

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

S. J. Perelman

Critical Essays

Edited by
Steven H. Gale



S. J. Perelman

First published in 1992, this book focuses on the oeuvre of S. J. Perelman. Taken together, the essays included serve as an introduction to this important humorist's work, both in terms of the specific short prose pieces, plays, and films examined and as an overview of his lengthy professional career. They provide insightful and in-depth literary analyses as well. The work encourages a better appreciation for Perelman's contributions to American literary history.

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Steven H. Gale



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To Kathy, Shannon, Ashley, Kristin, my mother,
Mary Wilder Hasse, and my father, Norman A. Gale,
and to the Goodwins, the Johnsons, and Linda,
as always, with all my love and thanks

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GENERAL EDITOR'S NOTE

With *S. J. Perelman: Critical Essays*, Garland Publishing is introducing a new series of volumes on major humorists. The series, *Studies in Humor*, will consist of collections of both previously published and original articles about these humorists. Forthcoming anthologies are planned on subjects such as Geoffrey Chaucer, Classical Greek and Roman humorists, eighteenth-century comedies, Mark Twain, James Thurber, American women humorists, and black humor, among others. Each volume will be devoted to an assessment of the work of an individual author or group of authors within a specified category.

The intent behind this series is to supply in a single volume a representative sample of the best critical reactions from the humorist's contemporaries and from subsequent scholarly assessments. The contents of each volume will include a chronology of the author's life and writing; the volume editor's introduction to the writer's canon; reviews (book, play, and/or film); interviews; essays focusing on specific works (this section will contain journal articles and selections from books); general essays treating particular aspects of the humorist's canon; a selected, annotated bibliography; and an index. This structure provides access to important scholarship (some of which may no longer be easily obtainable) on the most important and most representative examples of the humorist's work, along with popular reactions

General Editor's Note

to that work, and allows for comparisons to be made in both critical and popular reactions over the course of the writer's career.

Steven H. Gale
General Editor

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The editing of a collection of essays such as *S. J. Perelman: Critical Essays* is a very different project from the writing of a scholarly literary study, in terms of the percentage of help that can be provided in typing, photocopying, keeping track of permissions materials, and indexing. I appreciate the help of my secretary, Elaine Wesley; my office staff; Verdell Smith; Nancy Brooks; reference librarian Karen Pope; the inter-library loan librarian at Kentucky State University's Blazer Library, Susan Ellis; and my family, all of whom made my job easier in these areas.

Permissions costs can be a major problem in compiling an anthology, and I would like to express my appreciation to those authors and publishers who granted me permission to reprint their work without demanding an exorbitant fee in exchange.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Gary Kuris, vice president at Garland Publishing, for his ongoing encouragement and generosity and for his appreciation of and commitment to humor. In a field of literary study that is just now beginning to attract the scholarly attention that it deserves, Gary's contributions have been both helpful and valuable (and too numerous to recount here); it was Gary who suggested that this volume be the first of a series.

As always, I want to thank my wife, Kathy, and my three daughters, Shannon, Ashley, and Kristin, for their motivation, encouragement, and patience.

Frankfort, Kentucky
May 1, 1991

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CHRONOLOGY OF MAJOR EVENTS

- 1904 Perelman is born in Brooklyn, New York, on February 1.
- 1917 Wins first prize for short story "Grit" in a contest sponsored by *American Boy*.
- 1917–1921 Attends Classical High School in Providence, Rhode Island. Chairman of debating team and editor of the literary magazine *The Accolade*.
- 1921–1925 Attends Brown University; leaves without earning a degree. First publication, in *The Brown Jug*. Goes to work for *Judge*, the major American humor magazine of the time.
- 1929 July 4, marries Laura West, novelist Nathanael West's sister. First collection of prose, *Dawn Ginsbergh's Revenge*, is published. Becomes a prose contributor to *College Humor*.
- 1930 "Open Letter to Moira Ransom" is his first contribution to *The New Yorker*, December 13. *Parlor, Bedlam and Bath*, co-authored with Quentin Reynolds, is published.
- 1931 Sketches in theatrical revue, *The Third Little Show*, produced in New York City. *Monkey Business* (film) is released.
- 1932 With Bert Kalmer and Harry Ruby creates *Horse Feathers* for the Marx Brothers. Contributes sketches to the Broadway revue *Walk a Little Faster*. Buys farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.
- 1933 *All Good Americans* (play), written with Laura, runs for 40 performances. *Sitting Pretty*

Chronology of Major Events

- (play) is staged on Broadway and sold to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer as the basis for the 1934 film *Paris Interlude*.
- 1934 *Paris Interlude* (film) is released.
- 1936 *Florida Special* (film) is released.
- 1937 *Strictly from Hunger* is published.
- 1938 *Sweethearts* (film) is released.
- 1939 With Laura, co-scripts *Ambush* (film) for Paramount. Hosts *Author! Author!*, a summer radio quiz show on “whodunit” theme. *Ambush* is released. *Boy Trouble* (film) is released.
- 1940 *Look Who’s Talking* is published. Sketches included in the revue *Two Weeks With Pay*. *The Golden Fleecing* (film) is released.
- 1941 *The Night Before Christmas*, a play co-authored with Laura, is staged at New York’s Morosco Theatre.
- 1942 *Larceny, Inc.* (film) is released.
- 1943 *The Dream Department* is published.
- 1944 *The Best of S. J. Perelman* is published. *One Touch of Venus*, a play co-authored with Ogden Nash and Kurt Weill, is staged in New York City. *Greenwich Village* (film) is released.
- 1946 *Sweet Bye and Bye*, a musical play with a futuristic theme, closes in Philadelphia during tryouts. *Keep It Crisp* is published.
- 1947 *Acres and Pains* is published.
- 1948 *Westward Ha!* is published. Film version of *One Touch of Venus* is released.
- 1949 *Listen to the Mocking Bird* is published.
- 1950 *The Swiss Family Perelman* is published.
- 1951 *A Child’s Garden of Curses* is published.
- 1952 *The Ill-Tempered Clavichord* is published.
- 1954 *Hold That Christmas Tiger!* is published.
- 1955 *Perelman’s Home Companion* is published.

Chronology of Major Events

- 1956 *Around the World in Eighty Days* (film) is released. Perelman receives the New York Film Critics Award and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Award ("Oscar") for best screenplay.
- 1957 *The Road to Milton* is published.
- 1958 Writes script for Cole Porter television musical, *Aladdin*. *The Most of S. J. Perelman* is published.
- 1959 "Malice in Wonderland," a satiric spoof of Hollywood, is telecast on NBC's *Omnibus*. *The Big Wheel* is televised.
- 1961 *The Beauty Part* (play) is staged. *The Rising Gorge* is published.
- 1965 Honorary Litt.D. awarded by Brown University.
- 1966 *Chicken Inspector No. 23* is published.
- 1970 Laura West Perelman dies April 10. Perelman sells his Bucks County farm and moves to London in October. *Baby, It's Cold Inside* is published.
- 1974 Revival of *The Beauty Part* at the American Place Theatre.
- 1975 *Vinegar Puss* is published.
- 1977 *Eastward Ha!* is published.
- 1978 Receives the first Special Achievement Award of the National Book Awards Committee.
- 1979 "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Cat's-Paw," his last comic essay, is published in *The New Yorker*. Perelman dies of cardiac arrest in his apartment at the Gramercy Park Hotel in New York City, October 17. Awarded (posthumously) New York City's "Mayor's Award of Honor for Arts and Culture."
- 1981 *The Last Laugh* is published.
- 1984 *That Old Gang O' Mine* is published.
- 1987 *Don't Tread on Me: The Selected Letters of S. J. Perelman* is published.

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INTRODUCTION

During a career that spanned fifty-four years, S. J. Perelman gained a reputation for being one of the master stylists in American literary history.¹ Those among his peers who publicly marveled at his work are a disparate group of writers that ranged from Dorothy Parker to Harold Pinter, from Robert Benchley to Somerset Maugham, from Ogden Nash to T. S. Eliot, from E. B. White to Eudora Welty, from Woody Allen to Spike Milligan and Peter Sellers, and from John Updike to Kurt Vonnegut. In fact, Benchley wrote admiringly that “It was just a matter of time before Perelman took over the *dementia praecox* field and drove us all to writing articles on economics.” The list of contemporary writers who admit to having been influenced by Perelman is equally impressive and contains many of the same names (Allen, Milligan, Sellers, Updike, Perelman’s brother-in-law Nathanael West, White, and many others). White once admitted that “Sid’s stuff influenced me in the early days. . . he has, from the beginning, bowed to no one.”

While many of the critics and scholars who reviewed Perelman’s writing during his lifetime focused primarily on the nature of his humor and his stylistics, since the author’s death in 1979 a reevaluation has begun, and scholars are finding substantive content as well. The selections that are included in this volume reflect the growing critical awareness of the nature and extent of Perelman’s talents and a consequent increase in appreciation for his writing. Perelman’s work appeared in three major genres—prose, drama, and film—and he gained both popular and critical success in all three areas. In fact, he is one of the most popular humorists in American literature and he received numerous

prestigious awards in recognition of his achievements. The popularity of Perelman's writing (and his stamina) is demonstrated by the sheer volume of work that he produced: a novel, over 560 short prose pieces (published primarily in America's premier humor journal, *The New Yorker*), twenty-three collections of his short prose (two of which were published posthumously), eight stage plays, eleven filmscripts, and at least four television scripts. Viking/Penguin was so sure of the humorist's continuing popularity that the company rereleased three of his anthology volumes in 1987 in conjunction with the publication of *Don't Tread on Me: The Selected Letters of S. J. Perelman*, edited by Prudence Crowther. The honors and awards that he received include the New York Film Critics Award for *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1956), an Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences "Oscar" for Best Screenplay (for *Around the World in Eighty Days*), election to the National Institute of Letters (1958), an honorary Litt.D. from Brown University (1965),² a Special National Book Award for his contribution to American Letters (1978), and the New York City "Mayor's Award of Honor for Arts and Culture" (1979).

The scholarly interest in Perelman's career, which is traced in my *S. J. Perelman: An Annotated Bibliography* (Garland, 1985), has been relatively slow in developing, for reasons that I explored in *S. J. Perelman: A Critical Study* (Greenwood, 1987), so I will not review those elements here. Still, momentum seems to be gaining. In addition to *S. J. Perelman: An Annotated Bibliography* (the standard bibliography) and *S. J. Perelman: A Critical Study*, three other important books have been published that reflect the growing interest in Perelman—Douglas Fowler's *S. J. Perelman* (Twayne, 1983), Dorothy Herrmann's biography, *S. J. Perelman: A Life* (Putnam, 1986), and Crowther's edition of the humorist's letters.

Even more importantly, many of the scholarly examinations of Perelman's writing, whether of individual pieces or of his entire canon, have been first rate. This is an

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especially sanguine situation, since it is now possible to bring the best and most representative of these studies together for the first time in *S. J. Perelman: Critical Essays* at a moment when interest in his work is increasing. Because some of the selections included in this volume are difficult to obtain and because the collection will to some extent allow scholars to trace the evolution of the humorist's career as well as developments in Perelman scholarship, I hope that *S. J. Perelman: Critical Essays* will serve as a useful starting point for those who are intrigued by this important figure in American literature.

Several criteria guided my choice of the selections included in this volume. First, the pieces had to be outstanding examples of Perelman scholarship in terms of the insights developed and the clarity of the writing. Second, with three exceptions, the articles chosen have not been reprinted before.³ Third, I wanted to include a wide range of topics and approaches to Perelman's work in order to present the best representative cross section of criticism possible. The essays selected embody explications of Perelman's writing, examinations of his comic techniques and style, commentaries on his themes and subject matter, assessments of his artistic achievements (in some of which the authors discuss the elements of Perelman's writing that cause them to classify him "among our most valuable resources" and others in which the authors note what they perceive as his deficiencies), considerations of whether his works are satires or mere parodies (i.e., serious writing as opposed to shallow, social observations), and explorations of the nature of humor and humorous writing and its place in literature.

Of the 24 pieces contained in *S. J. Perelman: Critical Essays*, 15 originally appeared in 12 different journals or newspapers, and 9 were taken from books. Among the selections included, there are discussions of at least one Perelman work from each of the seven decades in which his professional writing was published, from the short pieces that appeared in the 1920s to *That Old Gang O' Mine*, which was

published in 1984. At least one piece of criticism from every one of those decades except the 1920s is included as well. For those who do not find their favorite sample of Perelman criticism among those anthologized here, I can only plead the limitations of space and permissions costs.

The structure of this volume is simple. It begins with a set of three interviews because an interview is as close to Perelman's writing as it is possible to get without actually reprinting that writing. The interviews are followed by introductions to two of the anthologies, by selected book reviews, and then by reviews of plays and of a television program that Perelman scripted, all of which provide a picture of the immediate response to his work.⁴ A series of assessments of Perelman's writing by literary scholars that appeared in learned journals and books composes the third category of entries in *S. J. Perelman: Critical Essays*. A selected bibliography and an index conclude the volume. Given the existence of *S. J. Perelman: An Annotated Bibliography*, there was no need to present an exhaustive bibliography here. Parenthetically, recognizing that journalistic and academic conventions are not always parallel, particularly in the area of punctuation, and that British and American spellings are sometimes different, I have retained the original punctuation and spelling rather than trying to make everything consistent throughout.

The two most important and informative interviews that the humorist granted are included in the first section. Information gained from Perelman himself is invaluable, and fascinating besides, and allows the artist to speak for himself rather than having scholars interpret his work. Scholars sometimes ignore newspaper and magazine reviews when they do research. Interviews, however, are another matter. Some critics do not trust interviews, claiming that the interviewee often does not know or is lying in his or her responses (e.g., Harold Pinter's amusing answer to the question of what his plays are about—"The weasel under the cocktail cabinet"). Other critics find interviews most revealing

about the work, the author, and, if the subject is open and insightful, about the creative process itself.

Among those interviews to which all Perelman scholars need access is "The Art of Fiction: S. J. Perelman," conducted by William Cole and George Plimpton for the *Paris Review* in 1963. Perelman's views on his own work and his theories regarding the nature of humor make this interview particularly informative.

More detailed than the Cole and Plimpton interview is William Zinsser's 1969 *New York Times Magazine* piece, "That Perelman of Great Price is Sixty-Five." Especially valuable for the information on Perelman's early activities and the literary figures whom he felt had most influenced him, this is also the most complete interview presentation of the writer's biographical background.

In April 1970, Laura Perelman died. Six months later Perelman had sold their Bucks County, Pennsylvania, farm (which he had satirized in *Acres and Pains* and *The Rising Gorge*) and moved to London, where he would live for two years before returning to the America that gave him the identity upon which his humor depended. In an interview with the *Washington Post's* Myra MacPherson, "Perelman's Rasping Wit becomes an Anglo-File," the humorist reveals his attitude about life in America that led to his decision to become an expatriate.

Introductions to two of Perelman's volumes are representative of how his contemporary professional peers assessed his writing. It is in his introduction to *Strictly from Hunger* (1937) that Robert Benchley, one of the leading humorists in American literary history, states that Perelman took over the "*dementia praecox* field" and established himself as the leading writer in this genre. Dorothy Parker, another major twentieth-century American humorist, wrote the introduction to Perelman's largest and most important anthology, *The Most of S. J. Perelman* (1958). This collection is the best sampling of Perelman's writing ever assembled, and it allows the reader to follow Perelman's development as both

a writer and a humorist, for it contains pieces that he wrote over a 28-year period, from 1930 to 1958. In her introduction Parker relates humor to criticism and notes that Perelman “stands alone [as a humorist] in this day.”

A selection of contemporaneous reviews of some of the writer’s books, as well as two of his stage plays and of a television program that he scripted, follows. It is useful to consider how Perelman’s work was received hot off the presses by his audience and to place it in the context of what else was being published at the same time. The arrangement of reviews reflects the chronology of the works being examined (e.g., a review of *The Road to Miltown*, published in 1957, precedes a review of *Chicken Inspector No. 23*, published in 1966).

Among those who wrote reviews of Perelman’s books, and who delighted in and respected his talents as a prose stylist, are some of the leading literati of the twentieth century.

Writing for the literate audience of *The Saturday Review* in “Philosophic Lunacy,” a review of *The Road to Miltown*, humorist Steve Allen claims that “Perelman is simply too good,” and that his consistently high quality might discourage other professional humorists. Allen describes Perelman’s basic formula for humor and his stylistic mastery and declares that the combination of these elements make his subject, along with Thurber and Benchley, one of the “three funniest men writing in our time.”

Another important twentieth-century American humorist, Ogden Nash, reviewed *Chicken Inspector No. 23* for *Life*. In “A Precious String of Perelman Pearls,” Nash comments on Perelman’s unique style, the nature of his topics, and his audience, both in the United States and in Great Britain (where Perelman is regarded as America’s “foremost humorist”).

Novelist Paul Theroux, who would later edit *The Last Laugh* (a posthumous collection of Perelman’s writing), provides a positive review of *Vinegar Puss* (1975) in “Marxist.”

In "The Exploits of El Sid," a review of "The Hindsight Saga" section of *The Last Laugh* (1981), Tom Wolfe remarks on Perelman's stylistics and his foray into non-fiction, which Wolfe finds so successful that he begins to see, in retrospect, that the author exhibits talents as a satirist in addition to being a supreme parodist.

Drama critic Brooks Atkinson explains why he finds *The Night Before Christmas* (1941) an amusing play that does not live up to its potential in his *New York Times* piece, "The Play: On 'The Night Before Christmas' the Perelmans Crack Safes and Jokes in Sixth Avenue."

In his review of *The Beauty Part* (1961), "Candide Among the Culture-Vultures," Robert Brustein considers the reasons for the play's success, which primarily reside in Perelman's "linguistic flair." Brustein, who wrote two admiring reviews of the comedy, also offers his opinion that the play may not be popular because Perelman's satirical targets are too close to home for the comfort of his middle-class audience.

A review of one of the author's television scripts concludes the review section. In "Television: 'Malice in Wonderland,'" Jack Gould describes an *Omnibus* production of four of Perelman's short stories about life in Hollywood (1959). Perelman's humorous "cracks alone could have sustained the show," Gould declares, but more importantly he finds that the "sting and substance" of the program demonstrated an important point about television humor. For it to be successful, he concludes, "let it say something."

The scholarly essays that come next focus either on primary aspects of Perelman's writing or on individual pieces. These selections devoted to scholarly reactions to Perelman's work tend to view the humorist's output from an objective and often broader point of view than that evidenced by the reviewers. At the same time, the essayists also examine their subjects in greater depth than can the reviewers. Overview articles concerned with literary techniques that appear in and characterize his entire literary corpus come at the end of this section. The arrangement of the articles again reflects, within

loose categories (e.g., general articles, plays, films, overviews), the chronology of the works being examined.

Perelman's work has been extremely popular in the United Kingdom. Alistair Cooke, for example, included commentary on the humorist from the British point of view in his Ride Lectures, a series of talks on the American in England from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Perelman. In Englishman John Wain's "A Jest in Season: Notes on S. J. Perelman, with a Digression on W. W. Jacobs," Jacobs, a nineteenth-century British humorist, is used for comparative purposes to demonstrate how fashion is important in the initial popular acceptance of a comic writer, but how those whose writing is likely to last beyond their immediate generation somehow rise above fashion. In doing this, Wain offers observations about the nature of durable versus non-durable literary humor and includes an analysis of Perelman's style and choice of topics to distinguish between his parodies and his satires. Comparisons and connections between Perelman and contemporary writers, including T. S. Eliot, are also made.

For Louis Hasley, in "The Kangaroo Mind of S. J. Perelman," the attraction in Perelman's writing is not his "positive ideas," which Hasley finds sparse. Rather it is his "stylistic playfulness" that ironically leads the critic to conclude that the humorist is merely "an entertainer *sui generis*." This evaluation of Perelman's writing as lacking enduring literary merit in the form of significant themes is typical of the early scholarly studies of Perelman's writing and is indicative of initial scholarly reactions to the humorist's writing; more recent examinations have contradicted these conclusions.

Although Philip French's "Perelman's Revenge or the Gift of Providence, Rhode Island" is technically an interview, it is not included in the interview section because Perelman is not the only interviewee. An edited version of a program originally honoring Perelman's seventy-fifth birthday that was broadcast on the British Broadcasting Corporation program "Radio 3," this article includes comments on Perelman's

writing and style by comedian Woody Allen, who admits to having been influenced by Perelman; cartoonist Al Hirschfeld, who accompanied the author on some of his journeys and illustrated the resultant travel pieces; Yale University English professor and novelist John Hollander, who characterizes the Perelman style; *New York Times* interviewer Israel Shenker; and former *Holiday* magazine editor Caskie Stinnett, who marvels at the writer's craftsmanship and approaches to writing.

Ostensibly a book review of *That Old Gang O' Mine*, Peter De Vries's "Perelmania" appeared in *The New Yorker*, the journal that housed so many of Perelman's "casuals" (editor Harold Ross's appellation for this special genre of writing—short and frequently humorous prose pieces). A humorist himself, DeVries goes beyond just reviewing the collection of Perelman's early writings. He discusses his subject's style as part of a consideration of the nature of humor and humorists as well.

Two major areas of Perelman's canon that have received scant scholarly attention are his playwriting and his screenwriting. "Satire and Subversion" is taken from John Lahr's *Up Against the Fourth Wall*, a volume devoted to the modern theatre. Lahr's father, Bert, had appeared in Perelman's play, *The Beauty Part*, and Lahr comments briefly on the writer's "vernacular humor" in his attempt at stage satire.

The case of *The Beauty Part* is unique in American theatre history. Because of a newspaper strike in New York City in December 1962, for the most part advertisements and reviews of the play were unavailable to theatregoers (ironically, a western edition of *The New York Times* was published; the December 28 issue contained an appreciative review by Howard Taubman, which probably would have assured a long run for *The Beauty Part*). As a result of the lack of publicity, the play closed, despite strong praise from those who saw it. In *Broadway's Beautiful Losers*, Marilyn Stasio examines a number of dramas that should have been Broadway hits but

were not for one reason or another. Stasio concludes in her chapter on *The Beauty Part* that Perelman's play may be the best in this category and that the reason for the failure of the production was unprecedented.

J. A. Ward's "The Hollywood Metaphor: The Marx Brothers, S. J. Perelman, and Nathanael West" demonstrates the graphic differences between Perelman and the Hollywood culture that he found so despicable. Metaphorically, Ward claims, a comparison of the nature of the Marxian hero as opposed to that of the typical Perelman protagonist captures the essence of the characters' creators in terms of style and theme. Ironically, given their association on two motion pictures, the characteristics of the Marx Brothers are exactly those that Perelman's personae find intolerable.

Beginning with a brief discussion of literary artists' reactions to their Hollywood experiences and then quickly commenting on the characteristics displayed by preeminent American humorists, Sanford Pinsker establishes the background against which he examines the works of Perelman and Woody Allen in "Jumping on Hollywood's Bones, or How S. J. Perelman and Woody Allen Found It at the Movies." Perelman's subject matter and style are surveyed, particularly as related to the film capital, and examples of both his satire and parody are furnished. Perelman's influence on Allen is considered next, followed by examples of elements in Allen's writing that are similar to or different from those that characterize Perelman's writing.

In *S. J. Perelman: A Critical Study*, Steven H. Gale presents analytical overviews of the scenarist's cinematic and theatrical output. "*Around the World in Eighty Ways: S. J. Perelman as Screenwriter*," which is taken from the film section of that volume, is a commentary on the filmscripts that Perelman wrote and links some of the themes and techniques found in the movies to the author's work in other media. Gale focuses on *Around the World in Eighty Days* to show how and why it was Perelman's "most professional and polished looking film, immensely popular, and did what it was intended to do."

One of the most insightful analyses of Perelman's canon is "The Sane Psychoses of S. J. Perelman," found in Norris W. Yates's *The American Humorist: Conscience of the Twentieth Century*. Published in 1964, this volume was one of the first attempts at a book-length examination of twentieth-century American literary humorists, and Perelman's writing is seen in this context. Yates notes the influence of James Joyce and others on the writer's use of language and labels the humorist's characteristic style "Perelmontage," relating it technically to a cinematic technique that combines numerous elements in a quick collage to produce an effect that is greater than the sum of its components. The scholar also focuses on the "Little Man" convention and the sense of humor and faith in the "decency of at least a small number of human beings" in defining Perelman's narrator. Yates demonstrates how the humorist's combination of techniques and subject matter makes Perelman a satirist.

A first rate analysis of Perelman's use of fantasy in contrast to the writing of Benchley and others who created the Little Man figure is the basis for Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill's "Benchley and Perelman" section of *America's Humor: From Poor Richard to Doonesbury*.

Chapters from books sometimes furnish a different perspective on an artist's work than that found in scholarly articles because selections from books are part of a larger whole which includes a more detailed and comprehensive view of the writer and his canon than is possible in a single essay. These selections also are self-contained. One important element in Perelman's background and style that is only touched on by other critics is the focus of "Perelman and the Tradition on Falling Out of Fashion" by Douglas Fowler. In this chapter, taken from his fine monograph (*S. J. Perelman*, Twayne, 1983), the first book-length study of the author's work, Fowler discusses Jewish-American authors (George S. Kaufman and Woody Allen in particular) and considers Perelman in the environment of the Yiddish literary tradition

to explain how and why the humorist's writing is simultaneously related to this element and separate from it.

Taken together, the selections included in *S. J. Perelman: Critical Essays* serve as an introduction to this important humorist's work, both in terms of the specific short prose pieces, plays, and films examined and as an overview of his lengthy professional career. They provide insightful and in-depth literary analyses as well. The result should be a better appreciation for Perelman's contributions to American literary history.

Endnotes

1. For a discussion of Perelman's literary career, see Steven H. Gale's *S. J. Perelman: A Critical Study* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987).

2. Many scholars have mistakenly assumed that Perelman graduated from Brown University in 1925. Actually, like James Thurber, he ended his university days three credit hours short of the requirement for graduation. Whereas Thurber could never pass biology, Perelman was unable to complete a course in trigonometry.

3. The three exceptions are William Cole and George Plimpton's important interview, which was reprinted in a volume of the *Paris Review's Writers at Work* series, and Robert Brustein's and John Lahr's theatrical reviews, which were reprinted in volumes of the critics' collected reviews.

4. I had planned to include film reviews, too, but most film reviewers pay little or no attention to the screenwriter or the script, and this is certainly the case with the reviews of Perelman's films; it did not seem germane to reprint mere plot summaries and cast lists. In fact, probably the most expansive critique of Perelman as the author of the script contained in a film review appeared in the commentary in *Time* magazine on *Around the World in Eighty Days*: "S. J. Perelman's script, moreover, is a deft, witty spoof of Verne's book, which in turn was a spoof of the English, so that the moviegoer often experiences the refined pleasures of laughing at a man who is laughing at somebody else."

S. J. Perelman

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The Art of Fiction: S. J. Perelman

William Cole and George Plimpton

S.J. Perelman has an eighty-acre farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania (where the house is “shingled with second-hand wattles”), a Greenwich Village apartment, and a no-nonsense, one-room office, also in the Village. It was there that the interview took place. The office is furnished like a slightly luxuriant monk’s cell: a few simple chairs, a desk, a cot. On the walls are a Stuart Davis water color and photographs of James Joyce, Somerset Maugham, and the late Gus Lobrano, a *New Yorker* editor and close friend of the author. The only bizarre touch is David Niven’s hat from *Around the World in Eighty Days*, mounted on a pedestal.

Mr. Perelman, trim and well-tailored, is of medium build. His hair is gently receding, and graying at the temples. He wears old-fashioned steel-rimmed spectacles, bought in Paris many years ago. He is soft-spoken and reserved, sometimes chilling, and gives the impression that he does not suffer “nudniks” gladly. He cares about words in their proper places; in his speech each sentence emerges whole and well-balanced, and each generally contains one or two typically Perelmanesque words. He is impatient with obvious questions—those that he has been asked over and over again in hundreds of interviews—but lights up when talking about his days in Hollywood, or telling anecdotes about his friend Robert Benchley. As *The Listener* put it, reporting on a

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