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His Girl Friday

1 A camera moving leftward through the newsroom of a big city newspaper pauses at the opening doors of an elevator to discover a man and woman it then begins to accompany back in the direction from which it came. The woman, soon to be identified as Hildy (Rosalind Russell), in a defiantly smart hat, who seems to know where she is going, pauses to say hello at the switchboard, whose operators return her warm yet mildly sardonic greeting in kind, suggesting a shared past of civilized suffering, and revealing that she has been away for a while. She turns to the man accompanying her, Bruce (Ralph Bellamy), to ask him to wait while she briefly interviews her now former husband and boss Walter (Cary Grant), who is the paper's managing editor.

2 The camera continues to follow, or rather slightly lead her, down an aisle of "Hello, Hildy's" and bantering returns, into Walter's office, where the man himself (Hildy had asked the operators whether "the lord of the universe" is in) is primping in a mirror. In the fast and erotically tinged talk and backtalk between them, peppered with glancing reminiscences and recriminations, she eventually decides that the reason she stopped by to talk to him, on her way from divorcing him in Reno to setting off with her fiancé for home in Albany, is to tell him to stop sending her incessant telegrams attempting to change her mind. (If that's really what she wanted from him, she could have sent him a telegram.) When she, perhaps accidentally on purpose, lets it slip out that this new beau is waiting outside, Walter insists on meeting him.

3 Walter theatrically confuses Bruce with an old man also in the waiting area, then calls concerned and admiring attention to Bruce's thorough preparations against the possibility of inclement weather, and finishes by insisting on taking the pair to lunch. He affably motions them into a waiting elevator, and Hildy as she passes him says out of the corner of her mouth, "Won't do you a bit of good, Walter," to which Walter replies publicly, in his grandest good humor, "No, no, glad to do it."

4 At lunch Walter tries to trick Hildy into interviewing a prisoner, Earl Williams, falsely accused, for political reasons associated with an impending election, of deliberately murdering a policeman. He argues that Hildy could save the poor fellow's life by turning public opinion in his favor. Hildy starts getting interested in the journalistic possibilities, but then recognizes it as a trick of Walter's, who has someone else who could do the interview. Walter, conceding her point, levels with her, suggests a straight business proposition, and appeals to Bruce to take his side, emphasizing Hildy's special talent for this kind of writing. Hildy then makes a successful counter-proposition: Bruce sells insurance, and Hildy will do as Walter asks if Walter buys a very large life insurance policy from Bruce.

5 Hildy shows up in the pressroom of the Criminal Courts Building, explaining that she is taking a last assignment before quitting the miserable life of a newspaperman. She learns from her fellow reporters that Earl Williams is insane, but that the mayor and his creature the warden insist that he is fit for execution (the reporters point out that it was a black cop Earl chanced to shoot and that the black vote is large).

6 After an insurance company doctor has given Walter a physical in his office, Walter reminds Bruce to phone Hildy and tell her the certified check she has demanded for Bruce's commission is signed; Hildy, in response, anticipating Walter's capacities, insists that Bruce, while Walter is out of the room, put the check in the lining of his hat. As Bruce leaves the office, Walter points him out to Louis, a shady combination of Ariel and Caliban, who follows him.

7 In the Criminal Courts Building, Hildy bribes her way into the holding cell where Earl Williams awaits his fate. His first words to her are "I'm innocent." The interview consists in Hildy's leading him to the idea that the reason he fired the gun (which he had no sound reason to have or to shoot) was that, as he was passing his days sitting in the public park since losing his job of fourteen years, he had overheard one of the soapbox orators there speak of "production for use," and after all, the use of a gun is to shoot. Earl accepts the explanation with a show of genuine illumination. Hildy, depressed from her benevolent further confusing of a bewildered victim, leaves the death cell, wishing Earl good luck.

8 Molly Malloy, a distressed woman whose sympathy for Earl when she saw him wandering alone at night in the rain led her to take him back to her room, walks into the pressroom to accuse the newspapermen of heartlessness and distortion in reporting her and Earl as having a love nest. Hildy walks in

unobtrusively, sits down at her desk, and begins to type as she listens to Molly. The men further ridicule the woman (out of habit, but one understands as well, out of guilt), and Hildy comes over to protect her and leads her out of the pressroom, closing the door behind them.

9 The reporters walk aimlessly about the room, uncomfortable and silent. After a long moment, Hildy returns, pauses in the doorway to observe the scene, and comments, calmly and brutally, "Gentlemen of the press."

10a The phone rings for Hildy. It is Bruce, who tells her that he has been arrested for stealing a watch. Hildy rushes out to rescue him. His first words are "I'm innocent," which is no news to Hildy. She threatens the cop in the precinct with a story in the *Morning Post* if he doesn't release Bruce, who he knows didn't steal the watch they found planted on him. In the cab Hildy, making sure the check is still in Bruce's hat, asks him for his wallet, which he discovers, not to Hildy's surprise, is missing; Hildy had taken the precaution of demanding as they separated at the restaurant that he turn over all his cash to her, namely \$500, which Bruce informed her is their entire savings. Arriving back at the Criminal Courts Building, Hildy tells Bruce to wait in the cab.

10b In the pressroom the reporters are listening with impressed concentration as one of their number reads from the interview left in Hildy's typewriter. The one reading observes, "Anyone who can write like that won't last three months in retirement. I'll give three-to-one odds on it." Hildy enters, taking him up on the bet. She phones Walter and tells him she wouldn't cover the burning of Rome for him if they were just lighting it up. She wants him to listen to the sound of her tearing up her interview with Earl Williams. ("I bargained to write it, I didn't bargain not to tear it up.") As she begins collecting her belongings, she launches into a farewell to the newspaper game.

11 In the warden's office, a psychiatrist is about to give Earl a final sanity test. The psychiatrist and the sheriff exchange pleasantries about the fearful annoyance of having to appear in the newspapers, and agree to share the lime-lit burden of the inevitable interview and photograph of themselves. The doctor darkens the room and directs the light of an enormous lamp into Earl's face, and Earl says, "I'm innocent."

12 As Hildy stands at the threshold of the pressroom, finishing her valedictory address to her comrades, machine-gun shots ring out and sirens go off everywhere. Someone shouts "Earl Williams escaped"; the other reporters rush out, leaving Hildy standing alone. She is dazed, then coming alive she rushes to

the phone: "Get me Walter Burns, quick. Walter, Earl Williams has escaped. Don't worry, I'm on the job."

13 In the pandemonium outside the jail, Hildy tackles the jail guard she earlier bribed.

14 Reporter after reporter enters the pressroom, phoning to bring their papers up to the minute. By the time Hildy enters, it is empty again. She closes the door and phones Walter to tell him she's got the story of the escape exclusive. "The jailbreak of your dreams." The gun Williams used was the warden's, who gave it to him to reenact the killing. Hildy says it cost her \$450 to get it, and it was Bruce's money, and he's waiting in a taxi for her. Walter puts his hand over the phone, asks Louis to take 450 counterfeit dollars to Hildy at the Criminal Court Building. At the same time, he dispatches Louis's brassy blonde girlfriend to encounter Bruce in a taxi parked outside that building. Walter assures Hildy that the money will be there in fifteen minutes.

15 As she waits, more reporters enter the pressroom with bits of news. The warden makes an appearance and is pressed by the reporters to confirm whether there really is, as he claims, a red menace. Bruce phones to tell Hildy that he is in jail again, this time for "mashing." As he begins describing the woman who entered the complaint, Hildy at once understands. She tells Bruce she can't leave right away. The mayor enters and the reporters ask whether the jailbreak will affect the election, a possibility that the mayor elaborately finds incredible. The warden announces excitedly that his rifle squad has located Earl; the reporters rush out to the scene.

16 The mayor and the warden go up to the warden's office, and as the former tells the latter that he's taking him off the election ticket, the door opens to reveal Mr. Pettibone, a large man in a bowler hat with an open umbrella—evidently a mythic messenger of some kind. He tells them he comes from the governor with a reprieve for Earl Williams. The mayor, aghast, looks at the document and reads aloud "on grounds of insanity." The phone rings, the warden picks it up and reveals that Earl Williams is surrounded. He asks the mayor what to do. The mayor hands the reprieve back to Mr. Pettibone and tells that perplexed personage that he never delivered it, promising him, as he nudges him out of the office, to give him a good-paying job and to fix his wife and to take care of his child's school problems. Then as he lights a cigar he says to the awaiting warden, "Shoot to kill"; the warden relays the message.

17 Louis shows up at the pressroom to give Hildy the 450 apparent dollars. She also demands Bruce's wallet, which Louis reluctantly produces. When

instead of accepting his offer to take her to the train station Hildy further demands that he go down to the precinct and free Bruce, Louis, who wants nothing to do with police, runs away. Hildy picks up the phone and before she can finish a sentence, in a startled isolating shot, she slowly hangs up the receiver and stares at Earl Williams walking toward her, having just entered by a window. She tells him he doesn't want to kill anyone, and as he agrees a window shade suddenly snaps up behind him, which he wheels around and shoots at. He vacantly hands the gun to Hildy, who runs to lock the door and turn out the lights, since the shot will have given him away. He says he doesn't care any more. Hildy phones to tell Walter she needs him. Bruce calls on another phone and hears her tell Walter that she has Earl Williams. There is a knock on the door. Hildy cracks open the door. It is Molly, who is frantic that they are about to shoot Earl down. Hildy tries to send her away but Earl calls out to her not to leave. As soon as Molly is in the room, reporters knock and clamor at the door; the women hide Earl in the only large receptacle in the room, a rolltop desk. Hildy goes to the door and turns the lights back on before she unlocks and opens it.

18 Two reporters enter with questions, first of all one about what Molly is doing here. They, joined by the rest of the gang, phone their papers with the news that Earl was not found. They get to speculating about where Earl might be, for example, still right here in this building, and they become suspicious at Hildy's apparent encouragement for them to leave and search for him. Bruce's mother comes in looking for her son, saying she knows they have captured a criminal. The reporters turn on Hildy, who protests that the mother has misheard what was said. Molly, standing across the room near the windows, attracts their attention by crying out that she is the only one who knows where Earl is and now they'll never find out. Walter and Louis are shown to enter the room precisely as Molly leaps out of the window Earl had entered by, or one next to it. The reporters abandon Hildy to rush to the window, look down into the courtyard and learn that Molly is alive. The room clears except for Walter, Hildy, Louis, Bruce's mother, and Earl invisible inside the desk. Hildy wants to talk about Molly, but Walter insists on learning where she has Earl, which is why she sent for him. Walter directs Louis to take Bruce's mother and hide her somewhere. Louis introduces himself to the mother and in one gesture lifts her up and flings her over his shoulder, then disappears with her.

19 Hildy is beside herself. Walter talks sense into her by saying that this is a revolution, that her story will throw out a corrupt regime, that they will name

streets after her and put statues of her in the parks, that she's stepped up into a new class (which really startles her). They start writing the story. Walter phones Duffy, his assistant editor, to tear out the front page, and to get hold of a group of wrestlers to carry a desk out of the pressroom.

20 Bruce shows up, having wired Albany for a hundred dollars to bail himself out. He asks where his mother is, and asks for his money. Hildy, to his surprise, hands him his wallet. Bruce pleads with Hildy to come with him for the life she's always wanted, while simultaneously Walter tries to get words in edgewise and otherwise to Duffy, intermittently telling him to stick Hitler in the funny papers, and later to leave the rooster story alone, "That's human interest." Bruce finally says he's leaving on the nine o'clock train and Hildy asks, gesturing to the story in her typewriter, "Can't you see this is the most important thing in my life?" Walter has also intermittently been on the phone with the wrestlers, who are delayed by difficult women in coming to get the desk.

21 Hildy remembers, painfully, that Bruce said he wasn't coming back. Louis enters completely disheveled, managing to relate that his car ran into a squad car of police racing down the wrong side of the street. He doesn't know what became of Bruce's mother; perhaps she's dead. They start calling hospitals; Hildy tries to leave but is pushed back by reporters entering along with the warden and assorted policemen. Walter orders the warden out of the pressroom; as Hildy tries to get away, the gun Earl handed to her falls out of her purse. The warden identifies it as his gun, hence the one Earl used to escape, to the delight of the reporters. The warden puts Walter under arrest.

22 Bruce's mother enters with more police and accuses Walter of kidnapping her. Walter denies that he has ever seen her, emphasizing his sincerity by rapping three times on Earl's hiding place and receiving three raps back from Earl. The warden is prepared to shoot through the desk, but Hildy prevails upon him to give Earl a chance to come out peacefully, which he does.

23 The room empties again, except for Walter, Hildy, a policeman who puts handcuffs on them and guards them, and the exultant warden, whom the mayor enters to congratulate. As the mayor and the warden gloat over their triumph, Mr. Pettibone, umbrella and all, appears again with the reprieve, saying that these two refused to take it earlier and tried to bribe him; he also makes obscure and dire references to his wife's attitude. The mayor and the warden express their unbounded, transparently profound, pleasure and relief in the reprieve of an innocent man, and Walter and Hildy in turn promise them ten years in jail when the *Morning Post* appears in a special edition.

24 In the opening sequence of the film, Hildy had accused Walter of reminiscing irrelevantly; now she reminisces about an earlier brush they had with the law, before they were married, the time they stole a courtroom exhibit of a stomach to prove foul play, and hid out in a hotel room where they—Hildy pauses, looking for the right words to suggest that that was when they entered on their adventures together. Walter reminds her that they could have gone to jail for that, too.

25 Walter suddenly becomes earnest, and says goodbye to Hildy, assuring her that a wire from her will bring Bruce happily to meet her at the station in Albany. She protests that she has to finish the story, and Walter tells her he'll write it himself, though it won't be half as good. He explains that he had been jealous and sore that Bruce could offer her the kind of life he could never give her. One last time the phone rings and again it proves to be Bruce under arrest, this time accused of passing counterfeit money. Bruce tells Hildy that it was she who gave it to him. She hangs up and begins sobbing. (We hear music arising for the first time.) Walter seems genuinely alarmed, calling her Honey and saying she's never cried before. She blubbers out that she thought Walter was sincere this time, that he was going to let her go without doing anything to stop her, that she didn't know he had Bruce in jail again, that she thought he didn't love her any more. "What were you thinking with?" is Walter's answer to this amazing outburst. So she, recovering, tells him to send down some honest money to the jail to bail out Bruce, and Walter, merry again, phones back Duffy to tell him not to do anything, that Hildy is staying to write the story, that she never meant to leave. And when he says they're getting married and, consulting Hildy, says it's to be in Niagara Falls, he is asked by Duffy to cover a strike in Albany, which is after all on the way to Niagara Falls, and, again consulting Hildy, Walter agrees. The two exit walking fast, him first, her holding the bags.

I might note at the outset that Walter's order to Duffy to tear out the front page, that Hildy is staying, is an allusion to the play *The Front Page*, from which Howard Hawks and his writer Charles Lederer have torn the original role that became our Hildy, making what was originally a man's into a woman's part. I confess that I found the remake of the film, called *The Front Page*, which keeps the male Hildy role intact, steeped as I was in the Hawks transfiguration, to be largely flat, however expertly acted by Jack Lemmon

and Walter Matthau. Of course it could be of great interest to track the endless consequences of such a difference (no doubt as part of tracking the relation of each of our films to their sources, in plays or novels or stories); but I do not foresee an interest in me to do this with the systematicity that would make it worthwhile. I merely caution you that what I take up here about these matters is a response solely to the Howard Hawks film with Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant.

I have gone on with my summary of the film at greater length than in other cases, finding as I proceeded that it was particularly hard to recall in enough detail to justify anything I would be likely to want to emphasize. I have viewed the films discussed in this book enough times to trust myself to give a reasonable summary of each of them from memory, occasionally prompted by my notes. But in the case of *His Girl Friday* I found I could not manage the account after a certain point unaided by another viewing. This became interesting to me. The opening two sequences, after the prologue, namely Hildy's return to Walter in his office and the subsequent lunch at Walter and Hildy's familiar restaurant, their home away from home (Walter's office being another such home), were no problem. Each was a substantial conversation about a particular issue, Hildy's engagement to Bruce be married in the former, Walter's proposal of the interview in the latter; the issue in each case is broached, discussed, and a conclusion arrived at. This roughly continues to be the pattern through Walter's insurance physical examination and Hildy's interview with Earl Williams. But about now, with Hildy's return to the pressroom and Molly's rebuking of the male reporters, things change, the world seems to change. This perhaps comes to a climax after the sirens go off and Hildy is drawn to forget about her farewell to Walter and to their escapades in facing down the mischief of the world. From now on no single issue is in focus, no conversation develops and achieves a decision, anything can happen, nothing can be made to happen.

I began to find that I could not remember exactly the times Bruce phoned to say he was in jail, nor precisely when and how his mother happened to be in the pressroom just when she was needed, nor, for example, how Hildy happened to have both Bruce's wallet and the 450 counterfeit dollars in it ready just in time to hand to Bruce when he appeared (who had bailed him out of jail?). And just when do we cut away to the warden's office for the sanity test, and again later when Mr. Pettibone enters? Any misplacement of one of these pieces blocks out the fit of another. This surely is essential in

accounting for the fundamental fact of generic difference of *His Girl Friday* from its fellow members in the genre of remarriage comedy.

We can characterize the difference in the new setting by noting that the image of a Shakespearean green world (the Connecticut of most of the other members of the genre) is here replaced by a black world, identified with the chaotic, dangerous state of nature as described by Locke in his *Second Treatise of Government* and by Hobbes in *The Leviathan*, two of the three classical, most famous, sources (along with Rousseau's *The Social Contract*) of the social contract theory of the legitimacy of government. Walter says to Hildy that they are in a revolution. Revolution is an essential topic of classical contract theory, as is the question of how the state of revolution is recognized and who is entitled to declare that such a state obtains. That Walter says this to Hildy in private, and in a fantastic set of declarations about her once-in-a-lifetime chance to wipe out corruption, is a parody marking the grave fact that a genuine, deep problem for the contract theorists is posed by this matter of recognizing when a government is no longer intact or has broken faith with its charter. This is part of a larger register of conceptual farce running through the language of the film.

As is not unique to this film within the works of Howard Hawks, one finds various broad allusions to a fascination with the human behind. (I think immediately of the sequence of double entendres in *Bringing Up Baby*, Hawks's film of some four years earlier.) In *His Girl Friday* I recall four verbal allusions to this region of human anatomy: (1) "Stick it in the classified ads"; (2) "Earl Williams is hiding under her piazza" "Tell her to stand up"; (3) "What was the name of the mayor's sister?" "You mean the one with the wart on her—" "Yes," "—Fanny"; (4) "Hildy, you're stepping up into a new class!" "Huh?" Without being overly pedantic about this, one is entitled to some curiosity over its insistence. I confess that it took a while for me to register the significance of Hildy's abrupt "Huh?," although Walter's reference to class contains the allusion literally. The first three allusions are blatant vaudeville. The last is just between Hildy and Walter—perhaps a reference to whatever went on in their early cohabitation in a hotel room that they could have gone to jail for.

The point I would like to formulate here is not of some hidden meaning but rather of a general implication of unsurveyable interaction between the political and the erotic (or, if you prefer, the psychological), or the chaotic public and the illegitimate private. That finding the political fugitive Earl

Williams should be a matter of (or analogous to) finding something lost in our confusion over what our anatomy hides, and reveals, and of whether that confusion is in particular something natural or social, suggests that the state of nature is one not only essentially pre-political but pre-human, something occurring before the flowering of human sexuality. Here the ancient insight of Aristotle of language as the condition of the political joins the insight of Freud (elaborated by Lacan) of human desire as a (an unfinished) social (or say joint) construction, or reconstitution, of human desire out of biological need, of language as reaching in its expressiveness to the depths of individual construction and reconstitution. And that Hildy should become convinced of her vocation (“Hildy, this isn’t a story, it’s a career!”), a step into her further self, by understanding Walter’s saying “You’re moving up to a new class!” as a step into (erotic) freedom, suggests that she perceives in that “Huh?”—as if she has been punched into insight—that her desire for ridding the world of political corruption is at the same time her desire for sexual liberation. But what then are the terms of that liberation?

Let us take the moment in which Hildy is transfixed by the gunshots and sirens expressing Earl Williams’s escape, as she is abandoned in the press-room, as her recognition that she too is a victim of circumstances, in need of escape, and that Walter is key to that condition, to why she is in that place, at that moment—perhaps not to discover that she can choose to leave but perhaps that she is free to choose to stay. To do what?

Here I am remembering the film from its ending, taking what is discovered there as epitomizing the pair’s perfectionist quest. Weighing the ending of each of the films of both of our genres is something one learns to be as important as pondering the conclusion of a poem. How can this possibly be? Can there be something to call a popular genre of film having such power that those creating within it, who learn to give all they can to the genre, can be taken beyond their expected strengths? For example, notice that, for all the supposed knowledge of the “happy end” of Hollywood comedies, none of the comedies of remarriage ends with an unequivocal kiss. Either the embrace is invisible (a door closed in our faces) or else the embrace is compromised (by visible awkwardness, physical or psychological), or, as in the present case, postponed, out of a certainty that there will soon enough be time and place for it.

What Hildy achieves at the end is Walter’s affirmation of his love for her (as direct as such a thing can be from Walter: “What were you thinking

with?”); what Walter achieves is her recognition (a recognition as willing as she can make it, given its cost) that he cannot give her the life she wanted from Bruce (admitted by Walter without denying that the want was, is, genuine). What I called, in my summary, Hildy’s amazing outburst, through her sobbing, namely her declaration that she thought he was going to let her go without doing anything to stop her, seems to make explicit her nearly insatiable need, no doubt required by the very way Walter satisfies it, for proof that he will continue to go to any lengths to keep her with him, and keep her interested. The entire narrative of the events of this film can be taken as a wedding ceremony, Walter’s answer to Hildy’s opening announcement to him—invitation, one might rather say—implied in her informing him that she is divorced and is getting remarried and that Walter must stop trying to stop her. How can she doubt that he has been doing nothing but accepting the implied invitation to stop her? Her tears show her relief in knowing that he knows it. Divorce may be, as Walter tells her from the beginning, “just some words mumbled over you by a judge.” Marriage is not.

Why pair *His Girl Friday* with Plato’s *Republic*? We should hardly expect any film, or set of films, or set of any imaginative works, to exhaust a text which, as much as any, founds the aspirations of philosophy. And, as I had occasion to suggest in taking up Plato’s text, its Myth of the Cave, so uncannily prophetic of the technology of motion picture projection, is alone enough to justify pairing it with any film. But we can be a little more specific.

The black world of this film not merely takes the place of the green world as the source of what insight is available to the human mind in certain of its straits, but occupies the bulk of the film after its not insubstantial beginning in the worldly bustle of a big city. And while we see the pair making a certain exit from that world, we see no more of a different world; we have moved deeper into the same world, or say into the conditions of that world. There is no obvious way to get to the green world; there is no obvious way to leave the black world.

In Plato’s description of the stages of devolution of the human city (from aristocracy to timocracy, to democracy, to tyranny), each creates the souls to match it. In the good city, Plato’s city of words, fit for philosophy, there are, over the mass of members any city is made of, a smaller class of educated guardians, and, out of them, a small class of philosopher-rulers. Each class has its virtues and its capacities for knowledge. The knowledge contained in newspapers, the highest knowledge attainable in the black world, far from

philosophical knowledge, is yet better than the illusions of the everyday that chain one into fixations of irreality in Plato's cave. Newspapers recognize the irreality of our condition, if not an alternative reality, and that itself unfixes the chains, the first "step into a new class" as Walter puts it, the first impulse of perfection.

A democracy must not contain a separate, privileged class to guard the city; for each member of the democratic city, it is his or hers to guard. Those who consider themselves a class of guardians, privileged to take the lead, will not recognize the good which should reign over the common life, but will, pursuing the only good they know, and in ignorance of the very concept of the common good, put their own stamp of private power on the city. In the black world the fantasy of being jointly guided by justice as fairness cannot be assumed; it is to be awakened.

Those inclined to a step of freedom in their lives enter the cave not to save its (other) victims, but to root out the false benefactors the mass of victims attracts. A moment of reprieve is the best you can hope to offer others. Whether they will accept it as the chance for self-liberation is not up to you. A black world, like any world according to Plato, creates its own virtues. The virtues required for the limited good you can do in a black world (all the world we know there is) are, as divined by this film, for example, deviousness, charm, wit in the face of danger, a knowledge of what is of human interest, the appeal to others through sentiments you may not be in a position to authenticate, hardness in the face of desperation you cannot alleviate, a dangerous addiction to freedom, and an immunity to flattery and other bribes. (Are these virtues? Vices?)

Call this a picture of comic stoicism. It is a life that can call upon the mysterious unseen powers beyond oneself, presenting itself to a benevolent judgment that takes pity upon, even sees the justice in, at least the necessity of, our transient insanities. While it is not a life (or a world) that has much interested moral philosophers, it seems to form the stock-in-trade of such observers of the human spectacle as Montaigne, Pascal, and Nietzsche in his aphorisms.