

Chapter 1

Charlie/Chaplin

Charlie and the Clown Tradition

I wish to demonstrate in this book that Charlie Chaplin is a great poet of the cinema. Although he is often awarded the title of 'poet', the use of this term usually turns out to be unhelpfully vague. My intention is to be as exact as possible in my use of the term—and sober: I want to enlist for Chaplin the serious attention deserved by one who is both original and who also draws strength from theatrical and social traditions older than the cinema. I dearly hope that in my use of the term 'poet' I can avoid that extravagance of film criticism by which workmanlike, craftsmen film makers have been transformed into cinematic Prousts and Tolstoys.

The greater part of the book is devoted to detailed analyses of individual films. These analyses are based on two assumptions: that the films have serious meanings (or we would not find them so moving and important); and that the meanings reside in the comedy and not in something outside it. And in this introductory chapter I attempt the task of setting down the general observations and contentions that the specific accounts serve to illustrate, which is hard, because Chaplin's remarkable multiplicity does not yield easily to the sequence and linearity that expository argument demands. The difficulty is to convey, in considering in turn, as I propose to, Charlie's relation to the clown tradition, the ingredients of his character, his patterns of behaviour and the deliberate or intuitive contribution of Chaplin the artist, how all these aspects are related. A useful way into the subject is provided by one of the very earliest films, whose representative quality offers some sugges-

tive answers to the unavoidable question, Who *is* Charlie, to start with?

Kid Auto Races at Venice was possibly not, as has often been supposed, the first film in which Chaplin wore his famous costume. There is a conflict of testimony on this point between Chaplin and his biographers, but it was certainly the first such film to be released (in February 1914), so there is some justification for regarding it as particularly significant. The temptation to do so is anyway almost irresistible. *Kid Auto Races* would not merit much attention but for the value bestowed upon it by hindsight. It is one of Sennett's typical early location impromptus, shot quickly and off the cuff, an opportunity for the untried comedian to show his paces. What action there is takes place during a children's motor race at Venice, California. There is no story and only one character. A newsreel crew are filming the events, and Charlie's function is to get in their way, and in the way of the contestants, and to make a general nuisance of himself. His basic screen character seems to have sprung almost fully formed into life, and he uses numerous bits of comic business that he was later to elaborate. Most of the action is shot from the outside, by Sennett's unseen cameraman. However, we occasionally view the events through the lens of the dummy camera, and here an interesting use is made of the frame, into which Charlie strolls, sidles or peers, and from which he is shoved or yanked. The significance of this fragment resides not only in the portentous fact that our first view of Charlie is of him showing off in front of a camera, but in the fact of the showing off—the kind of relationship that is established between Charlie, the world he inhabits and his audience.

Actually, there are three audiences: the crowd at the racetrack, crammed behind ropes; the fictitious audience for whose benefit Charlie clowns before the dummy camera; and we, watching the actual film. Charlie exhibits a vain consciousness of all his audiences, particularly the one implied by the camera, which fascinates him. He parades before us with an air of strutting self-importance, or poses sternly with his hand on his hip. He demands that we admire him. To the exasperated protests of the camera crew he responds with gestures of dignified remonstrance, and promptly sidles back into our view. *Kid Auto Races* is, in effect, a piece of prolonged and multiple self-display. It demonstrates with special clar-

ity two of Charlie's most prominent qualities, his abnormality (the eccentricities of appearance and action that distinguish him from the normal world he inhabits and from us, his audience) and his compulsion to performance (his consciousness of an audience and his apparent need for one). For brevity's sake, I will call these qualities oddity and display.

The qualities are obviously related: the first embraces the second, and the second implies the first. Charlie's oddity is first of all a matter of costume, that incongruous and ill-proportioned mixture of garments that looked sufficiently peculiar at the very beginning, when its constituent parts were still in fashion, and has looked more peculiar as the years have gone by. But more importantly, it is a matter of behaviour. Charlie's eccentricities of behaviour are legion, and are considered at greater length below. They mostly take the form of a consistent and deliberate flouting of legal, social and psychological norms, with effects ranging from the mildly bizarre to the almost insane. There is virtually no rule of conduct he doesn't disregard, and no legitimate expectation he doesn't confound. As for display, it is usually evinced by the deliberateness of the oddity and the implied consciousness of an audience on whom the outrage will tell. Occasionally it issues in overt gestures of audience awareness, when the pretence of fictional realism is momentarily abandoned, such as the little pirouette with which Charlie acknowledges our applause for his foiling of the jewel thief in *The Pawnshop*.

Charlie's oddity and display are the qualities that link him most unmistakably to a larger tradition. That Charlie's personality, behaviour and problems relate him to the great clown figures of the past, whether real, mythical or theatrical, has been recognized as long as he has received serious attention at all. It has also been recognized that in his case the relationship is more vital and direct than in that of his contemporaries and that it is a potent source of his appeal. An early instance is Pierre Duchartre's observation that 'though he may not be aware of it, Charlie Chaplin is undoubtedly one of the rare inheritors of the traditions of the *commedia dell'arte*'.¹ A later writer, Allardyce Nicoll, has explicitly denied that Chaplin's mimic art has much direct resemblance to the *commedia*,

1. *The Italian Comedy* (London: Harrap, 1929).

which depended upon spoken dialogue.² Both authorities are perhaps right. Duchartre had in mind a *commedia* scenario in which Pulcinella, evading capture, impersonates a weathercock and other objects. This certainly prompts the image of Charlie metamorphosed into a tree in *Shoulder Arms*, or assuming the form of a standard-lamp in *The Adventurer* (in both cases for the same purpose). And Nicoll is right to warn against a too easy identification of historically remote and dissimilar forms of comic drama, though he goes on to describe a system of stock characters and relationships in the *commedia* that does not seem very different from that of Chaplin's Keystone-to-Mutual period. However, it is not necessary to prove a direct historical link of influence between Charlie and his illustrious predecessors. It is more profitable to see them all as examples of a common type, exhibiting a remarkable consistency of characteristics throughout the ages. This is the procedure of an important book that was the first to treat the subject of clowning wholly from a psychological and typological, rather than a historical, point of view: William Willeford's *The Fool and his Sceptre* (1969). Mr Willeford's complete argument is more elaborate than my purposes require (and in places, I admit, too obscure for me to follow), but, in all my general observations in this chapter on clown figures and their significance, I have made grateful use of some of his terminology, especially the indispensable terms 'boundary' and 'centre'.

Willeford's basic contention is that the clown figure (which he refers to throughout as the 'fool' comes from beyond the boundary of the secure and the known, and, arrived in our comfortable reality or 'centre', puts on a recognizable performance (which he calls 'the fool-show'). These ideas correspond to our sense of Charlie's oddity and display. It is the oddity that is the more important for the moment. The fool transcends both cultural allegiance (the costume and habits of a particular time and place) and all specific rules of conduct. These propositions give a traditional sanction to both Charlie's anachronistic get-up and his eccentricities of behaviour. From beyond the boundary, which is both social and psychological, the fool brings those disruptive modes of behaviour and primitive habits of thought that the centre—of society and of

2. *The World of the Harlequin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963).

the mind—chooses either to ignore or to conceal (is normally obliged to, in order to survive). He is profoundly unsettling in effect, introducing the irrationally unconscious into the rationally conscious centre, the possibility of chaos into order.

Such an account throws an interesting light on Charlie's compulsive rule-flouting, mentioned above, which is one of his most signal characteristics. And it is not just a matter of the obvious thou-shalt-not moral and legal rules, and those of social decorum. Charlie certainly flouts these. Morality–legality says that we should respect others' property, tell the truth and own up to our lapses: Charlie is a thief, a liar, and is not above sitting meekly by while innocent friends get manhandled for his misdeeds. Decorum demands seemly behaviour at social gatherings: Charlie is liable to assault the guests, try out unusual dance steps or practise his golf strokes on the side dishes. There are many other kinds of rule, for example, those less explicit ones governing intimate personal relationships, which uphold an ideal of respectful honesty: Charlie is capable of manufacturing pathetic dramas to win the sympathy of his girl. There are the rules that dictate our behaviour at moments of danger or crisis: Charlie's displays of heroic intention are apt to give way to a more prudent assessment of his chances. There are the simple rules of congruity, or reasonable expectation: Charlie negotiates the potholes of a slummy side street with the dandified air of a boulevardier. Most basic of all are what might be called cognitive rules, which determine what we perceive: Charlie continually interprets others' friendly nudges or slaps as evidence of hostile intention and responds with a hearty wallop (in *The Cure*, waiting for his turn with an arm-flailing masseur, he reaches prudently for a hefty back brush); menus are likely to make him think of hymn books, prompting a grudging display of piety, and baby-sized hymn books seem to him naturally designed for babies to read.

But it is clearly not enough to see Charlie as simply and solely alien and disruptive. To employ Willeford's terms: although our social-psychological centre cannot allow itself to be engulfed by the chaos that the fool brings from beyond the boundary, in order to prosper it needs to accommodate the possibility of chaos as an important fact of experience. And the fool, who straddles the worlds of darkness and light, is uniquely qualified to provide the

recognition. So Charlie, although he is not *of* our world, is actively *in* it, an agent of release whose behaviour, as well as being negative and destructive, is potentially beneficent and transforming.

The way he gets in and stays in is largely by his talent of versatile role-playing. This is the most evident manifestation of Charlie's instinct for display. He is a natural actor, always on the look-out for a likely scenario: mostly offered bit parts, he usually manages to translate himself into the hero. If he tires of one role, he can switch to another while we are still adjusting to the first. Charlie's histrionic fertility is astonishing, and is one of the things that gives his films their peculiarly vigorous life. His role-playing can be emotional and immediate (vivid impressions of dignity, arrogance, aggression, gallantry and grief in bewildering succession), efficiently professional (boxer, sailor, janitor, fireman, waiter, dentist, cop), domestic and personal (father, husband, lover, friend), or calculated, in the form of deliberate imposture. Professional roles are the commonest, and amorous roles the most enjoyed, but imposture has a special attraction and force. It is as an imposter—whether Count Borko, the Reverend Parker or Henri Verdoux—that he acts out his most intimate dramas. For Charlie, imposture is the device by which he can most readily penetrate the defences of our stubborn and orderly centre, a conduit for the introduction of subversion and mayhem. To the audience it offers the pleasures of complicity and suspense. At the typological level it could be regarded as the function of display: the fool's chief means of mediation between oddity and normality.

Charlie's compulsive play-acting is not just a form of infiltration. His successful impostures, in particular, demonstrate not only the case with which he invades and occupies our world, but also his desire actively to transform it. Charlie's power of creatively transforming our stubborn, confusing reality is one of the most important single facts about him. And the ultimate beneficence of the enterprise seems to be testified to by another of the characteristics that Charlie shares with the real and imaginary clown figures of the past, his apparent immunity from the normal consequences of his actions. I am not just thinking of his endless capacity for outwitting cops and other authority figures, or of the success of his impostures (which are usually discovered in the end, in any case). These are active stratagems. I am thinking of the sort of immunity

from punishment or blame that falls unbidden into his lap, so to speak, plucking him from danger and often transferring the direful consequences on to somebody else. A splendid example is the golfing scene in *The Idle Class*, when the blame for Charlie's numerous sporting solecisms and misdemeanours is visited, unknown to him, upon the hapless innocent he is tailing round the course. This immunity is a kind of magical luck. Its enjoyment by historical court jesters has been attributed to their talismanic virtue of themselves transmitting luck to those they abuse. In Charlie's case, it has the immediate dramatic effect of audacity and surprise, and, as I have suggested, the larger effect of confirming the justness of Charlie's creative role.

The power of creative transformation takes many forms. At its simplest, it is Charlie's means of making the world answer his own needs, by, for example, his casually insensitive use of other people: his habit of soliciting their attention by forcibly turning their heads towards him, of leaning his elbow on their backs or laps, or of striking matches on their rumps. Other people can be to Charlie either convenient objects or tiresome obstacles. There is little especially beneficent about this, it is true. A much more imaginative sort of transformation is his repeated employment of visual metaphor. This is the process by which objects are used, or actions performed, in terms of other objects or actions. Charlie, without betraying any sense of incongruity, will wipe his nose on a doormat, or his eyes on a beard; clean his boots with a toothbrush; search for fleas in a bearskin helmet; practise billiard strokes with a sword on a bunch of onions; fan a groggy dental patient with a towel, boxer-fashion; or feed a brood of children like chickens, by scattering cornflakes. The phrase 'poetry of cinema', which once had a place in the film critic's vocabulary seems never to have meant much more than a romantically charged visual prettiness. The pervasive metaphorical suggestiveness of Charlie's comic business is poetic in a more precise sense. Poetry is (among the many other things that it is) a pre-rational mode of thought, whose prevailing principle is the association of ideas. Its best images, like the gags I have listed above, provoke a feeling of simultaneous appropriateness and surprise. Fools are pre-rational thinkers, and hence to some extent inevitably poets as well. Enid Welsford has said that, in contrast with the energetic and rational hero, the fool 'by

his mere presence dissolves events, evades issues, and throws doubt on the finality of fact'.³ This goes further than what I have called transformation ('evades issues' suggests the interesting question of morality, which I shall consider below), but seems to include it. Charlie's metaphorical gags, as well as adding surprise and diversity to the comic business, could be described as his most regular method of throwing doubt on the finality of fact. They also constitute one of his most thorough invasions of our reality.

It is not fanciful to invoke the names of Shakespeare and Dickens in thinking of Chaplin's metaphorical audacities, even though it is obviously a comparison that cannot be pressed too far. Like them, he is a great English genius, and like them he seems to be compelled (rather than to have chosen) to register his experience abundantly in poetic terms. But there is a sense in which the instances I have cited are only the small change of Chaplin's 'poetry'. They strike us as the random and instinctive products of an ineradicable habit, with no meaning beyond their immediate occasion. Chaplin's mature films are poetic in a wider sense, in their fabric and dramatic organization: the extended passages of comic business are significant, and contribute to the expression of an often complex theme. The evolution of Chaplin's poetic effects, small-scale and large-scale, is considered at greater length in the next chapter: I want to return for the moment to the nature of Charlie the character's powers of creative transformation.

These powers can manifest themselves in individual bits of comic business or across the whole spectrum of a particular activity. To take the second kind first, there is the question of work. For it is Charlie's professional roles that provide him with his most frequent opportunities for creative violation of the rules. Although he is a natural aristocrat, he accepts the need to work: which is in any case a useful source of income, additional to the larger amounts he is apt to acquire by chance, or conquest. But he cannot help refashioning work according to his temperamental needs. He is not interested in it as a puritan discipline, a social duty or a contribution to the national economy. His attitude is more like D.H. Lawrence's: 'There is no point in work unless it absorbs

3. Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London: Faber & Faber, 1935).



Plate 1. *Modern Times*.

you like an absorbing game'.⁴ Charlie's jobs being mostly menial, his work is hardly ever absorbing, but he does his best to turn it into a game. His common procedure is to turn it into dance. Examples are legion, but the most famous ones are probably his gleefully prancing disruption of the factory regime in *Modern Times*, and his shaving of Chester Conklin to the music of Brahms in *The Great Dictator*. Under Charlie's management, work is shorn of its merely functional ends and transformed into a self-justifying creative activity. This may be one of the things Welsford means in saying that the fool 'dissolves events'.

As well as manipulating people, objects and activities, Charlie manipulates situations. I have already mentioned his talent for imposture, and his unscrupulous manufacture of dramas for the enlistment of sympathy (in *The Pawnshop*, hearing Edna approach while he is throttling his rival, he throws himself to the floor in an attitude of piteous defeat). His powers of transformation also show themselves in innumerable active stratagems for the furtherance of whatever aim he has in hand. In the finest of the films, these scenes have, as well as a dramatic function, a poetic suggestiveness that contributes tellingly to the total effect, in the way I have mentioned above.

In *Shoulder Arms*, Charlie's contribution to the espionage department of the war effort is to disguise himself as a tree in order to spy on a group of Germans. He finds his disguise a mixed blessing (he can bash his enemies on the head without compunction, but finds himself vulnerable to wholesale conversion into firewood), and takes refuge in the anonymity of a nearby wood (an example of a clown's actively seeking the immunity that is his right). This escapade has the eventual effect, together with Charlie's other military exploits, of altering the whole course of the war. An even bolder stratagem (and surely one of Chaplin's most imaginative comic episodes) is the scene in *A Dog's Life* in which, in order to recover the stolen wallet, he revivifies, with appropriate bits of his own person, the thug in the café alcove whom he has rendered unconscious. It is hard to find words adequate to describe the spellbinding lifelikeness of this impersonation, in which Charlie conducts a complete conversation with his arms alone, effectively wrenching reality around to the fulfilment of his own ends.

4. *Pansies* (Yorick Books, 1988 [1929]).

These last two instances have a special interest, and lead usefully to the next important point to be made about Charlie's art. They are examples of a particular type of imposture, one that provides a further significant link between Charlie and the traditional fool, a fondness for non-human, and especially animal, disguises. (The second example is of course actually a human disguise, but the peculiar circumstances—Charlie's, in effect, wearing another man's body—class it with this type of stratagem rather than with routine imposture. One would not have to look further for a bona fide animal disguise than the scene in the same film in which Charlie, to gain admission to the saloon, stuffs Scraps down his trousers and turns himself into a sort of man-dog). Non-human, semi-human and animal disguises are immemorial ingredients of the traditional fool's repertoire. Historically, they linger late in the hobby-horse and the wild man of the mummers' play. In the terms of Willeford's analysis, such disguises are first of all part of the fool's disruptive function: wildness and semi-wildness are unassimilated reminders of the pre-civilized chaos from which the fool emerges into the civilized centre. But they are also instances of another of the fool's enduring traits, which Charlie inherits and which is the most important single clue to his spirit: compulsive doubleness.

Doubleness, or duality, and its attendant qualities—contrariety, contradiction and confusion—are among the fool's most distinctive and determining features. It is easy to see that they are a necessary consequence of his condition. Moving from the boundary to the centre he can't help to some extent dragging the centre back to the boundary. By the fact of his irrational presence in our rational midst he inevitably has the effect of confusing the two. And to confuse the two is precisely his function. In Charlie's case, we have seen that his function is in a sense both of and not of our world. His effect upon our reality can be either destructive or creative, or both at the same time. And his oddity, the first quality he exhibits, is matched, especially in his later incarnations, by familiarity—a sympathetic humanness with which we can identify (a point to be developed later). He is a very contradictory case—could be said, indeed, to embody the principle of contradiction.

Duality operates in both the personal and the social spheres, and at every level of expression. It evinces every degree of refinement and elaboration. At one level, it means actually being two people

or two things. In a few films, Charlie plays two distinct characters—in *A Night in the Show*, for instance, he is both Mr Rowdy and Mr Pest; in *The Idle Class*, both the husband and the tramp; in *The Great Dictator*, both Hynkel and the barber. More often, as in his various impostures and disguises, he only pretends to be double. At another level, it means occupying two social positions. It is his impostures that usually enable Charlie to do this, but in at least one film, *City Lights*, he contrives, thanks to the alternate attention and neglect of the fickle millionaire, to be genuinely rich and poor at the same time. At another level, it means expressing two attitudes or qualities. This is the commonest kind of all, and could be described as Charlie's permanent condition. Some of the attitudes are those which, elsewhere, are split between two characters: Charlie combines the qualities of Pest and Rowdy in being both fastidious and vulgar, for example. He is also both good and bad, considerate and selfish, wise and stupid, shrewd and naive, industrious and idle, brave and cowardly—the catalogue is almost endless. It is the continual switching back and forth between these attributes that gives his films the remarkable tension and vivacity of their surface life, and his character the inexhaustible capacity for surprise that serves to distinguish him more than anything else, perhaps, from his rival comedians, contemporary and later. At yet another level, duality means embodying two needs. Here there is some overlap with the previous category, but Charlie's needs are distinct from his attitudes, and more profound. A simple list cannot serve the same purpose, but it will be some indication of what is meant by saying that Charlie needs, for example, both morality and amorality, the material and the spiritual, control and licence, nature and artifice. It is in his greatest films that his needs are defined and their conflicts resolved, in the form of comic-poetic dramas that are the ultimate evolution of his art (*The Gold Rush* explores the relation between the material and the non-material, for example, and *The Circus* that between artifice and life), and they will be considered most fully in the analyses of specific films. At this level, the needs are more than Charlie's and are generalized into themes.

The large and looming presence in Charlie's nature of duality and opposition finds visual expression in the numberless images of balance, deadlock and containment of forces that constitute

the most prevalent and significant type of image in the films. As with the metaphorical gags, they are so common that to cite examples is to pick stones off the ground. Balancing acts are second nature to Charlie, and the threatened loss of equilibrium an everyday hazard. In addition to the tug of opposites, the feelings they always express are the imminence of danger and the demonstrated possession of skill. They are partly a function of Charlie's instinct for display. They figure both his battle for a footing (literal and metaphorical) in our inhospitable world and the contradictory demands of his own nature. In the earliest films they are usually casual and instinctive, with no significance beyond the provision of immediate excitement: the drunken or desperate teetering on the edge of a park lake for example, or the heroic grasp on an unspilled tray of food on a bucketing boat. In other instances, the display element is to the fore: in *Shanghai'd*, it is devilment that makes Charlie start juggling with the ship's dinner-time ham bone, and in *The Pawnshop* sheer high spirits that prompt him to pick his way precariously across a 'tightrope' that is stretched safely along the floor. In the later films, the balancing acts are often extended scenes, and correspondingly more significant. The most celebrated example is the cabin that clings hazardously to the edge of the crevasse in *The Gold Rush*, while others are the rope-walking climax of *The Circus*, the roller-skating episode in *Modern Times*, and the boxing match in *City Lights*, with its strange, dancing sense of deadlock and staved-off threat. In these instances, as well as the constant condition of Charlie's nature and the conflict of his needs, the balancing acts are figurative expressions of the particular opposition of forces in the context from which they arise. They are reminders that contradiction is not the same as complexity and evidence—in their demonstration of poise and skill—that it is an inclusive complexity of effect at which the major films aim. But whether casual or calculated, trivial or momentous, Charlie's art is everywhere the art of the equilibrist.

Charlie's Needs

It is time to look more closely at the actual stuff that Chaplin's films are made of. What are Charlie's everyday needs (as distinguished from the profounder ones above)—his activities, preoccupations, the motives that compel him into action? Although basic and mun-

dane, they are certainly not trivial, and are complicated by the contradictions rooted in Charlie's nature. They can be roughly divided into the personal and the social, though in Charlie's realms of action this is a difficult distinction to maintain. His personal needs all come under the general head of appetite. Listed baldly, they are money, food and women.

Oddly enough, considering the avidity with which he pursues it, money in itself is of little importance to Charlie. Having no desire to accumulate possessions, he doesn't even seek it for its obvious benefits. He is not particularly concerned about where it comes from. He presumably receives some for working, though, as we have seen, his attitude to work is disinterestedly non-functional, and there are few occasions on which we actually see him being paid. The kind of income he finds most attractive, and is most regularly in receipt of, or most tenaciously pursues, is the money that appears from nowhere, or from all manner of unofficial sources, or is just lying around to be picked up—what throughout I will call 'found money'. This can take the form of a vagrant coin (*The Immigrant*), a stolen wallet (*A Dog's Life*), Big Jim's mountain of gold (*The Gold Rush*) or the fortunes of gullible widowed ladies (*Monsieur Verdoux*). The needs that these particular windfalls satisfy are, respectively, relief from a pressing and potentially calamitous debt; retirement to a life of frugal industry and domestic bliss; entry to a world of luxury and ease; and sheer survival in a world of harsh competition. Charlie is capable of pursuing money from a purely altruistic motive, as in *City Lights*, but he values it most for its power of granting access to that world of luxury that he considers his native element, but from which, without it, he is liable to be tiresomely excluded. Luckily for him, it is not always necessary actually to have money to belong to this world, but only to appear to have it: and he is a practised fabricator of appearances. Found money is a precarious source of income to rely upon, a fact that lends suspense to a number of the films. The café scene in *The Immigrant* is a prolonged and witty testimony to both the treachery and beneficence of found money: the picked-up coin, on which Charlie's hopes are pinned, whose loss produces so many anxious moments, is finally condemned as false, and Charlie's beans-and-coffee blow-out providentially paid for with his benefactor's tip. It is clear from all this that money for Charlie is a magi-

cal, talismanic and sometimes wholly imaginary substance, quite as much as a tangible one: disembodied, conjured from the air, an instrument of fantasy. (It is not until *Monsieur Verdoux* that we are given a more realistic view of money's origin and meaning.)

Food, whatever further value it acquires, cannot help being tangible. It is of the first importance in Charlie's world. He spends a lot of his time gaining access to it, having it served to him, serving it to others and eating it. Its prominence is witnessed by the abundance of café scenes in the films, and the frequency with which he himself turns up in the guise of waiter or diner. This is partly a matter of comic convention, as Chaplin explains in his account of his first days with the Essanay company: 'Now I was anxious to get to work. Although I hadn't a story, I ordered the crew to build an ornate café set. When I was lost for a gag or an idea, a café would always provide one'.⁵ A café is a place of public resort, offering numberless opportunities for comic exploitation. But dramatic convenience can only ever have been a minor consideration. Food is a positive need to Charlie at a level deeper than convenience, as is figured perhaps in its having a balancing act of its own—the tray-carrying gags that seem to express the difficulties and hazards of its acquisition. Of course, hunger impels him to action, as it impels us all. And much of his food consumption operates at the simple level of satisfaction of appetite, such as the nicking of the bangers in *A Dog's Life* (the immediate result of which scene—Charlie's rolling under the fence to escape the cop—is interpreted very interestingly by Willeford in terms of 'boundary' and 'centre':⁶ or Charlie's decimation of Syd's pies in the same film. In these episodes interest is centred upon the cunning and resource of Charlie's scavenging. But the element of eating that really appeals to Charlie, both in the café scenes and in the fashionable dinner parties at which he is usually present in his role of imposter, is the element of ritual. He responds feelingly to the idea of eating as an act of celebration. It is a ritual that he cannot help making peculiarly his own—hence his innumerable solecisms and violations of table etiquette. He is capable, in his early and cruder

5. Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (London: Bodley Head, 1964).

6. See William Willeford, *The Fool and his Sceptre: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and their Audience* (Evanston, IL; Northwestern University Press; London: Arnold, 1969), pp. 134-35.

incarnations, of desecrating the ritual and employing food as ammunition. But his usual approach to food consumption is gentle and considerate, almost loving. The emphasis is on the civilized niceties, however much modified by his peculiar nature, and the simple appeasement of appetite gives way to the conventions of gourmet dining. For Charlie, food is a positive value, eating a creative act: a meal is a work of art. The boiling of the boot in *The Gold Rush* is the most famous example of Charlie's way with food: nearly as interesting in its different way is his unpaid-for restaurant banquet in *Modern Times*, designed to return him to the comfort of jail, whose multiple satisfactions spill over into his wonderful air, under arrest, of patrician ease and condescension. Food is also an inducement to display. And in the films' recurrent actual or imagined vignettes of domestic life, the act of eating is further enriched by the associated feelings of affectionate rapport.

This last point is a reminder that food does not stand alone in Charlie's pantheon of pleasures, but is associated with others, such as drinking and dancing. Together they can be classed as festivity, the promotion of which is one of the clown's immemorial functions. Drinking as such does not figure nearly so large in Charlie's activities as eating. This is possibly because it offers fewer opportunities for comic business (the play with glasses and bottles in *The Adventurer*, and the smashed hip flask in *The Pilgrim*, are exceptions that come to mind). Where the act of drinking is important, it usually has a special significance in the film (such as the mix-up over Verdoux's poisons, or the beneficial draughts of water that Hynkel administers down his trousers). But the effects of drink are as prominent as the act of eating. Charlie's drunken sessions are balancing acts in which sobriety and order are pitted against insensibility and chaos. They are visible dramatizations of the struggle in his nature between darkness and light. Dancing has a similar function, being Charlie's attempt to establish a foothold in the social civilities of our discouraging world: with always eccentric, and often disastrous, results. He is likely on the dance floor to find himself transfixed by chewing gum, pinioned to an enormous dog, or simply incapable of remaining upright on the hyper-polished surface. In moving from food to festivity we have shifted from personal to social needs, an indication of how difficult it is in Charlie's case to distinguish the two. We have also led into his sec-

ond physical appetite. It takes two to dance, and it is on the dance floor that Charlie often meets or amuses his women.

Women, unlike money, are ends in themselves. Like food, they are tangible and desirable objects. Charlie's relations with them have three stages, which correspond to a threefold development of his character that will be elaborated below. The first stage takes the form of cynical dalliance. This basic Charlie has a sharp eye for a pretty face: presented with a middle-aged and a comely girl both in danger of drowning, he will after careful scrutiny rescue the pretty one first. He is a compulsive chatter-up, ready with whispered confidences, suggestive winks and playful back-kicks. Spotting Edna hiding, for her own good reasons, under his bed in her nightgown, his smile registers a pleased surprised that the world should be so agreeably arranged. He is most at home in the world of the earliest films, whose pervasive eroticism is symbolized by the recurrent nude statuettes that he is wont to examine with artistic severity. The Charlie in this stage shades off into another, high-spirited one, whose relations with women are more affectionate, and are usually shown, not in the making, but as already established. This stage of his love life is conducted on a level of pally equality, qualified by occasional mockery (he is capable of slyly playing the weight-lifter with Edna's doughnuts). His girls are liable to find themselves used as raw material for his mischievous transformations. He can be patronizing, even paternal, insisting on a high standard of table manners and personal cleanliness (*The Vagabond*). If Edna starts getting becomingly but unreasonably shy over being married, he will carry her bodily into the registrar's office (*The Immigrant*). It is this Charlie who is so fond of conjuring images of domestic bliss and material abundance, where fruits hang ready to hand and milk flows direct from cow to jug. The objects of his affection are either wholesome girl-next-door figures, tolerant of his eccentricities, or child-like waifs, dependent upon his protection.

The final stage in Charlie's amorous life is his assumption of the role of the romantic lover. In this he is susceptible to the whole range of feelings normally associated, in art and life, with love relations, from the delight of reciprocal passion to the misery of change, rejection or loss. It is the difficulties that are emphasized, his chosen women being often remote and inaccessible, because

of wealth and class (*The Pilgrim*), temperament and background (*The Gold Rush*), alienated affection (*The Circus*) or the accident of circumstances (*City Lights*). Sometimes he gets his girl (in *The Gold Rush*, he gets a great deal more besides), but often he does not. In the first stage, rebuffs are a minor irritation—there is always another girl round the corner; in the second, Charlie's love life is usually happy and secure; but in the third he is vulnerable to the painful feelings attendant upon change or loss. In this case the pain may be countered by a fantasised denial (in *The Bank* he dreams a drama of heroic rescue and wakes up kissing a mop); or dissipated in a farcical denouement (the border-straddling conclusion to *The Pilgrim*); or the issue may be left tantalizingly open (*City Lights*). In *The Circus*, uniquely, he reconciles himself to his loss, and assumes the role of matchmaker to his girl and her chosen lover.

It is Charlie the romantic lover who most exposes his creator to the charge of sentimentality. There is no point in denying that the charge is often justified. Chaplin's treatment of romantic love can possess an inexcusable element of self-indulgence, especially when he offers uncritically to engineer situations in which his own pitifulness is emphasized. At such moments the effect is embarrassing, leaving us with unresolved feelings on our hands that we don't know what to do with. But I would maintain, first, that this is a much more minor nuisance than it is sometimes made out to be, and, second, that it is mitigated, even justified, by various circumstances. For one thing, the moments of romantic love are subject, like the rest of Chaplin, to the duality factor, and often, in the balancing interest of critical intelligence, the targets of a sudden process of deromanticization. Charlie's grave courtliness, studied gallantry and heroic attitudinizing are liable to moments of undignified collapse. In *The Gold Rush*, for example, where such gags are especially common, he opens the cabin door to greet his beloved with an air of tender expectancy, and gets a snowball in his face; repeating the scene on a later occasion, he is confronted by a hungry mule.

But Chaplin's sentimentality is not only qualified by these moments of farcical reversal. At a deeper level it is related to the whole of his attempt to introduce serious feelings into comedy, by grafting sophisticated literary and dramatic elements to the basic fool tradition, and allowing farce to be infected by reality. I don't

wish to anticipate what I shall say below in defence of Chaplin's comedy of feeling. It is enough to suggest here that his sentimental excesses may be the price that is paid for the realism of his mature art. And it is not contradictory but complementary to this argument to maintain that, however serious and genuine the feelings that it issues from, Charlie's love behaviour has always a strongly theatrical element. Just as he is impelled to turn work into dance, so he is impelled to turn love into display. Whether at the cynical, affectionate or idealizing stage, it is the role of lover that fascinates him, and his energies are devoted, as in the case of his other needs, to converting feeling and appetite into performance.

As well as the personal needs that I have called appetite, Charlie evinces two compelling social purposes that provide him with an entry into our world's social life (though we have seen, in the spectrum of Charlie's needs, how finely the personal shades off into the social). These are work, and what for want of a better word I shall call rank. Work has been discussed above as being one of the prime targets of Charlie's powers of transformation: the effect of the transformations being usually to deprive the activity of its functional ends and replace them with creative ones. Charlie's professional roles are very important to him. He is not a shirker, and positively wants to work. (Our familiar idea of him as a homeless and jobless vagabond may seem strange in view of the amount of time he actually spends in paid employment.) He values work in the first instance for providing him with a footing in our world, and a sense of normality and belonging. It is clear that this is to a large extent a respectable front, and that his chief use for work is as material for his true purpose of creative disruption. Work offers an endless range of activities on which he can exercise his gifts. His professional roles are roles in the theatrical sense, like the lover's and the imposter's: work ministers to his unappeasable appetite for display. It also gives rise recurrently to one of his most remarkable pieces of oddity, an exhibition of his pre-rational mode of thought. This is his habit of work creation, the process whereby he actively manipulates the opportunities for work instead of, as custom dictates, waiting for them to come to him. Examples range from the employment of Jackie as a smasher of windows to stimulate the glazier's trade in *The Kid* to hastening his rich wives along

the road to our common lot in *Monsieur Verdoux*. Charlie's mind cannot accept that the benefits of work must necessarily be accompanied by its tedium or hazards. His view of our view of work is wittily caught in a moment in *Shanghai'd*, when, in automatic response to the mate's aggressive arrival, he busily trundles an empty trolley from one side of the hold to the other: the pure appearance of purposeful activity.

What I have dubbed rank, although intimately related to money, is in itself one of the most important of Charlie's repertoire of needs. The films exhibit a pervasive awareness of class distinctions, and everything that they imply in the way of acquired luxury and ease. The point of calling the quality rank is to stress that it is not just the luxury and ease that Charlie values but the sense of social superiority that goes with them. His original comic character, whose appearance and mannerisms are preserved in his very first film (*Making a Living*), was that of a drunken English aristocrat who parades a fastidious consciousness of his superiority to everyone around him. This theatrical type turns into the earliest form of Charlie's screen character, whose drunkenness and class-consciousness are partly designed to lend some dramatic plausibility to his remarkable callousness towards others. Fascination with rank issues in Charlie's favourite imposture, that of a rich and titled celebrity. The recurrence of this situation calls to mind the prince-and-pauper fantasies of popular literature that involve an unexpected inheritance, succession to a title or a sudden reversal of circumstances. Many of Chaplin's early stories operate at this fairy-tale level. The whole obsession indicates how English a figure Chaplin was, and remained: it took an Englishman to turn so frequently for comic inspiration to a consciousness of class distinctions that must have seemed outlandish to his original American audience.

The feelings associated with rank are ambiguous. They are partly feelings of ridicule. The pretentious denizens of rank are there to be mocked: to fall on their backsides, have ice-cream dropped down their necks or pies thrust in their faces. Chaplin has written of 'the pleasure taken by the public in seeing richness and luxury in distress'.⁷ Our happy task is watch with relish as the class-bound world of wealth and ease, with its stiff-backed formalities, is under-

7. Quoted in Louis Delluc, *Charlie Chaplin* (trans. Hamish Miles; London: Bodley Head, 1922).

mined and disrupted by Charlie the imposter. But another feeling is present too: a feeling of the actual pleasure of participating in the glamorous world from which we are normally excluded. Chaplin has also exclaimed, of a week spent in New York, 'How bountiful and reassuring is luxury!'.⁸ Like women and work, the possession and parading of rank minister both to Charlie's sense of security and to his love of display. He enjoys every minute of playing the lord, and we enjoy it with him.

It is hard not to see this complex response, whereby we relish and ridicule at the same time, as being at least partly derived from Chaplin's own experience of poverty and deprivation. There is evidence in what he has written of his own life that his attitude to the world of the rich and powerful was a mixture of envy and defensive hostility. (An interesting comparison with Dickens suggests itself here.) But the parallels with popular literary-dramatic fantasies mentioned above indicate that his fascination with rank is more than personal. In contriving his typical situations, he dramatizes what most of us feel. The deepest origin of class fascination comedy lies probably at the typological level, in the fool's ritual relation to the king, to whom he was a scape-goat or stand-in to ward off evil, or a sort of mock variation (being often historically awarded imaginary or borderland kingdoms).⁹ This relationship could be regarded as the first, archetypal imposture. In *The Great Dictator*, we recall, Charlie, by replacing Hynkel on the rostrum, becomes, in effect, the king—achieving his most dramatic impersonation of all.

What the above consideration of Charlie's appetites and purposes reveals is that they are all, in one way or another, infected by the feelings of duality and contradiction that have been described as endemic to his condition. In each case the activity in question becomes what might be called defunctionalized by getting translated into a form whose justification lies in the creative pleasure of performance: food and money-seeking into the skill of acquisition; woman-seeking into gallantry; work into dance; rank into display. The effect is drastically to qualify the view of Charlie we might otherwise have as a money-grubbing, gourmandizing, womanizing, work-shy counter-jumper. It also changes our image of

8. Chaplin, *My Autobiography*.

9. See Willeford, *The Fool and his Sceptre*, Chapter 9.

ourselves. His apparent indifference to the obvious benefits of these common and often-despised concerns of life has the result of making them seem less burdensome and more enjoyable. To watch function turned into display is to feel the endless pressure of our purposes relieved, if only momentarily. Each appetite or purpose also exhibits its own kind of contradictions. The brute appeasement of hunger issues not only in Charlie's varied dexterity of food acquisition, but also in his grandly delicate manner of consumption. His womanizing ranges from the cynically lustful to the theatrically romantic, and is likely without warning to veer between these extremes, or settle on any point between. Work can be both sought and shunned, transformed into dance, and its incentives unscrupulously manufactured. The total impression is of a kaleidoscopic complexity, whose effect upon the audience is both bewildering and exhilarating.

Charlie's appetites and purposes are designed both to bring him personal satisfaction and to establish a base of operations, as it were, in our unaccommodating social reality. We have seen that it is impossible to distinguish absolutely the personal and the social spheres, but in neither, it is pertinent to mention at this point, is Charlie guaranteed to get his own way. His forays into our world result in both victories and defeats, and watching the films with attention is to some degree a matter, at pivotal moments, of chalking up one or the other on his behalf. Our world displays a remarkable power of resistance to Charlie's intentions, whether benign or mischievous. He may find himself winning or losing money, food, woman, job, rank—sometimes winning and losing more than once in succession in the same film. These ups and downs, as well as providing surface drama and suspense, are clearly one of the conflicts that are dramatized in Charlie's numerous balancing acts. Indeed, they have a subcategory balancing act of their own, in the recurrent images of frustration and defeat, where the symbolized deadlock is signally to Charlie's disadvantage. An early example is his dough-kneading efforts in *Dough and Dynamite*, when the rubbery substance exhibits seemingly unlimited powers of elasticity; and, later, the labour exchange scene in *A Dog's Life*, when his frustrated attempts to gain the attention of one official or the other culminate in a display of useless and automatic slithering, which continues while they are packing up to go home; and even

later, hearkening back to the first, Hynkel's pathetically ineffectual offer to demonstrate what he'd like to do to Napaloni by tearing apart the spaghetti. Charlie's transformations are vulnerable to abrupt losses of potency: at these moments our world takes its revenge.

The whole question of Charlie's personal and social aspirations is shot through with extensive and crucial ambiguities. Put briefly, the conundrum is this: both what he demands from life, and the satisfaction of these demands, are characterized by contradictory elements that he both desires and fears. More specifically, he seeks from life both the satisfaction of appetite and the security of a sense of belonging. But to seek the satisfaction of appetite is to expose himself to the danger of uncontrollable forces, while the security of belonging can involve an intolerable sense of constraint. He cannot have the appetite without the danger, or the security without the constraint: yet the constraint is a threat to the appetite, and the danger a threat to the security. It seems like an irresolvable puzzle. No wonder that Charlie's balancing acts, as much as by skill and poise, are characterized by danger and deadlock!

The conundrum is probably best understood at the social level, where it highlights the problems of morality and of random hostility, which are recurrent preoccupations in Chaplin's films. What I shall for present purposes lump together as Charlie's appetite (the desire for money, food, women, work and rank), together with his need to establish a stable social identity (*security*), draw him for their satisfaction into our world. But his appetite is characterized by amorality, compulsive rule-flouting and a cheerful indifference to conventional sanctions and supports (all conditions, we remember, of his fundamental oddity). These factors make him vulnerable both to the official hostility of policemen, clergymen and other authority figures (the guardians of legality-morality) and to the random hostility of criminals or of natural calamities (both rule flouters by definition—the conjunction of the two will not seem outlandish if we remember how, in *The Gold Rush*, the malevolence of Black Larsen becomes associated with that of both the blizzard and the bear). Our world seems to Charlie irredeemably infested with threat and *danger*. There is no defence against natural calamity, but the answer to the other hazards is apparently to accept the *constraint* of conventional morality, and of 'normal'

habits of behaviour, a course against which Charlie's nature revolts. I have italicized the key terms in the above account to bring out the schematic nature of the conundrum (in a way that I hope is useful), but must emphasize that it does not remain at the level of schema, but is dramatized with witty particularity and with increasing degrees of subtlety, in Chaplin's mature films, where various ways out of the impasse are suggested. The natural calamity problem is treated in *Shoulder Arms* and *The Gold Rush*, and the morality problem in *Easy Street*, *The Pilgrim* and *Monsieur Verdoux*. (Which should not be taken to imply that these are the only matters with which these films are concerned.) At the personal level, exactly the same conundrum applies, though here the appetite in question is usually that for affectionate relationships, and the danger that of their rejection or loss: on this topic the key films are *The Vagabond*, *The Kid* and *City Lights* (where the whole problem described in this paragraph is dramatized, at the psychological level and in symbolic terms, with unrivalled delicacy and imaginative force).

Chaplin and the Three Charlies

There is Charlie, and there is Chaplin. In the last resort creature and creator cannot be firmly distinguished, but there comes a point when everyone who has written about Chaplin finds it necessary to try. So compelling, in its convincingness and power, is Charlie's personality, and so thoroughly does our sense of the life of the films depend upon *him*, that one tends to forget that there is a controlling intelligence behind him that with whatever degree of consciousness, is larger than he. The oblique stroke that divides his name in the chapter title is my attempt to register the ambiguity of the phenomenon, the problem of two-in-one with which the critic is obliged to deal. In the preceding sections of this chapter I have tried to show that what impresses us as Charlie's power derives primarily from his peculiarly intimate relationship with the traditional clown figures of the past, manifesting itself, as he moves from his chaotic boundary to our orderly centre, in a compulsive oddity, a talent for display, and a pervasive contradictoriness of character and behaviour that issues in repeated images of balance and deadlock; and have proceeded to demonstrate how these qual-

ities exhibit themselves in the practical concerns—Charlie's appetites and purposes, which compel him to action—of the films. In this section I wish to divert attention to Chaplin's contribution, defining that as everything that follows where the clown tradition leaves off. I am aware that this element is not everywhere easy to isolate, that it does not necessarily imply a conscious programme or prescription on Chaplin's part (I shall to a large extent argue the contrary), and that it is by no means all pure gain. But to describe and judge it is probably the critic's most necessary task, if any view of Chaplin as a great artist is to be sustained. In large part the describing and judging are attempted in the accounts of individual films that make up the bulk of this book, but a number of general observations are called for.

It is obvious that Charlie's art is not comprised in the assertion that he is a uniquely thorough modern embodiment of the traditional clown type, and in a description of what this type's qualities are as they show themselves in his films. Every modern comedian, in and out of films, exhibits some of these qualities, but not every comedian is a great poet of the cinema. The important point is that Charlie's unusually direct access to the sources of power of the traditional clown type gave him both a head start on his rivals and a rich accumulation of subject matter from which to fashion psychological and social themes. It enabled him to draw upon an ancient tradition in embodying an ambiguous attitude to good and bad, order and chaos, material and spiritual, life and artifice. His traditional stance on the border of our world obliged him to become both its victim and its master—both to suffer containment and degradation and to exhibit important possibilities of transcendence and release. But the translation of these potentialities into works of art needed the powers of contrivance, both intuitive and deliberate, of Chaplin the creator.

It must have been both intuitively and deliberately that Chaplin set about his first task of adapting his screen character. Had he remained for ever in his original incarnation he would have been an object of fascination but hardly one of sympathy. The arrogance, callousness and amorality of his earliest version, together with his powers of infiltration and transformation, would explain the attention he has received but not the affection in which he is held. It is obvious enough that in a short space of time, though

throughout a large number of films, Chaplin sophisticated and refined Charlie's character. In fact, there are at least three distinguishable Charlies (corresponding exactly to the three stages of Charlie's love life described above). Although they evolved at different times, and have recognizable identities, it is often hard to separate them with any accuracy. They do not always appear in an unadulterated form. Often, and invariably in his best films, they merge and mingle, offering themselves in a number of combinations. Charlie is capable of using his variety of selves to augment his powers of surprise by switching deftly from one to another. Much of the vivacity of the films derives from our uncertainty about which Charlie we are to see next.

The first Charlie, the prototype, is the insolent aristocrat, who contemplates his neighbours with lordly condescension. He is fastidious, irritable and vain. His dignity is constantly offended by the vulgarity of the world he is forced to inhabit, which persists in obstructing his demands for attention and service. He is not above a little vulgarity himself, especially when drunk, and will trade insults and indignities with the basest. This is the Charlie that Chaplin brought with him from his music hall repertoire. He has described him as being based on an observed social type. 'I thought of all those little Englishmen I had seen with their little black moustaches, their tight clothes and their bamboo canes, and I fixed on these as my model'.¹⁰ The comic potential of this character derives from the extremity of his insolence, and from the assaults to which his precarious dignity is subjected. This is the Charlie to whom other people are either convenient objects or tiresome obstacles.

The second Charlie is altogether more human and likeable. His invasion of our reality is benign rather than hostile. He is the light-hearted, high-spirited contriver of inventive comic business, whose power of transformation takes the forms of mockery, facetiousness and practical jokes. He emphasizes Charlie's display rather than his oddity (it is he who energetically sets about turning work into dance), though in his way he is no less odd than his fellows. With the women in his life, who are tolerant of his eccentricities, he is flirtatious rather than predatory. His relationships in

10. Quoted in Delluc, *Charlie Chaplin*.

general are casual, and he is not averse to a friendly punch-up, but he has no dignity to stand on, and at his most aggressive is able to convey that it is really all a game. He is for many moods the most attractive Charlie: our reaction to him is one of pleasure at his resourceful mastery of events. He is found in his purest form in a film like *The Pawnshop* (which is a kind of compendium of second-Charlie behaviour and gags—all inconsequent flummery and display).

The third Charlie marks a move towards a much greater realism of presentment. He is a fully and recognizably human figure, characterized by his openness to a greatly enlarged range of feelings—especially to the vulnerable feelings of love, kindness, embarrassment, grief and fear. In particular he is Charlie the romantic lover, whose girl, often placed beyond his reach by circumstances, is the object of sincere and disinterested affection. It is clear that this new development has dangers. To start with, there is the danger that, in so totally occupying the centre, he will lose touch with the boundary—that by merging himself with the human he will forfeit the transcendent benefits of the disorderly and chaotic non-human periphery. This danger is alleviated by the facts: first, that the third Charlie only occasionally appears in an unadulterated form, and is most likely to exhibit, simultaneously or in rapid sequence, elements of the other two; and, second that he makes positive use of the new feelings to which he has found access. The development of the third Charlie made possible Chaplin's creation of the comedy of feeling—comedy made out of serious feelings, which employs them for comic ends. To a large extent, of course, all comedy does this, but not often with the feelings that characterize the third Charlie, and hardly ever with feelings so unmistakably genuine. For example, the fear of imminent violence is employed to sustain suspense to breaking point in *Easy Street*; and, in *The Immigrant*, the same fear produces the same end, complicated in this case by the social embarrassment of Charlie's solecisms. Also in *The Immigrant* is a subtler instance, and more to the point by reason of its relation to the love theme: the amusing mixture of solicitude and prudence that makes Charlie hesitate over how much money to slip into Edna's pocket. The prudence is a constant Charlie quality, but the solicitude, real and touching, is only made possible by his third incarnation.

These suggested alleviations of the danger of the comedy of feeling also apply to the commoner charge laid against it: that it issues in passages of embarrassing self-pity and pathos. As I said above, this charge cannot be evaded by Chaplin's admirers, and must sometimes be conceded to be true. The third Charlie is potentially—and on several occasions an actually—sentimental figure. There are moments when, by engineering the drama, he appears to be setting himself up for our pitying attention. But 'pathos' is too often used as a blanket term to cover both the moments of self-indulgence and those much more frequent moments when serious (and often admirable) feelings are employed to produce a complex comic effect. The pathos to which many indiscriminately object is the unfortunate residue of a humanizing intention that at its purest gives rise to the profoundest kind of comedy. It has in any case been exaggerated. The sentimental side of Charlie's nature has been coarsened by his commentators (not least, alas, by Chaplin himself on the soundtrack of the reissued *The Gold Rush*) to the exclusion of other qualities. 'The little fellow', 'the little tramp'—these patronizing sobriquets have tended to obscure the quite unsentimental feelings from which much of his comedy arises. (In fact, the evidence for Charlie's being a tramp at all is largely inferential. He spends more time actually working than any real tramp can ever have done. His permanent state of vagabondage is not the result of pity-inducing social conditions so much as of his traditional role of alien intruder in our familiar world.)

Chaplin's first large-scale assault upon the comedy of feeling was *The Kid*. This is often thought of as a sentimental film, but it is a good example of how unjust the charge of self-indulgence can be. There *is* sentimentality in *The Kid*, but it is confined to the novelettish unreality of the framing subplot or 'overplot'—Edna's seduction and desertion, her change in fortunes, the loss and recovery of her child. This is the part at which we wince. The main body of the film is devoted to something that is entirely different, and that is an excellent example of the benefits derived by Chaplin's developing art from the comedy of feeling: the establishment, in comic and realistic terms, of the affectionate relationship between Charlie and Jackie. Their growing sense of mutual need, the odd feeling of identity that is established between them, and the pride

and responsibility that Charlie's role of surrogate father gives him (as well as his comically idiosyncratic notion of the nature of a father's duties) are all excellently done, and in a manner whose emphasis is humorous and affectionate rather than sentimental. So sure is our sense of the fineness of those passages that when the time comes for an unabashed exhibition of feeling—Charlie's ardent reunion with the tearful Jackie—we judge that he has earned it. *The Kid* is also important in the development of Chaplin's dramaturgy. It shows that the need he felt to introduce a new seriousness into his work was not confined to the realm of Charlie's character, but extended to the whole dramatic construction of the film. It demonstrates a transitional stage in which the comic bits and the serious bits are kept separate, in terms both of plot and, to some extent, of feeling (for, as we have seen, serious feeling inspire the comedy), with unfortunate consequences when eventually they have to come together. In later films Chaplin shows a much greater adroitness in reconciling comedy and realism, managing to weld disparate elements into a complex, seriocomic unity. (In *The Gold Rush*, for instance, the inhabitants of the cabin embody a spectrum of human types from seriousness to folly—Larsen the serious villain, Jim half hero half fool, and Charlie the fool—and so are able to coexist without incongruity).

So, as well as dangers, the new enlargement of scope brought about by the creation of the third Charlie and of a dramatic framework suitable to contain him led to new possibilities: a larger range of subjects for Chaplin to treat, a greater depth with which to treat them. One important area that this greater realism affected profoundly was that of Charlie's relationship with his audience. The development of the third Charlie gave the audience a vastly increased scope for sympathetic identification. The typical situation of the third Charlie is a sort of mirror image of his appetites and purposes: he is without all the things he wants. At his lowest ebb he is impoverished, hungry, lonely, jobless and despised. He is adrift in a threatening world to which he only half belongs, a prey to the institutionalized hostility of authority figures and the random hostility of criminals and catastrophes. So his struggles to achieve his ends and to overcome threats, which form the action of his typical plots, contrive to dramatize widespread common fears about the vulnerability of the individual life, its identity, and its

relations to society and to nature. Chaplin's cultivation of realism reinforced the bond with his audience that his original artistry had forged: by basing his comedy upon observed life, and the impulsion of common hopes and fears, he ensured the utmost of sympathetic audience involvement, and it is to these qualities that he owes his unprecedented popularity. Of course this is not the whole story. The sympathy-inducing realism is qualified, ranging in degrees from the minimal to the drastic, by those qualities that Charlie inherits from the fool tradition: his incorrigible oddity and his passion for display. At the same time as we register sympathy and resemblance, we recognize that we are watching something alien and that it is being deliberately paraded before us. It is the conflict between these feelings that gives the films, and our experience of watching them, so much of its tension, as our awareness of the action fluctuates and recoils. It is also one of the elements that lend their bafflement to Charlie's numerous balancing acts. William Willeford expresses the paradox of this conflict between identification and alienation by juxtaposing two ancient opinions about folly: that we are all fools, yet a fool is instantly recognizable. It could be said that Charlie's service to his audience is the traditional clown's function of mediating between their recognition of folly in others and their awareness of it in themselves. But to a much greater extent than any predecessors, Charlie makes us realize that not everything that is foolish is necessarily alien, nor everything alien necessarily foolish. His move towards full humanness complicates an already complex pattern of challenge and response.

This book is not a study in sources, but it would be misleading not to acknowledge that the new seriousness with which I have been crediting Chaplin did not come to him unbidden, but must have been suggested in part by elements in the various dramatic traditions to which his experience gave him access. It was not only ideas for plots and routine comic business, for instance, that he inherited from English music hall and pantomime: a large part of the repertoire of music hall songs was devoted to realistic incidents of domestic and social life, with emphasis on the poverty, deprivations and enjoyments of working people, and often registering niceties of class distinction and social pretension. His intimate acquaintance with this material has clearly left its mark. (He

has often testified to his devotion to the sentimental songs current in his childhood, whose nostalgic cadences reappear, in his own music for his films.) It is important to remember, too, that part of his early professional experience was on the legitimate stage, where he acquired both skill in serious acting and a discriminating judgment of style and technique. It is to this experience that he probably owed his interest in dramatic construction, as well as the life-long fascination with theatricality and the creative life of the actor that finds its final expression in *Limelight*.

Chaplin's ambition to graft straight dramatic elements on to his comic plots would seem to derive from his experience of other people's films. His arrival in Hollywood coincided with the emergence of the film from its fair booth stage into a recognized vehicle for the expression of realistic life and serious themes. The art film did not spring spontaneously into life but itself derived from the conventions of the nineteenth-century theatre, in which Chaplin had received his earliest training. So it was not unknown territory into which he was venturing. The earliest story films reflected the nineteenth-century stage's fondness for combinations of romantic plot, realistic settings and spectacular action. But the form was gradually being refined, and made capable of subtler expressions of feeling, by the innovative efforts of D.W. Griffith, soon to be Chaplin's friend.¹¹ It was this kind of serious film art to which Chaplin aspired. His earlier efforts (*The Vagabond* and *The Kid*) owe more to other films than to life, and are unsatisfactory partly on that account. But very shortly, in *A Woman of Paris*, he produced his own wholly serious and original achievement in the sensitive and realistic mode. The point to emphasize for present purposes is that his efforts to render his comedy more subtle and responsive have their place in the larger history of the film as an art.

When we speak of the clown as a type, as, following Willeford, I have repeatedly done, it is as well to remember that the type has historically assumed a great variety of forms. It follows that when we examine influences some particular forms will seem to tell strongly and others not at all. One aspect of the fool tradition that

11. The historical process is convincingly described in A. Nicholas Varda, *Stage to Screen: Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949).

so far as I can recall never manifests itself in Charlie is the long association of folly with learning and other expressions of mental ability. (I am thinking of the fool type who assumes the authority of a knowledge or capability he does not possess: a type whose modern English incarnations are Will Hay, Tony Hancock and the Arthur Lowe of *Dad's Army*). Charlie's impostures are professional and social, never intellectual, and in any case he never allows incapacity to embarrass him. But another historical development of the type did, it has been suggested, have a real influence. This was the transformation wrought upon the *commedia* character of Pedrolino by Jean Gaspard Debureau in his Théâtre Funambles performances in early nineteenth-century Paris. The change was so drastic as to leave little in common with the original. Pedrolino was an early servant type, apparently more personable than his fellows, though his character exhibits over the years the same bewildering variety as the other *commedia* types. Debureau's Pierrot retained the character's traditional ruffed and trousered costume but introduced into his behaviour a new element of the pathetic and romantic, emphasizing his deprived and victimized condition. This Pierrot's direct descendant is Marcel Marceau's Bip, but he is also revived in the English pantomime and circus, and in this form would seem to have made a decisive contribution to the third Charlie. (It cannot be a coincidence that it was as a version of this type that Chaplin chose to appear in the harlequinade ballet in *Limelight*). If this is true it could be seen as lending a dramatic licence to Charlie's much-maligned pathos by investing it with at least some of the authority of a venerable theatrical tradition, and so making it seem more a matter of stylization than of self-indulgence.

An influence that seems to me to have told decisively is that of Dickens. I do not know what direct evidence there is for Chaplin's having read Dickens, but it is a fact that Dickens's influence upon English popular culture of all kinds was enormous and diverse. His novels provided a significant element of the popular theatrical fare of the late nineteenth century, in the form of both direct dramatizations and character monologues. It is impossible that Chaplin should not have encountered him, perhaps frequently, in one or other of these forms. Whatever the precise facts, it seems to me that *The Kid* could not have been conceived, or taken the shape that it did, without the presence in the background of *Oliver Twist*.

There are important differences, of course. The film could in one sense be described as the novel in reverse, for in the film the sense of insecurity that is common to both works centres upon the threat of Jackie's abduction by the forces of paternalistic authority rather than, as in the book, Oliver's abduction by those of a darkly criminal underworld. Chaplin does not, in this instance, represent safety as residing in middle-class social norms (or rather, he does at the end, but it is an ending unusually hard to believe). The main point is that both dramas derive their feeling from poignant stories of recovery and loss, and from the events we witness being derived obscurely from other events in the past (enacted at a different social level), with which they are finally reconciled. Quite apart from the question of direct influence, Chaplin has often been called the Dickens of the cinema, and the resemblances between the early experience of each, and the way it emerged in their work, are sufficiently striking. Both knew poverty and deprivation in childhood, and the unsettling effects of fluctuations in fortune (though in the popular accounts of the life of each this element is exaggerated, and it is overlooked that the normal character of each home was securely lower middle-class). Both were driven by unusual ambition, capable of exceptional energy, and earned rapid fame and success. Both were liable to visitations of misery and self-doubt. Both were raised in London, a city of abundant life and violent contrasts (and the London of Chaplin's youth was still that of Dickens in most respects). These experiences issued in the work of each in a preoccupation with feelings of vulnerability, with poverty, wealth and class, and with sudden changes in fortune; in evocations of the problems of living in modern industrial cities (it has often been remarked that the streets of *Easy Street* and *The Kid* resemble those of London rather than any American city); and in an occasional proneness to sentimental self-indulgence. I have already noted how Chaplin's metaphorical audacities are a sort of visual equivalent of Dickens's verbal ones, and are the product of similar habits of thought. But the most important resemblance for this stage in my argument is the way in which the art of each developed. Dickens's later novels are conscious and responsible works of art, in which the unassimilated feelings and fantasies that pervade the early work are employed, in a drastically modified form, on behalf of a serious critique of social life. My contention is

that what happens in Chaplin, while by no means identical either in achievement or character (I deal with the question of the degree of consciousness below), is remarkably similar. If *The Kid* is his *Oliver Twist*, then *Monsieur Verdoux* could be called his *Great Expectations*.

I have been speaking of elements of his art that Chaplin may be deduced to have borrowed from theatrical and literary traditions. I think it is not an exaggeration to say that what he *invented* is the film as a form of comic-poetic drama. I said at the very beginning that I based my interpretations of the films upon the premises that they had serious meanings and that these meanings are to be found in the comedy. We have seen that early on he set about sophisticating and refining the character of Charlie by giving him access to a greater range of experience than was available to the basic comic type he inherited from the clown tradition. (The form this process took is traced in greater detail in the next chapter.) One result of this was that the comedy began to owe a great deal more to the clown's inner life—his attitudes and responses—than to the conventional knockabout of external action. Further, by basing the action of his films upon widely held hopes and fears about both our individual selves and our social relationships, Chaplin ensured both an inexhaustible supply of material and the fullest sense of sympathetic identification on the part of the audience. But this is not the only kind of seriousness I mean. I am thinking of the sort of serious meanings that make a work of art seem alive and significant rather than inert and conventional—the unmistakable sense of a vital aspect of experience captured and conveyed. I am assuming a general agreement that Chaplin's finest films do give us this sense. If they were not serious in this way we would not find them so important, or, in however obscure a way, so relevant to our own lives. The admitted fact that the 'meanings' of comedy are not usually so obvious or readily formulated as those of non-comic art does not mean that they are not there. They await discovery by patience, directed attention and a cultivated receptiveness.

Chaplin's themes derive from, but are not identical to, what I have called his appetites and purposes. They can be seen as the translation of appetite and purpose into need by the generalizing process that symbolism entails, and take the form of an enquiry, in dramatic terms, into the psychological and social needs of human

nature. If this sounds arid, it is hard to find a form of words that does not: the living process is enacted, in its fullness, in the works of art themselves. At least the words may suggest both the urgency and the seriousness of the enacting. I have attempted to suggest something of the complexity of the result in describing above the 'conundrum' of Charlie's deeply ambiguous attitude to the demands and promptings of his private and social selves. The films are attempts to express and resolve the contradictions that attend virtually every aspect of Charlie's experience. The basic conflict is the pitting of need against fear. For example, there is the need and fear of moral constraints (*Easy Street*, *The Pilgrim*), heroic endeavour (*Shoulder Arms*, *The Gold Rush*), affectionate relationships (*The Vagabond*, *The Kid*, *City Lights*), material satisfactions (*A Dog's Life*, *The Gold Rush*) and professional activity (*Modern Times* and just about every other film). In addition, a significant number of films dramatize Chaplin's ambiguous feelings about his own role of performer (*The Circus*, *Limelight*). It is immediately apparent that each film is not limited to a single theme (though one invariably predominates): *The Gold Rush*, for instance, combines, cleverly but easily, the themes of predatory nature and of the tyranny of material satisfactions. And every film is concerned in some measure with the work theme and the love theme. In the culminating achievement of Chaplin's career, *Monsieur Verdoux*, all his themes converge in a single drama to whose impressive complexity it is difficult to do justice.

The method of the films is that of poetic significance. And the significance resides in the passages of comedy and not in anything that is tacked on them or sandwiched between them. This is even, indeed especially, true of the sound films, where part of the burden of expressing the theme is given to speech. In *The Great Dictator*, it is not to the barber's rhetorical trade that we go for the meaning of the film, but to the images of Hynkel dancing with the globe, and of the barber shaving his customer to the music of Brahms, for these express the conflict between active creativity and barren megalomania that is at the heart of the film. A sign of the poetic method is its generated sense of pressure of purpose. The significance bears upon all parts of the action: nearly everything contributes, very little is redundant. It follows that the meaning of the film may be contained in, or partly sustained by, passages of

business that appear to have little to do with what one thinks of as the main theme: of no film is this truer than of *City Lights*, the pervasive (and relevant) suggestiveness of whose comedy has never been properly recognized. But in most of the films it does not take unusual powers to understand the significance of what is being offered: it is easy enough to see that the boiling and eating of the boot in *The Gold Rush*, to take the most famous example, expresses Charlie's ambiguous attitude to food consumption, and so relates naturally to the overall theme of physical survival (though the dance of the rolls in the same film presents the expositor with a more delicate problem). For detailed accounts both of the themes of the films and of their manner of presentation, the reader must turn to the chapters that follow. My purpose here is to contend that together they constitute a form of major art for which the credit is wholly Chaplin's.

Imputing to Chaplin artistry of this quality is to raise the question of how conscious the artistry is. It is not a simple question to answer. The degree of consciousness varies from film to film, and between one kind of creative activity and another. I take it as agreed that an artist can produce all manner of successful effects, and create significant patterns, of which he is not completely aware. There is one level of activity at which Chaplin's artistry is wholly conscious. This is the level of creation of specific comic business, the mechanics of film-making and manipulation of audience response. There is plenty of evidence in Chaplin's published writings that he had thought hard about the mechanics of his trade, and brought to bear upon his day-to-day work the fruits of past experience. Individual bits of comic business were meticulously rehearsed and carefully calculated in terms of camera position, succession of shots and effect upon the audience by way of such dramatic qualities as surprise, suspense and advancement of the story. There is no visible evidence, at least after the earliest crudest efforts, of Chaplin's much-impugned indifference to the mechanics of film-making. The evident skill and deliberation, at the purely cinematic level, of *A Woman of Paris*, give the lie to this charge. Similarly with Chaplin's powers of dramatic construction. I do not think he has ever been given sufficient credit for the skill with which his films are assembled, in terms of relation of episodes, distribution of effects, pace of action, parallelism and con-

trast, catastrophe and climax. His dramaturgy is very efficient, the only major criticism seeming to me to be that the pace of the later films is too slow, and some of their material repetitive or redundant. I hope to justify this claim in the analyses that follow.

It is at the level of theme and poetic method that it becomes hardest to say how conscious Chaplin was of what he was doing. His own writings are not very forthcoming on this point. The only evidence is provided by one's subjective judgment and general sense of likelihood. It seems to me clear that at this level the organizing was instinctive and unbidden rather than deliberate. I do not think that, in the line of mature films from *A Dog's Life* to *City Lights*, Chaplin was ever fully aware of the subtlety of what he achieved; nor, if he had been, that the films would have been any the better—rather the reverse, I shall argue shortly. In general, it seems to have been the immediate dramatic qualities and effects of the story that he consciously attended to—the establishment of relationships, the creation of appropriate feelings. The poetic suggestiveness was left, so to speak, to take care of itself, which it did with great efficiency. And this is all you *can* do with it, however finely tuned your consciousness: it either arises unbidden from the depths or it doesn't, except as lifeless contrivance, exist at all. The 'poetry' is testimony to the existence of depths, to the seriousness of the theme, and to the urgency with which the theme is forced into expression. As I have said, the degree of consciousness must differ from film to film. It is impossible to believe that, in making *The Gold Rush*, Chaplin did not realize that, in addition to telling an exciting story, he was dramatizing an important dilemma about the purposes of life. But I find it equally hard to credit that he *was* aware of the subtlety of effect and organization that he produced in *City Lights*, a film that is *about* the unacknowledged depths of feeling.

In the films from *Modern Times* onwards, the question takes a different form. For these films are the result of a clear and deliberate intention. They issue unmistakably from Chaplin's conscious desire to address himself to the modern world, to adapt his traditional character and methods to the expression of certain themes felt to be momentous and unavoidable. Here, in judging the results, one finds oneself totting up an account of profit and loss. On the profit side, one cannot but applaud the enterprise and the

energetic courage with which it was tackled. Charlie's increasing irrelevance to a fast-changing world worried Chaplin, and, for all one's affection for Charlie, it is impossible to feel that he was wrong in being worried: and the themes that thrust themselves forward as demanding attention—the dehumanizing of work, the perversion of political power and the moral sickness of modern civilization—were such as should rightly have engrossed the creative instinct of a major artist, as they did the thoughts of intelligent ordinary people. And the burden of the themes is, as before, borne by comic passages of poetic suggestiveness and power. Altogether I judge these later films to be successful major works of art, an accolade not always afforded them at the time or since. But there *is* a loss account, and in it one must record that consciousness was not to Chaplin an unmixed blessing. His conscious grasp of his themes was weak and superficial, and resulted in comic business that is banal or facetious, in miscalculations of tone, and in an urge towards embarrassing and redundant explicitness. The worst sufferer from these vices is *The Great Dictator*, with its facetious names, clownish storm troopers and platitudinous peroration, but none of the later films is entirely free of them. So one finds oneself postulating two Chaplins—one who trusts his instincts and allows his themes to clothe themselves, and one who thrusts them into ill-fitting garments of his own making—and imputing the virtues to the one and the vices to the other. It is an unavoidable conclusion, and one to which I shall be forced to have recourse in discussing the films in question.

The issue of Chaplin's self-consciousness relates interestingly to that of his relation to his contemporaries, and to later representatives of their common tradition. I have neither the space nor the stomach for an extended comparison, but the subject cannot be avoided altogether, and moreover it seems to me to provide an opportunity for leaving the emphasis on the right place. I am thinking in particular of Buster Keaton, whose critical fortunes have risen astronomically in recent years as those of Chaplin have declined. In part this has been a salutary redressing of balance. Keaton is most certainly a great genius, and his long spell of neglect was a misfortune. There is no doubt that for decades Chaplin did hog the limelight. Keaton's films are characterized by resourceful invention, wit, excitement and visual beauty. The best of

them are better constructed than even the best of Chaplin's, and purged of all impurities: Chaplin perhaps never made a *perfect* film, as Keaton can be said to have done. However compared with Chaplin's, Keaton's films strike me as being characterized by a certain impoverishment of inner life. Their perfection is surface polish and dazzle, their excitement a matter of adroit acrobatics and physical action that assault the senses and leave the feelings unmoved. The difference is chiefly one of character: Buster's has none of Charlie's depth or complexity and hence none of his endless capacity for surprise. One could not find oneself describing Buster or his world in anything like, or equivalent to, the terms I have been using in this chapter. So to call him greater than Charlie, as has been done, strikes me as a serious misjudgment.

What goes for Keaton goes for the tradition he can be said to have inaugurated. (This is to leave out of account Harold Lloyd, another neglected genius ripe for wholesale rediscovery: but Lloyd, who remains always anchored firmly to the circumstances and habits of a specific time and place, is as much a comic actor as a clown, and so does not invite comparison here.) Jacques Tati, for instance, is very much a Keaton type of clown, and his character is even simpler and sparer: in his later films, indeed, he tends for long periods to vanish from view. (It is only fair to add that Tati's late films are highly original works of art that involve a radical revision—perhaps even a dissolution—of the tradition of clown comedy, and about the success of which, in common with many others, I find it onerously difficult to make up my mind.) Another modern artist, who seems to me to owe as much to Keaton as to the Stan Laurel he frequently cites, is Marcel Marceau, who has single-handedly revived the art of theatrical mime. There is a considerable Chaplin element in Marceau too, but the resemblance only serves to underline the contrast. Marceau is always a joy to watch, and is gifted with a wonderfully supple and athletic body: in the miming of physical action he has no equal. But it is when he needs most to be like Chaplin that he most falls short: in registering sudden changes of feeling, for instance, or any feeling at all—at these moments one is so often forced to judge him crude. And his repeated tendency towards stylization, rather than realism, of gesture makes part of his performance unnecessarily hard to understand.

I do not claim to have done more than rough justice to Chaplin's rivals and successors in this summary account, or to suggest that it comprises all that can be said about them: my aim is unashamedly to use them as a foil to his distinctiveness. Where he scores so decisively over them is in his comedy's unprecedented naturalness and closeness to life. It does not just issue from the common life we share and recognise, it seems itself to *be* life: to offer itself, even at its most bizarre, with all the ease, directness and vividness of an event actually witnessed, or an experience actually felt. It follows that it is in terms of our own experience that we ultimately justify our estimate of his art. And this is a truth about art in general, not Chaplin's alone. The point of dwelling upon such an emphasis in this context and at this time resides in the current state of film criticism as well as a desire to do justice to Chaplin. I began this chapter with a complaint about contemporary film criticism and will end it with another. For some time, its main characteristic has been a habit of submission to the glamour of a variety of dubiously authoritative intellectual systems, whose chief effect has been to isolate art from life and to treat it as a self-sufficient activity needing a species of wizardry to elucidate it. To those of us who looked forward to the creation of a responsible film criticism when there was none, such a development could hardly be more dismaying. My two complaints are related, of course: since you cannot justify taking seriously a mediocre product of the commercial cinema in terms of its human interest, you are forced to do so in terms of its significance as a system of signs, or as an illustration of some other arcane sophistry. To such fallacious 'approaches' Chaplin gives the lie. It is perhaps little wonder that for a time his reputation declined, to the advantage of figures more amenable to fashion, because less given to the embarrassment of appeals to actual experience. The approach to Chaplin can only be through life: Charlie's art is an art of life, and it is in our lives that we register his importance.