The Rationale of Deformation
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The Rationale of Deformation

By Rudolf Arnheim

On April 13, 1902, Paul Klee noted in his diary that he saw a disappointing exhibition at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Rome: "The only good things are the drawings, etchings, and lithographs of the French. First of all Rodin with his caricatures of nude figures."[1] This episode confirms our suspicion that when we inquire about the nature of caricature, we are dealing with a concept whose meaning is not obvious.

Today, some eighty years later, it would not occur to anybody to describe Rodin's quick figure sketches (Fig. 1) as caricatures. What did Klee see when he looked at them? The choice of the term "caricature" indicates that he saw those drawings as intended to deviate from the shape of the human figure as it "is." This does not mean that they seemed to him to insist upon the negative or derisible aspects of their subjects. More likely he had, in those days, no other words to describe an intentional deviation from lifelike representation. Also, the term was not meant to put Rodin's watercolor sketches in an inferior category. Klee considered them the best works in an extensive show of graphics. In fact, among his own graphics of those years there are caricatures, such as the well-known etching of 1903, *Two Gentlemen Meet, Each Suspecting the Other of Having the Higher Position (Fig. 2)*.

Although these drawings of Klee's are clearly caricatures, their style shades imperceptibly into that of other of his works of the same period that are not caricatures but—modern art. The same is true of some other artists in those years, for example, the early Feininger. There was manifesting itself a new kinship between "art," the kind of work that, self-contained and self-sufficient, was nothing less or more than an aesthetic object, and the humorous and satirical explorations of human deficiency that had developed into a flowering branch of applied graphics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

To be sure, the tradition of Bosch and Bruegel reminds us that humor and satire have an established place in the history of art; but I believe it can be said that until our own century there was a clearly understood difference between a faithful representation of nature, especially the human figure, and its deliberate deformation. Even when an artist like Leonardo, curious about the aberrations of nature, drew a face in which a gigantic lower lip and a hooked nose snapped together like a vise, his style of drawing was as carefully naturalistic as usual. And even in the Dutch tradition itself, Rembrandt's depiction of Ganymede
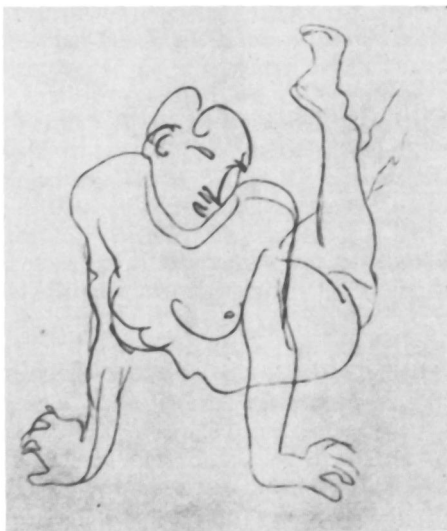

Fig. 1 Auguste Rodin, *Reclining Nude Resting on Arms,* ink over pencil, 15⅛ × 11 ⅜". Philadelphia, Collection Mr. and Mrs. Charles J. Solomon.
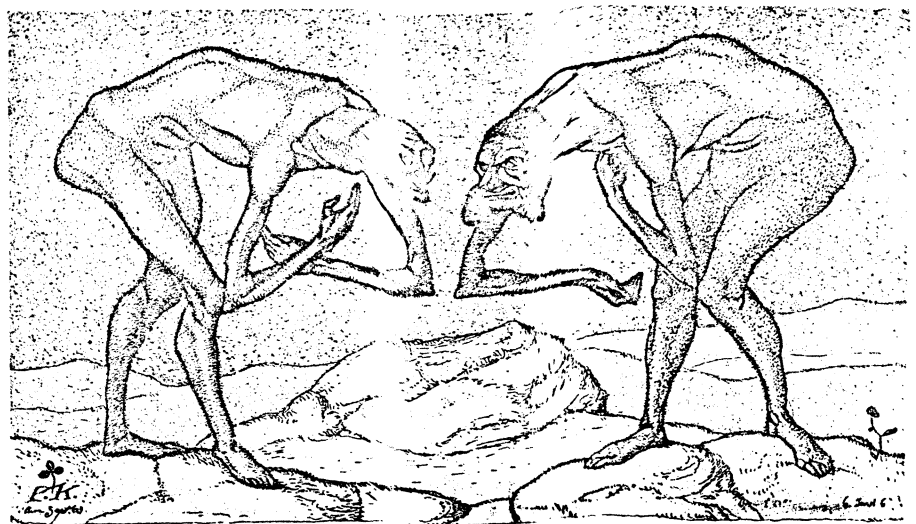

Fig. 2 Paul Klee, *Two Gentlemen Meet, Each Suspecting the Other of Having the Higher Position,* 1903, etching.

as a whiny brat differed in principle from the distorted figures of a Bruegel, not to mention the liberties that Daumier was to take with the classical norm in his heroes and gods of *Ancient History*.[2] Throughout the post-Renaissance tradition the rendering of nature was one thing, caricature another. It took the twentieth century to raise questions about the particular status of caricature in a setting in which deliberate violations of naturalistic standards had become the rule.

Psychologically these questions refer to perceptual expression and involve the role of deviation from norms in visual perception quite in general. Far from being the monopoly of caricaturists or expressionists, deviation from norms is at the very root of perceptual dynamics and therefore of expression, artistic and otherwise. Nonnaturalistic styles of art have made us suspect that we are dealing here with properties germane to all art. This has been least obvious in faithfully representational art. But pathology, by its exaggerations, has a way of making us understand normalcy, and caricature can be considered a "pathological" symptom of how art in general makes its points.

The following sketchy exploration takes off from the assumption that the essential property of artistic representation is its reliance on perceptual dynamics. In the visual arts, it is not the shapes as such that convey expression aesthetically but the configurations of directed forces generated in the nervous system of the viewer by those shapes. A triangle, for example, contributes expression not as geometry but because it points and jabs and acts straight rather than flexibly. Now, one of the main resources of visual dynamics is deviation. See a shape as a deviation from a standard, and it will be inhabited by forces that pull away from the norm or try to return to it. A tilted rectangle, like a leaning tower, makes its statement by its visually implied relation to verticality. Caricature is a spectacular demonstration of expression by deviation. But deviations come in many kinds, and only some make for caricature.

Nor are all deviations equally dynamic. A change of size has few dynamic effects as long as it applies equally to the image as a whole. An enlargement is a mere transposition, which leaves the configuration of visual forces untouched; it contains no reference to the original size. It is true, however, that when bigness and smallness face each other like Goliath and David in the same image, the contrast generates dynamics by relation. Even in such a case, mere size difference expresses little as long as the dynamics inherent in the elements remain unaltered. Lilliputians are no caricature of Gulliver, nor is he a caricature of them.

I t takes deformations of shape to get us to our subject. The simplest of those is the change of the ratio between the vertical and the horizontal dimensions. Things are made slimmer or taller or fatter. But here again we observe that the mere deviation from a norm is not by itself sufficient to obtain the effect. The deformation of a circle does make us perceive a range of ellipses as deviations from the circular norm; but deviation is rarely perceived when a square is transformed into a rectangle. A rectangle presents a stable structure of its own—its dynamics need not be that of a rubber square pulled along one of its axes; whereas an ellipse, within certain limits, is dominated by the strong virtual presence of the circle. We conclude that what counts for the perceptual effect of deviation is not the factual, geometrical difference between a given image and some norm, but whether such a norm is phenomenally present in the image as the base from which the given pattern deviates.

Change the size relation between the dimensions of the x-axis and the y-axis in the network of the basic coordinates, and you obtain skinny and fat people, short and tall ones. Here again we observe that the change of proportion as such does remarkably little for the deviation effect. To be sure, we see that Alberto Giacometti's figures are radically slenderized. But the perceptual presence of the norm from which they deviate is remarkably weak. The "correct" proportion of the human figure is present in memory only, and one needs little flexibility to find oneself transferred to a world governed by its own independent normal proportion and by the particular dynamics derived from that proportion. The emaciated, contracted, and shrunk figures turn into creatures of their own kind, whose adventures in space interpret our own tribulations. But Giacometti's figures are not thin humans and certainly not caricatures.

To accomplish their feat, these figures are alone, that is, deprived of a surrounding that might contradict the independent validity of their proportions. Such isolation is easily provided in sculpture. The lean figures of Wilhelm Lehmbruck profit similarly from their isolation. In painting, the setting must be subjected to the same formula as the figures. A consistent Mannerist like El Greco slims his shapes throughout a picture and indicates thereby that he is presenting not abnormal proportions of the human figure but a translation of the visual world as a whole.

We should remember here that Mannerist slenderizing did not come about by the kind of mechanical compression or extension that results from optical astigmatism. The foolish notion that El Greco's style was due to a defect of his eye lenses may serve here to make us realize that a mechanical overall change of proportion does not generate pictorial dynamics but destroys it.[3] For this reason, anamorphism has never been more than a trick, used not to enhance images but to hide them. It blindly crushes the pictorial structure. The anamorphic skull in Holbein's *Ambassadors,* whatever its intellectual meaning, mars the naturalistic scene of the painting as an unassimilated foreign body. It is an embarrassing flaw.

In Mannerism, the deviation from natural proportion derives organically from an enhancement of structural features inherent in the model objects. Arms and necks, columns and trees are strengthened in the elegance of their extension. Developed from within rather than imposed from without, the modification accentuates certain expressive aspects in a stylistically desirable manner. Particular parameters of deviation from the model tend to dominate artistic representation in other styles as well. Yet too much of such a dominance may result in a cheaply acquired uniformity and, indeed, in monotony. More typical and more fruitful are complex constellations of dynamic features. These, however, are more difficult to handle compositionally because they must be held together by an overall theme. On our way to caricature it is convenient to refer here to certain aspects of physiognomics, a once fashionable practice of interpreting visual expression, whose historical connection with the art of caricature has been so convincingly documented by Judith Wechsler.[4]

From the beginning, the teachings of physiognomics, together with those of phrenology, aroused much controversy. Understandably enough, one was primarily concerned with the validity of such interpretations: How much could one trust an analysis of a person's character and attitudes derived from the external appearance of the body, and especially the face and head? In his spirited attack on Lavater's teachings, which, he says, invaded Germany in the 1770s like an epidemic of madness, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg cited all the powerful arguments that have been leveled against the physiognomists ever since. "What an immeasurable leap," he exclaims, "from the surface of the body to the interior of the soul!"[5] And while he does not deny the effect of the mind on the body, he urges us duly to consider the shaping power of "the whiplashes of fate, of climate, illness, nutrition, and the thousands of calamities with which we are afflicted not just by our own evil intentions but often by accident or duty." Lichtenberg realizes, however, that we all draw constant inferences from the faces we deal with. He considers this practice justified only when it relies on pathognomic rather than physiognomic evidence; that is, on the behavior of the mobile parts of the body rather than on its anatomy.[6] Even this limited endorsement would leave the arts precariously impoverished since painters, sculptors, photographers, and actors rely on characterizing their figures beyond their momentary

feelings.

Fortunately the arts are not touched by the problem of physiognomic validity, except where images are used for documentation. A historian trying to check on the character traits of Pope Leo X from a Raphael portrait will indeed run into this problem; but wherever images are dealt with as art, things are what they look like. The question is not whether we have a right to condemn one of Daumier's lawyers because of the haughtiness and slyness of his externally visible expression but rather: What makes us see this particular appearance of face and deportment as haughty and sly? The answer takes us back to the psychology of deviation and, specifically, to the fact that just as a tilted rectangle is seen as a deviation from an upright one, each feature of the human body owes its expression to the deviation from norms that are inherent in perception.

The morphology of these deviations can be dealt with systematically in two ways. One of the procedures, pleasantly exact and simple, explores the modifications of the Cartesian network to which particular shapes conform. The biologist D'Arcy Thompson has studied evolutionary relations between animal species by showing that a simple tilting or curving or flaring of the coordinates will transform the shape of one species into that of another *(Fig. 3)*.[7] Which species deserves to be given the norm framework is somewhat arbitrarily decided—Thompson can treat the human skull as a deviation from that of an ape as easily as the other way around; and to the unprejudiced eye no one species is a caricature of the other.

When this procedure is applied to the human figure—Thompson refers to Dürer's studies of proportion—the results differ in two ways. Within their own species, humans are concerned with the norm and its variations, the ideal and its deformations, beauty and ugliness. Among the criteria for the choice of the norms in Western art, those based on the classical tradition are most easily identified. They rely, for example, on the balanced, equal apportionment of certain basic components. For a modern reference, see Oskar Schlemmer's drawing of the Greek ideal profile *(Fig. 4)*: the three faculties of imagination, will power, and activity drive are given sections of equal size in the corresponding areas of the face.[8]

An application of Thompson's method to physiognomy would lead to a study of racial variations. Characteristically, this aspect of the problem was so badly neglected that as early as two hundred years ago Lichtenberg, in his aforementioned polemic, was moved to defend the Negro race against the slurs derived from the Caucasian version of the physiognomic ideal. Correspondingly, whereas Thompson relies upon the harmonious, symmetri-
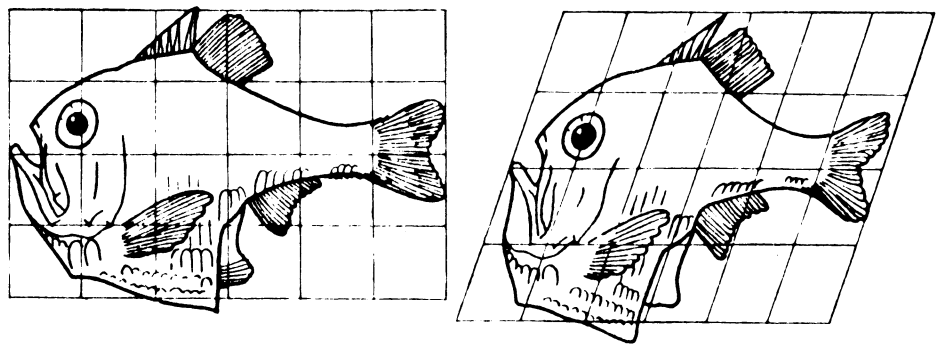

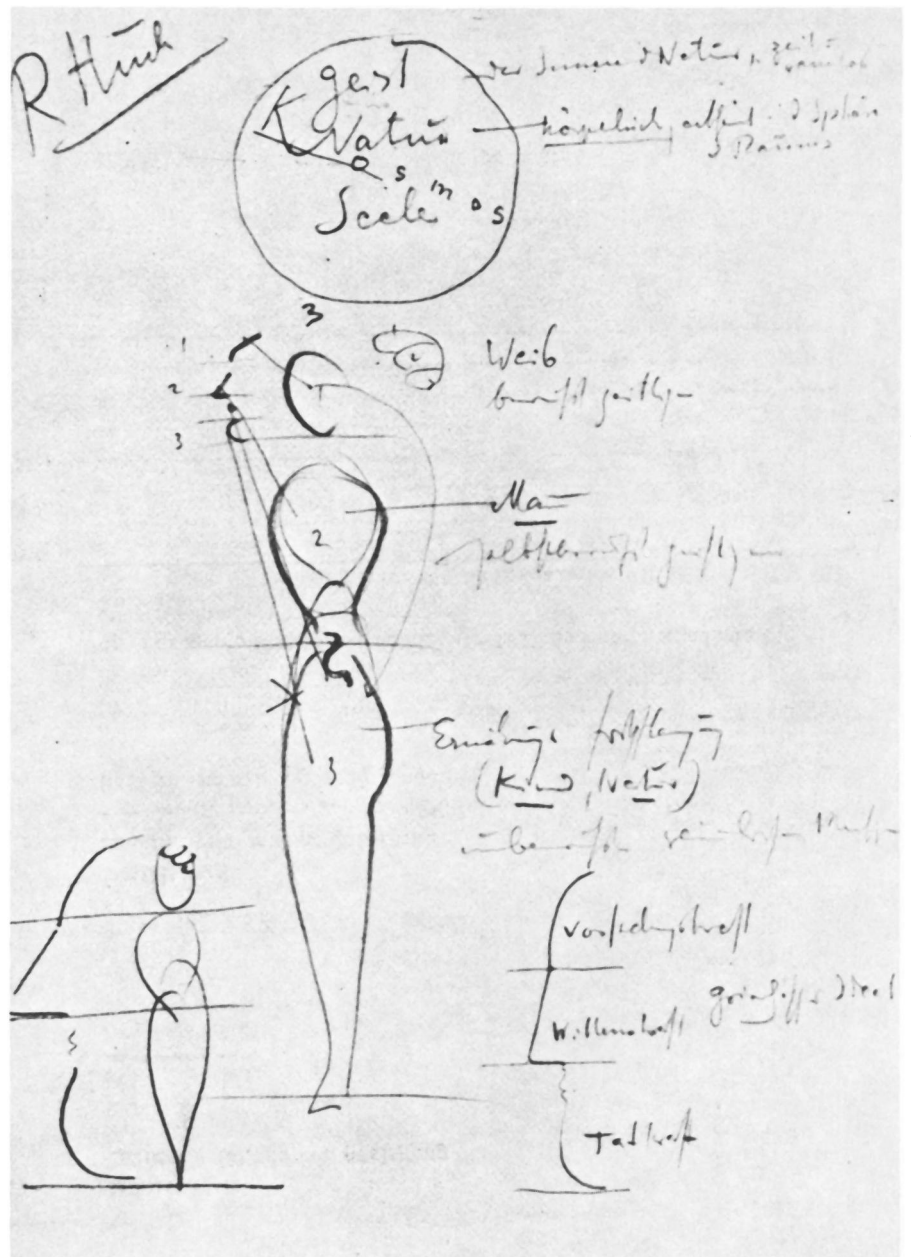*Fig. 3* D'Arcy Thompson, from *On Growth and Form*, p. 299.

Fig. 4 Oskar Schlemmer, pencil drawing.

cal, and geometrically simple deviations from the standard coordinates—he speaks of "a more or less homogeneous *strain*" —Dürer considers also irregular deformations of the network, which result in the ugliness of caricature; for whereas Thompson is interested in the rules of variation, Dürer studies the violations of the norm.

I said earlier that reliance on the Cartesian coordinates is one of two ways of deal-

ing with the morphology of deviation. The second way, less accessible to tidy systematics, aims much more directly at the dynamics of visual expression. It shows that each feature of the human figure derives its expression from a corresponding norm base, the way musical pitch derives its perceptual character from the norm level of the tonic. The basic scales of bodily expression are: upright vs. tilted, straight vs. bent, advancing vs. receding, rising vs. sagging, ample vs. lean, tense vs. limp, etc. An erect or slumping figure, a pointed nose or receding chin are read along these dimensions as deviations from culturally given norms—deviations that generate the perceptual dynamics of each element and are automatically perceived as manifestations of analogous states of mind.[9] To some extent these physiognomic readings take into account the known physical functions of the body and its parts. The expression of keenly observing eyes implies that the eyes
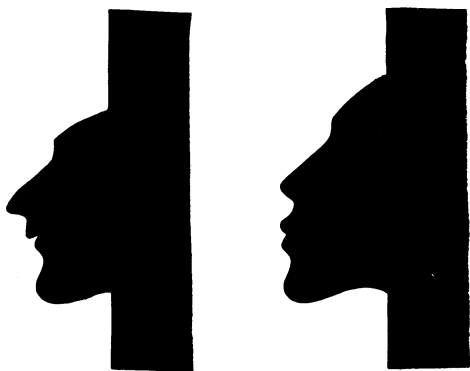
Fig. 5 From Rudolf Arnheim, ''Experimentell-psychologische Untersuchungen zum Ausdrucksproblem,'' in *Psychologische Forschung* (1928), Plate 132, Figure 14.

serve vision; but the nose, that favorite utensil of the caricaturist, may owe little to its being the organ of smell. The nose is the prow of the face and derives its principal expression from how boldly or awkwardly it handles that visual leadership.

There are as many deviations from norm bases as there are structural components of the human body. Some refer to individual parts, such as mouths or skulls, some to more generic features, such as the angle of the profile or the curvature of the back. When Lavater and his avid disciples, such as the young Goethe, described the physiognomy of individuals, they were intuitively guided by the perceptually organized totality of the expressive pattern. Trying to be systematic, however, the same Lavater endeavored to define in his writings the expression of each separate part of the head and to determine the expression of the whole from the sum of the parts.[10] I may mention here that I myself, under the direction of the gestalt psychologist Max Wertheimer, conducted years ago an ex-
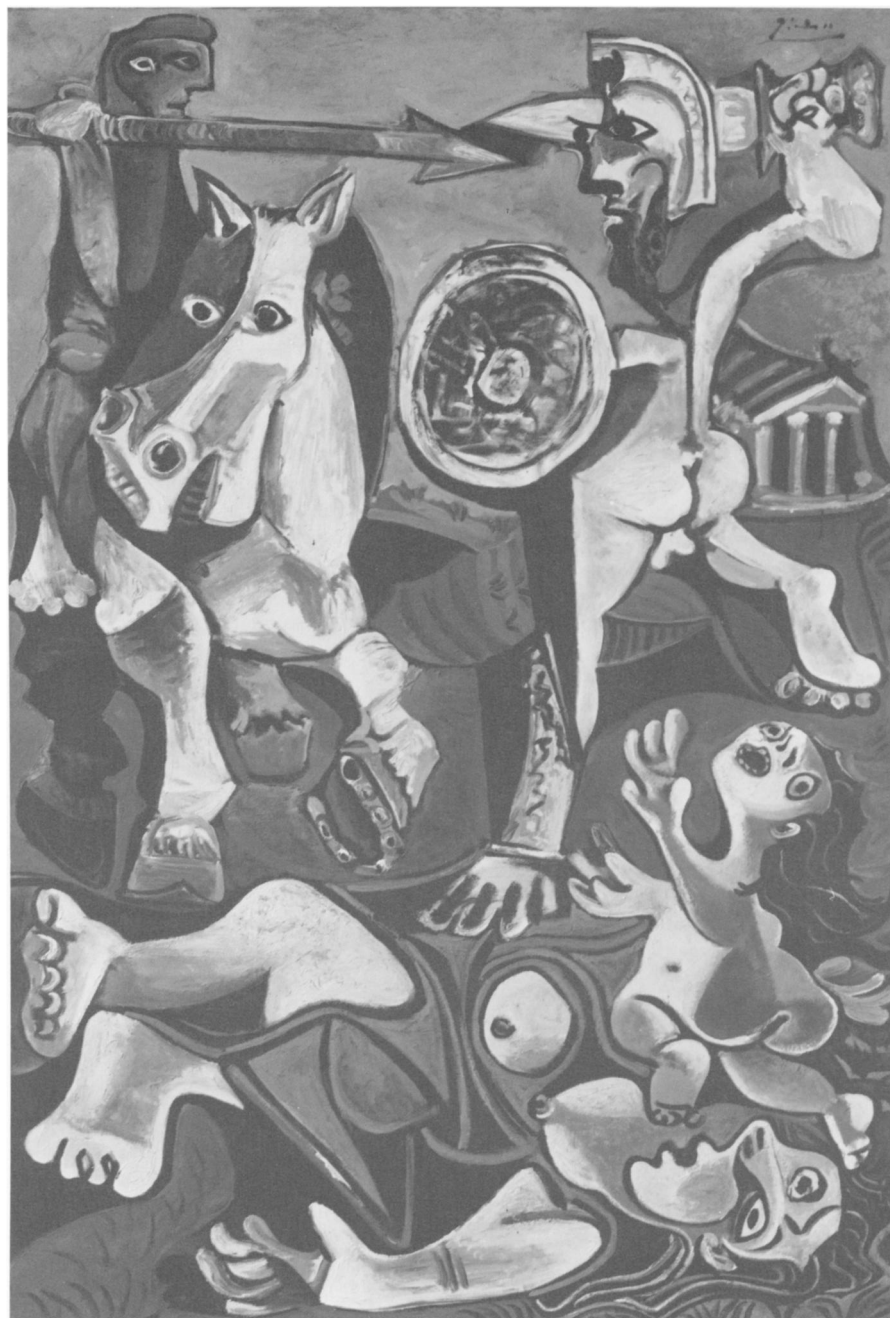
Fig. 6 Pablo Picasso, *Rape of the Sabines,* 1963, oil on canvas, 77 × 51¼". Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Juliana Cheney Edwards Collection. Fanny P. Mason Fund, Robert J. Edwards Fund.

perimental study showing how radically the expression of a chin or lip can change when the context is altered *(Fig. 5).*[11] The artist, in coping with physiognomic expression, faces the problem that arises with every global structure: how to organize a multiplicity of dynamic vectors in a coherently functioning whole. The problem is particularly acute in caricature when a variety of divergent features is forced into a precarious union, when a ''nosy'' nose is trying to get along with a hesitant mouth and vigilant eyebrows. A great artist like Daumier was able in a single face or figure to unify a group of outspokenly discordant expressive traits under one viable complex theme.

The problem of how physiognomic components relate to one another in a visual whole also suggests an answer to our initial question: What specific quality deserves to be called caricature, in distinction from the handling of perceptual deviation in art more in general? This question, I noted, has called for a more sensible answer ever since ''modern art'' prevented us from asserting that art becomes laughable whenever it deviates from the norms of nature. Because laughing at De Kooning's or Picasso's distorted women is clearly out of place, what new and better criterion enables

us to tell caricature from "art"?

D'Arcy Thompson was willing to endorse Aristotle's contention that "the essential differences between one 'species' and another are merely differences of proportion, of relative magnitude or (as he phrased it) of 'excess and defect.' " Excess and defect, however, are not neutral terms. They condemn the too much and the too little, and it is precisely this being out of proportion that turns a character trait into a negative one. The artistic representation of human deficiency has always been known to take two forms, illustrated traditionally by the masks of tragedy and comedy—deviations from the "normal" human face, which reposes serenely between the two; and those two opposites have been known to be profoundly related. Comedians incline to melancholy, and in all great humor, in Rabelais or Molière or Chaplin, there reverberates the tragic. "Le Sage ne rit qu'en tremblant" is the theme of Baudelaire's profound essay *On the Essence of Laughter*—the wise man trembles when he laughs.[12]

But not all laughter is that of wisdom. What is the psychology of the guffaws that have greeted progressive art for centuries? It is, I assume, the protest against the supposed inadequacy of the work and the artist and against the offensive deformation of natural and human perfection. This latter response, of course, is sometimes appropriate. In Expressionist art, for example, indictments of human "excess and defect" are frequent, and, although the mood is tragic rather than comedic, the affinity of caricature has often been evident. For the more essential distinction, however, we must rely here on the broader difference between characterizing particular individuals or species and dealing with the nature of perceived existence as a whole.

I said in the beginning that the figures of neither Giacometti nor El Greco are thin people. Rather, "thinness" describes the artist's image of the human experience as a whole. The deviation from perceptual norm is thereby raised to a more comprehensive level.

The trained museum-goer is aware of the distinction. He will not confuse the agony of the limbs in a Schiele or early Kokoschka with the monstrous victims of society exhibited in the cityscapes or war scenes of a Grosz or Dix. Yet, it seems to me that even in informed criticism there is a tendency to misinterpret stylistic deviations from naturalistic norm as personal idiosyncrasies of the artist. Suffice it to refer here to the strongly distorted representations of women in Picasso's paintings of the thirties and forties. They have been commonly described as manifestations of hatred and violence and then all too eagerly related to the artist's marital troubles. Seen in context, however, these variations of the human form are ways of coping with

visual reality that are applied equally to chairs or saucepans. The artist is dealing with problems that reach from the purely formal representation of three-dimensional shapes on the pictorial surface to the search for an appropriate expressive mode suited to his conception of the world. Take as an example Picasso's *Rape of the Sabine Women* in Boston *(Fig. 6)*. Surely, the topic calls for violence. But the distortions of the female bodies do not differ from what is done to the symmetry of horses and the perspective of a temple or a warrior's face. The turmoil is total; it is "cosmic," and it is neither caricature nor necessarily tragedy, either. I cannot see that when such a painting is analyzed, its style calls for more reference to the emotional attitude of the artist than one of the same subject, say, by Poussin.[13]

This brings me to a last particularity of caricature, namely an inherent limitation with regard to its level of wisdom. This weakness is inevitable because caricature is always "illustration." I am not referring here to the trivial distinction between pictures accompanying a text and others that do not, but to what we mean when we say of an artist that "he is (only) an illustrator." It is not a matter of telling particular stories, because some of our most profound works of art do precisely this. What we are aiming at when, with or without justification, we call an Alfred Kubin, a Felicien Rops, a Ben Shahn an illustrator is that on the road from direct visual observation to the depth

of the most abstract symbolic meaning the work gets anchored at the level of the particular story, event, or objects it represents. The depth to which a work penetrates human experience is surely the ultimate criterion of artistic excellence. It is the dimension we have in mind when we distinguish a portrait by Van Dyck from one by the late Rembrandt. What makes the distinction difficult and subtle is that the "illustrator's" work is not necessarily deprived of further generalization: the Van Dyck portrait refers beyond the individual nobleman to a type of person, etc. But we may be willing to say of the Rembrandt painting that without stopping at the level of the model it moves directly to that depth of human significance from which a mere illustration is barred.

There are other ways of missing out on the depth of significance—formalism, ornamentalism, and so on. And it would be absurd to suggest that caricature and other kinds of illustration lack the fine qualities of talent, composition, or originality. But the distinction seems to me relevant if we are to appreciate the extraordinary case of Honoré Daumier, in whose graphic work there unfolded ever more movingly a human quality, compared with which the figures drawn by his French colleagues or their English forerunners such as Hogarth and Rowlandson reduce to mere puppets. In becoming the king of caricaturists Daumier goes beyond caricature. I keep thinking of that lithograph of the Parisian petit bourgeois and his family

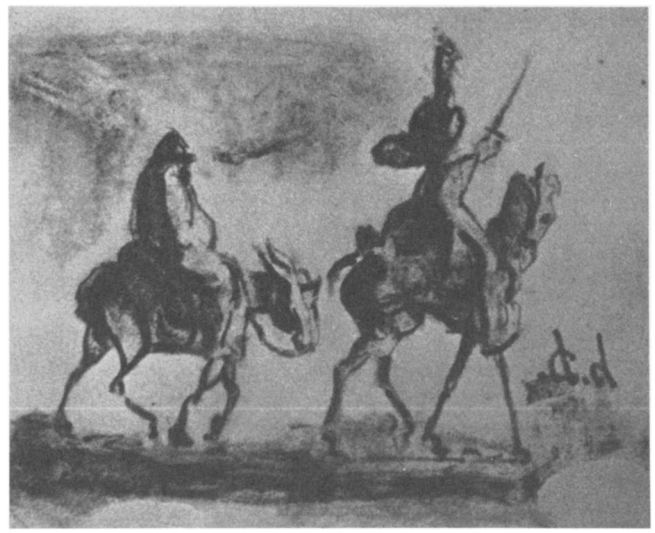**Fig. 7** Honoré Daumier, *Types Parisiens*, lithograph.

Fig. 8 Honoré Daumier, *Robert Macaire Journaliste*, lithograph.

Fig. 9 Honoré Daumier, *Don Quixote*. Brandeis University, Julia and Benjamin Trustman Collection.

admiring the crescent moon *(Fig. 7)*. The ridicule of caricature distinguishes this husband and wife unmistakably from moonstruck Romantic poets; but the smallness of their minds does not exclude them from the touch of genuine cosmic emotion for which we would look in vain in the faces drawn by other clever illustrators.

Here the deformation of the human norm acquires a deeper meaning, which makes us ask: "But is this really caricature?" This depth of meaning is the base for the transfiguration that became unmistakable in Daumier's paintings. In his graphics, the figure of Robert-Macaire, hardly more than a smalltime crook of the 1830s, is already aglow with a new, life-giving cleverness, ambition, and irony *(Fig. 8)*. The artist is well along on his climb to the tragicomic illusions of Don Quixote's bravery and to the more abstract and comprehensive formal expression needed to convey them *(Fig. 9)*. Just as in the literature of those days Friedrich Hölderlin was liberated by psychosis from the bonds of classicism to become a great modern poet *avant la lettre*, Daumier was freed by the license of caricature to become the first great "modern" artist of his generation.

Notes

1 Paul Klee, *Tagebücher 1898–1918*, Cologne, DuMont, 1957, p. 117.

2 Throughout the recent history of caricature one needs to distinguish a style of willful pictorial deformation from the mere faithful recording of caricatures provided ready-made, as it were, by nature itself. Some artists are caricaturists mainly by the choice of their subjects but hardly by their manner of handling the shapes. Some photographers, such as Diane Arbus, have specialized in the deadpan presentation of deformed human specimens.

3 The belief that Mannerist proportions were due to an eye defect is still not entirely extinct although it was refuted as early as 1914 by the psychologist David Katz (*War Greco astigmatisch? Eine psychologische Studie zur Kunstwissenschaft*, Leipzig, Veit & Co.).

4 Judith Wechsler, *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in Nineteenth Century Paris*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982.

5 G. Chr. Lichtenberg, "Ueber Physiognomik wider die Physiognomen zu Beförderung der Menschenliebe und Menschenkenntnis," *Gesammelte Werke*, Darmstadt, Holle, 1953, Vol. 2, pp. 44ff.

6 The most serious-minded attempts to correlate body types with character types were made by Ernst Kretschmer and later in America by W.H. Sheldon, who defined the asthenic (ectomorph), athletic (mesomorph), and pycnic (endomorph) body types in relation to corresponding "temperaments." (Ernst Kretschmer, *Körperbau und Charakter*., Berlin, Springer, 1921; W.S. Sheldon and S.S. Stevens, *The Varieties of Human Physique* and *The Varieties of Temperament*, New York, Harper & Row, 1940 and 1942.)

7 D'Arcy Thompson, *On Growth and Form*, Cambridge University Press, 1969, Chapter 9.

8 Oskar Schlemmer, *Der Mensch*, Mainz, Kupferberg, 1961, p. 31.

9 "We pass quickly and easily," writes D'Arcy Thompson, "from the mathematical concept of form in its statical aspect to form in its dynamical relations: we rise from the conception of form to an understanding of the forces which give rise to it." While the biologist sees tracks of physical forces, perception acknowledges the same deformations as the dynamics inherent in the shapes themselves. (*On Growth and Form*, p. 270.)

10 In his treatise *Von der Physiognomik* of 1772, Lavater explains that he looks for a common feature in the faces of people who share a character trait. If, for example, he finds in the faces of a majority of twenty geniuses a similar shape of the forehead or eyebrows, he looks for the same feature in the faces of others and discovers that "most of those who possess it are intelligent people."

11 Rudolf Arnheim, "Experimentell-psychologische Untersuchungen zum Ausdrucksproblem," *Psychologische Forschung*, 1928, vol. 11, pp. 2–132.

12 Charles Baudelaire, "De l'essence du rire et généralement du comique dans les arts plastiques," *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1961, p. 976.

13 In an interpretation of Picasso's sketches for *Guernica*, I suggested that when the painter moved from the classically harmonious image of the bull (#22) to a sharply edged expressionist one (#26), his intent was not to change the character of the symbolic animal from peacefulness to ferocity but to adapt it to a style suitable for the painting as a whole. (*The Genesis of a Painting: Picasso's "Guernica,"* University of California Press, 1962, p. 78.)

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