satire of that all-fool, all-knave society that is always Jonson's target: Jonson would then be performing predictably as satirist of an unwholesome epicoene world.

Yet there is no answer in this supposition since it is not at all clear that satire was Jonson's aim. *Epicoene's* final wisdom seems to be nearer to an acceptance of folly, although not joyously and certainly not humanely. The sum of the play is very like the sum of Truewit's varied posing and we are led to suspect that although mimicry is not praised, it is certainly enjoyed. The distinguishing mark of the wit is to parry ideas rather than merely invent them.

Let me not breath, if I meant ought, beside.
I only used those speeches, as a spur
To him.

(I, i, 157-159)

That the actual bond between Face and Subtle is their alternating sexual partnership with "Dol Particular" (when that pact is broken the alchemical machines explode) may be Jonson's subversive hint about how a society is composed. At any rate, after their rapprochement, they can and do talk directly and understandably to each other in order to consolidate their anti-society against the double threat of Lovewit's "real" one and the victims' parodies of reality. Face, Subtle and Dol thus give a base line to the play's intentional cacophonies.

It seems clear that in this play Jonson is exploiting the dramatic potentialities of diverse languages in opposition to each other. Some critics go further and suggest that the play's clash of jargons is "to prevent"

or baffle, or mutilate meaningful communication between characters whenever the dramaturgy requires that communication should be stifled. There is a constantly recurring sense in the play of the unbridgeable distance between people; they stand, shouting at each other across the abyss.⁸

It is certainly true that characters talk at cross purposes to each other, often making us into superior listeners privy to Jonson's meaning. Oddly enough, these are occasions when not understanding almost does not matter. Ananias does not understand when Subtle speaks to him "like a philosopher" and names the "vexations, and the martyrizations of metals in the work."

Sir, Putrefaction,
Solution, Ablution, Sublimation,
Cohobation, Calcination, Ceration, and
Fixation.

(II, v, 20-25)

And neither do we. The tone of this "episcopal pomp" is nevertheless clear enough for us to recognize that Jonson is ridiculing the Deacon's own jargon and aggressive piety.

Again when Dapper, first fool of the day's catch, and Face exchange hyphenated allusions to topical subjects that

heighten the dangers and mysteries of alchemy, the meaning is clear although the words are inexplicit. (The important business of the scene, I, ii, is visual, Face runs back and forth across the stage between the willing gull and the coy "Doctor" Subtle who pretends a reluctance to serve Dapper with a good fairy for success at gambling.) The conspirators' talk is, like Subtle's earlier, to give the spur to a ready subject.

Subtle: He'll draw you all the treasure of the realm.
If it be set him.

Face: Speak you this from art?

Subtle: Ay, sir, and reason too: the ground of art.
He'd o' the only best complexion,
The Queen of Fairy loves.

Face: What! Is he!

Subtle: Peace.
He'll overhear you. Sir, should she but see him —

Face: What?

Subtle: Do not you tell him.

(I, ii, 102-107)

It is not necessary to examine all the episodes to see that the "free" words of Face and Subtle are always firmly controlled by the "abstract ideal of the plot."⁹ (Abstract because, as Harry Levin and Jonas Barish agree for different reasons, in Jonson design and configuration of character and situation replace the cause-effect pattern implied by plot.) No matter how packed with nonsense words and sensible-sounding travesties of technicality, their jargon has twin roots in the fabric of their trickery and in their joint complicity with Dol. We never suspect that their cleverness may be unequal to their most outrageous schemes; so too we are confident that their dazzlingly absurd explanations will serve their opportunistic ends. Their "noise" is always functional because it is conscious disguise.¹⁰ Ultimately, their glib inventions and instant stratagems illustrate the flexibility their names imply and are to be contrasted to the rigidity of their victims. Tribulation has one demeanor and his accent has one meaning; so Drugger; so all. Even Surly the plain talker who sees through all the plots as "games" made out of "terms" to "charm" is confined to sceptical irritability by his tag. Sir Epicure

Mammon alone has verbal art which matches an unconfined richness of imagination and hints at an intellect forbidden by the rules of type.¹¹ Unlike that horizontal direction of Truewit's language, or in this play, that of all the speakers, Mammon's verbal heroics are built on wild fantasy which spirals ever upward and finally out of its original context. The conceptual difference between Mammon and the other characters is important enough to warrant a brief reminder of the principles governing tragic and comic languages.

Sir Epicure Mammon is as much a created type (that is, he has no exact predecessor in earlier comedy) as are the other characters. But whereas their language and action reinforces the humour they have been assigned — Tribulation worries more, Kastril simply shows more anger — Mammon is continually giving us new facets of a self and thus offending against the rules of classical comedy. Types are identifiable by a whole repertory of manner, gesture, costume and equivalent verbal idiosyncrasy. And, since pure type (or stock figure or "humour") is one-dimensional, comedies usually show him pursuing a single motive: the rake to seduce the ingenue, the miser to get more gold, the braggart soldier to swagger but never fight, and so on. In tragedy, language struggles for the precision that will portray what is unique about an individual, to delineate his particularity as multiply-motivated and multi-dimensional. The opposite seems to be true for the language of comedy, whose function is to project the general, not by vertical probing into psychological motive, but by horizontal expansion and elaboration. Often, then, many words add little to our understanding of a comic character, although they may add to our enjoyment and appreciation of him. Just as the many situations he finds himself in are all designed to simplify his single humour, so the many words spoken expose his single comic potentiality. Neither action nor word deepen his character; they vary, he does not.

Jonson makes us very conscious of this kind of horizontal and unrestrained verbal play. So whereas Druggier, Dame Pliant, *et al.*, suggests caricatures of Dulness, Obligingness,

etc., there is more of Sir Epicure Mammon than is described by the terms translating his name as Lust, Luxury, or Avarice. Copious studies would have us believe that it was Jonson's didactic purpose to censure such vices. Yet Sir Epicure's heady language evokes a response in us far different from moral disapproval — a point to which I will return.

He enters the play (II, i) as a prophet of the "Novo Orbe," a golden realm that he himself will also explore and conquer. But not merely for the satisfaction of a private greed. This prophet of the "happy word, be rich" will convert the world to fit his large dream; then once in it, and of it, he will be as a god conferring wealth on all. He steps into the action therefore not merely ripe for Subtle's art, but already seduced by an apocalyptic vision, and talking a parody of New Testament miracles. The "flower of the sun, the perfect ruby which [he] calls the elixir" that Subtle has promised him

Can confer honor, love, respect, long life,
Give safety valour; yea, and victory,
To whom he will. In eight, and twenty days,
I'll make an old man, of fourscore, a child.

(II, i, 49-54)

A moment later, cued into antiquity by his own boundless faith, he exhausts the "wisdom of the ancients" (Moses, Solomon and Adam) and turns scholar. Spinning from one fabulous clause to the next, he weaves legend, myth, classical allusion and the philosopher's stone into one colossal web of verbal detritus. Oblivious to Surly's acid detachment, Sir Epicure tells us that the treatise on the philosopher's stone, composed by Adam in High Dutch, was written on cedar board, known to be impervious to time and worms.

. . . 'Tis like your Irish wood,
Gainst cobwebs. I have a piece of Jason's fleece, too,
Which was no other, than a book of alchemy,
Writ in large sheepskin, a good fat ram-vellum.
Such was Pythagoras' thigh, Pandora's tub;
And, all that fable of Medea's charms,
The manner of our work: the bulls, our furnace,

Still breathing fire; our argent-vive, the dragon;
 The dragon's teeth, mercury sublimate,
 That keeps the whiteness, hardness, and the biting;
 And they are gathered, into Jason's helm,
 (Th' alembic) and then sowed in Mars his field,
 And, thence, sublimed so often, till they are fixed.
 Both this, th' Hesperian garden, Cadmus' story,
 Jove's shower, the boon of Midas, Argus' eyes,
 Boccace his Demogorgon, thousands more,
 All abstract riddles of our stone. How now?

(II, i, 88-104)

He stops only when interrupted by Face's entrance. Later still, a near view of his golden kingdom discloses a seraglio, decadent in a luxury rivalled only by our images of the late Roman Emperors. "I will have all my beds blown up; not stuffed: Down is too hard. And then, mine oval room, filled with such pictures, as Tiberius took from Elephantis . . ." (II, i, 41-56). Later in II, he is an alchemist doubling the layers of nonsense meanings given by Face and Subtle.

Subtle: . . . I mean to tinct C in sand heat tomorrow,
 And give him imbibition.
 Mammon: Of white oil?
 Subtle: No, sir, of red. . . .
 Out of that calx, I have won the salt of mercury.
 Mammon: By pouring on your rectified water?
 Subtle: Yes, and reverberating in Athanor.

In IV, i, he is a courtier who woos Dol with the comparatives and "conceits" of a sonneteer.

This versatile assumption of role after role might lead us to hear another Truewit, performing as the instant requires at the ultimate expense of a unique identity. But Mammon is not responding to the circumstances by conscious role-playing merely in order to exercise his agile wit. And, although his languages are somewhat like Truewit's in that they are built by associative links, we do not hear in them the facetiousness of careless posturing. We hear instead the unselfconscious accent of belief. Somehow, by outdoing the excessive magicians in excess he comes full circle to simplicity. It is possible for him to best Face and Subtle at their own game only by playing their game as though it were *not* based on obfuscation and audacious contempt. Sir Epicure means to be straightforward and

respectful. To Sir Epicure, one imagines, Subtle's skillful doubletalk is merely the scholasticism of an unimaginative pedant, and compared to Sir Epicure's imagination, Subtle's is indeed scholastic. For Sir Epicure lives each of his word-created episodes with the uninhibited reaches of his self-feeding fantasy opened to us. We do not always understand what he says because his referents are half hidden in private regions — and those we suspect to be even more expansive than his wild grandiloquence. Yet, despite the fact that many of his words baffle us — indeed that is partly because his words have ceased to express a particular content — we know what he means. At the height of Sir Epicure's wooing, for instance, Dol checks his compliments because, as she says, they threaten to consume him like a "phoenix."

Nay, now you court the courtier: and destroy
 What you would build. This art, sir, i' your words,
 Calls your whole faith in question.

(IV, i, 70-72)

Her lines are provocative because they seem to notice that his language has exceeded the limits of its intent — to present himself as the perfect lover. To her, his words have lost their content and have reverted to meaningless sounds. And, whereas her notion of "art" and its bawdy purpose is not ours, the art that calls into question a "whole faith" certainly is ours. Does Jonson notice that Sir Epicure has talked himself out of a role and into a *persona* whose "whole faith" we can intuit? To put it technically, the reasons why we know what Sir Epicure means are analogous to those that free him from his type.

In all the dictions other than Sir Epicure's, exaggeration functions at least partly to emphasize that language is a construct. In fact, most of the play's styles depend upon exaggeration of some sort for their satiric point. In many of Subtle's languages rhetorical overstatement (e.g., II, i, 143-176) creates an hypnotic effect on his victims. Surly's over-accumulation of detail in II (182-197) is his device for ridicule. Either the playwright and his three principle

characters Face, Dol and Subtle are collaborating in constructing styles to use as weapons against the foolish, or the playwright alone is devising styles that reflect gullibility. We always know that the "alchemists" do not mean what they say; they usually mean what they want their victims to understand. Nor does Jonson believe what Tribulation or Surly says; he means them to believe what they say. In all these extraordinary instances we, then, are always conscious of a space between what is said and what would be meant by these words in ordinary discourse. To say this much is simply to restate a function of language in satire.

When Sir Epicure speaks, the extraordinary and the ordinary merge. There is none of the space between word and meaning that would allow our assessment of Mammon as an abstract, a type created and controlled by its maker. Jonson does not believe what Sir Epicure believes, but he may believe what Sir Epicure means — hard as that is to paraphrase. Sir Epicure speaks his sensuous, suggestive, extraordinary words as though they conveyed only common meanings. Yet we know they have magical meanings for him and, what is perhaps finally more important, they have the same meanings for us. It is often said that Sir Epicure's evocative language paints the wantonness Jonson presumably wished to criticize. But I doubt it. The words linger and entice too well. Like all the victims of chicanery who mirror and variegate avarice, Sir Epicure Mammon has the *idée fixe* of the comic character. We, however, are not tempted to single Druggier or Dapper out of their context in the play as either likeable, or interesting, or to give them any other adjective which would imply their identity with the suppleness and variety of human experience. They do not rise above their own rhetoric to demand one-ness with us. They remain fixed within the hard edges of their extraordinary and unflattering "humours." For theirs are the quirks that make us all sometimes ridiculous. Sir Epicure's dreams however

are attractive: his prolific imagination is an excitement to our own. The outlines of his extraordinariness are more diffuse than rigid and his traits invite us to find in him more of ourselves than is in the type or caricature. He is capable of touching our secret dreams because we suspect he is innocent as well as ridiculous, generous rather than merely greedy. His foolishness prevents our admiration of his intellect; yet he is certainly neither stupid nor ignorant, the vices that Jonsonian comedy does attack unambiguously and that our vanity allows us to reject as alien.

Critical estimates of Jonson's perfect control of diction in *The Alchemist* means that our delight in Subtle's art is intellectual. We have little *feeling* about his triumphs over the gulls and perhaps still less over his success at escaping censure at the play's end. So too, although we regret that the eleventh hour audacity of Face will result in his being socialized once again as Jeremy the butler, we are not sad. We accept that, like us, he must relinquish the world of comic possibilities. But Jonson's own sensuous relish of words makes Sir Epicure a character richer than anything we expect from this alchemical illusion. It is almost as though accident and result were subject to some magical rule of inverse proportion: the more coincidentally Sir Epicure conforms to his theoretical outlines, the greater his power to captivate us. He is unreal; yet we don't want him to waken from his dream world for he echoes anti-social wishes of our own. Better still, he assures us they are harmless. Sir Epicure's cry "Oh, my voluptuous mind" can be beginning and ending, for his exuberance illustrates the unfathomable power of language to create.

Sir Epicure's role playing has many referents. Yet the most profound referents for his language remain private. Neither any one speech, nor the sum of all his speeches precisely conveys his inner world. We nevertheless recognize and respond to it despite an inability to define its boundaries. The many referents for Truewit's role playing are equally inaccessible to us, and neither do we have their

sum. He, however, has no discoverable, integral self. No contradiction exists in the fact that two such opposite conclusions derive from the same cause: the unintentional effects of language set free from restraints by function. Perhaps one cannot analyze so amorphous a subject as effect or meaning without treading perilously close to illogic, at least since effect implies subjectivity and analysis pretends to objectivity. Yet neither sternly objective nor admittedly subjective critics of Jonson are satisfied that his theories explain his results. Nor is there a consensus about his style, whether it is approached as an intrinsic element of the plays or as separable linguistic phenomena. Ultimately, of course, one needn't try to make Jonson accountable to criticism, ancient or modern. The more intriguing possibility is that he was unaccountable to himself, and being so, offered us the dizzying surfeit of free language that resulted in the accidental creations of Truewit and Sir Epicure Mammon.

NOTES

- ¹"The Prologue for the Stage" (II. 1-6), *The Staple of News, Works*.
- ²Muriel Bradbrook, *Growth and Structure of Elizabethan Comedy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1955), pp. 54, 146.
- ³Jonas A. Barish, *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1960), p. 155 ff.
- ⁴"*Epicoe* . . . is a comedy about . . . what is natural and unnatural for the sexes." The action, physical and verbal, suggests the possible answers. Edward B. Partridge, *The Broken Compass: A Study of the Major Comedies of Ben Jonson* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1958).
- ⁵Barish, p. 157.
- ⁶Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say* (New York: Scribner, 1969), p. 302.
- ⁷Alexander Sackton, *Rhetoric as a Dramatic Language in Ben Jonson* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1948), p. 147. "*Epicoe* expresses little or no emotion . . . raises no moral questions."
- ⁸Douglas Brown, ed., *The Alchemist* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1965), p. xxii.
- ⁹Harry Levin, ed., *Selected Works of Ben Jonson* (New York: Random House, 1938), p. 30; Barish, p. 79.
- ¹⁰Cavell's philosophic definition of noise versus language is a useful buttress of the point since his interest is not limited to the dramatic function of language (pp. 33-34). Also, Partridge

objects to the "words of filigree" position of Levin and finds that image and metaphor are structural parallels to the action.

¹¹Sackton makes a different claim: that Mammon uses hyperbole and other devices of rhetoric without mastery and is "victimized" by them (p. 148).

Suburban Crash

The plane crashes into the living room
floor.

Small children crawl out and climb
into your hair. One becomes a lamp.

Day in, day out we
stare into each others eyes
unable to forgive anything.

Suddenly you place your hand in mine.
We become parents.

We walk with flowery eyes through fifteen
years of caves, assorted sunlight and rooms.

Pier Giorgio Di Cicco