

**Walt Kelly's *Pogo* : The Eye of the Whole Man**  
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*By Carl Brucker*

The comic strip has been called the “folk play of the American masses,” a popular art form that “instead of a message . . . contains the mirrored image of its readers.”<sup>1</sup> And as the subtitle of a recent book reminds us, we usually study the comics to find out “What Dick Tracy, Blondie, Daddy Warbucks, and Charlie Brown Tell Us About Ourselves.”<sup>2</sup> Walt Kelly's *Pogo*, however, is more than a reflection of the America of the Fifties and Sixties. It is an innovative strip that carries a variety of social and personal messages to its readers, a strip-conscious artist, who rejects the “widely held and fallacious bit of folk belief . . . that the . . . readership level of the country hovers somewhere in the vicinity of a thirteen-year-old idiot who creeps wetly around on all fours.”<sup>3</sup> Kelly's humor challenges readers to become socially aware citizens, but, more importantly, *Pogo* encourages people to become self aware, to learn about :the stranger who is in our skin.”<sup>4</sup>

From his 1948 portrayal of candidate Thomas Dewey as a mechanical doll, through his courageous satire of Senator Joseph McCarthy as Simple J. Malarkey, a lynx who tried to tyrannize the swamp, to his caricature of Spiro Agnew as a hyena who spouted alliterative gobbledegook and wore out one of the ill-advised “imperial guard” uniforms briefly introduced during the Nixon administration, Kelly wrote a timely strip that was sometimes moved to the editorial page by nervous editors. This timeliness and the high visibility of the persons Kelly satirized have caused some critics to misinterpret the intent of Kelly's humor. Arthur Berger, for example, has called Kelly “one of the most savage satirists in America” and has written that *Pogo* “is permeated by a deep-seated and all-pervasive sense of hostility,”<sup>5</sup> but Berger's description is contradicted by the underlying tolerance of the strip and Kelly's persistent adherence to ideals that many would call naive. Kelly himself argues that above all a cartoonist must be a modest and courageously gentle man. In fact, a sustained reading of *Pogo* leads one to see persistent persuasion rather than savage attack. The sharpness of Kelly's satire is a reflection of the ignorance and destructiveness Kelly sees in his fellow human beings, but its effect is muted by Kelly's compassionate understanding of the universality of human error.

Just as the humor of *Pogo* is not driven by hostility, it is not confined to the arena of political and social commentary. *Pogo* often speaks of the hypocrisy and avarice of our leaders, but it always speaks to the individual reader's heart. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Kelly does not lull his public into complacency by supplying them with scapegoats; instead, his satiric intent is to force his readers to recognize their own part in human comedy:

There is no need to sally forth, for it remains true that those things which make us human are, curiously enough, always close at hand. Resolve then, that on this very ground, with small flags waving and tinny blasts on tiny trumpets, we shall meet the enemy, and not only may be ours, he may be us.<sup>6</sup>

For Kelly, the real fight to preserve American democracy takes place on the microcosmic battleground of the individual psyche, and the real enemy is not a venal politician but the human susceptibility to fear, ignorance, and the conformity: “*Pogo* is

Kelly's great satire on the unnatural behavior of human beings who live like marionettes--slaves to the repression of their society."<sup>7</sup> Porky Pine, the resident philosopher of Kelly's Okefenokee Swamp, summarizes the problem in a 1952 panel: "Eventually ever' man gotta face the problem of tryin'to figger if it's worthwhile to prove that he is himself."<sup>8</sup> *Pogo* encourages its readers to answer in the affirmative.

Kelly's humor is based on imbalance, the comically distorted temperaments of his humor characters and the comic disintegration meaningful order, but its purpose is to encourage wholeness. Kelly agrees with Al Capp that "All comedy is based on man's delight in man's inhumanity to man."<sup>9</sup> The human comedy surrounds us daily: "I finally came to understand that if I were looking for comic material I would not have to look long. We people manufacture it every day in a hundred ways."<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Kelly recognizes the serious implications of man's foolishness, but implies that we cannot stop laughing: "When people are fools, they are funny . . . . That disaster can result when too many of us are fools . . . does not change the basic mechanical formula for the joke."<sup>11</sup>

Kelly knows that humor is not merely a means for correcting error; it is an inextricable thread in the fabric of life, a common mark of humanity. He does not believe that we can eliminate error, but he hopes that we can become more aware of it and perhaps learn to live with it more happily. In fact, when Porky Pine elevates man's foolishness by maintaining in a 1953 strip that "it's the inherent right of all to make dern fools of theirselves" (see figure 1), Kelly is insisting that we accept error as part of our natures. Perhaps Kelly is not embittered by the pervasiveness of human error because he is "aware that humor is the enemy of regimentation; that fantasy is the enemy of tyranny."<sup>12</sup> Humor may underscore man's distance from perfection, but it also helps to keep him free.



Kelly has been called "the most engagé voice for basic human dignity in the entire industry,"<sup>13</sup> and, at its heart, his humor never relies on providing the reader with a reassuring sense of superiority. Without minimizing the destructive potential of man's imbalance, Kelly demonstrates an empathetic egalitarianism, feeling "with a sad and wonderful joy that we are all in it together [and] . . . the ride together is good for a moment or two of beauty and a number of laughs." He views with disgust the slackness of American culture and thought--"We worship the word 'genius' without ever cracking a dictionary to find out why we are on our knees"<sup>14</sup>--but he refuses to let such knowledge sour him. When he writes "[I] will go to my death avowing that some of my best friends are human beings,"<sup>15</sup> he is expressing his paradoxical mixture of clear-eyed awareness of man's inhumanity and unshakeable faith in the essential decency of man. Thus, he manages to preserve an innocent faith in human nature and combine it with knowledge.

In short, Kelly's humor is not simply a cynical blast at the imbalance of individuals, but serious art that points out, with sadness and wonder, the complexity of the human experience:

There is only one face to the whole picture of life. It is neither comic nor tragic, but both: and the observer can be said to be a whole man by how much of each he allows into his eye. The wry humor of tragedy can make a cynic of man or the inability to see the comic can make him stoic.<sup>16</sup>

Kelly's purpose is not to instruct behavior but to improve sight. Kelly's whole man is identified less by his actions than by his pluralistic powers of observation, and the goal of Kelly's art is to enlarge his readers' philosophical field of vision.

In this sense, *Pogo* is transcendental, based on a style that is not merely a medium through which messages pass but a microcosm grown from the personal vision of the artist. It is founded on the proposition that the reader can, in some manner, share this transcendent experience. Style is an integral part of Kelly's message, and pictures and words are the tools with which he struggles to create a liberated environment and voice, an imagined place that can carry his audience beyond the carceral limitations of American society. Like the "classic American writers" described by Richard Poirier, Kelly elevated the importance of language and style because he believed in the efficacy of art:

American books are often written as if historical forces cannot possibly provide such an environment, as if history can give no life to "freedom," and as if only language can create the liberated place.<sup>17</sup>

*Pogo* strains at the boundaries of comic strip tradition in an effort to liberate the reader and lead him toward greater wholeness. Of course, Kelly realizes that such a liberation is at best ephemeral, but he diligently pursues the ideal of wholeness with a joy that disguises the depth of his outrage: "the Now is alive with a curious life which defies the descriptive powers of such divers as swim ahead of the swine in search of pearls."<sup>18</sup> Kelly's comically twisted version of this proverbial saying, which uses the Melvillean image of the diver to portray the thoughtful seeker of beauty, avoids the cynicism of the original by implying that, no matter how absurd the situation or difficult the task, there is value in artistic endeavor.

*Pogo* illuminates the flawed brotherhood of man, and its central paradox is Kelly's attempt to use humor based on fragmented state of man and language to lessen that fragmentation. Yet, as a rebel who clings to traditional values, a satirist who often employs sentimentality, and a commercially successful artist who uses sophisticated linguistic and artistic techniques, Kelly is an artist whose work exhibits many paradoxes. The pursuit of wholeness means simultaneously grasping the slippery contrarities of innocence and experience, comedy and tragedy, idealism and common sense.

*Pogo* was an immensely popular strip, building from three or four papers in 1949 to appear in over 500 with 50 million readers by 1958, but it was also the favorite of the self-styled intelligentsia. Indeed, some analysts have criticized its "egghead self-consciousness."<sup>19</sup> Most studies, however, have praised Kelly lavishly. Unsurprisingly, Kelly fended off the "grinning gargoyle of a dedicated liberal searching for meaning," insisting that his whole purpose was "to have fun and make money at the same time."<sup>20</sup> Instead of scholarly analysis, he encouraged individual experience and imagination:

Knowledge and meaning can be too earnestly sought after. I'm for the boy who, blind or helpless, can lie around and find moonlight and dancing girls going about their business in the secrecy of his mind alone.<sup>21</sup>

Kelly's protest against interpretation is not completely ingenuous. His method is never over didacticism; he expects his readers to assimilate the human comedy of *Pogo* in small daily doses just as he and his schoolmates in Bridgeport had learned compassion from Miss Florence Blackburn, principal of the grammar school: "Miss Blackburn never tried to harness compassion. . . . She just used it, constantly, casually, and some of it rubbed off."<sup>22</sup> Kelly distrusts the rigidity imposed by analysts' attempts to define messages, for in *Pogo* he creates a fluid world that he invites readers to explore. *Pogo* is a private vision, a fantasy that discourages suspension of disbelief. Kelly's purpose is not to manipulate his audience's emotions or thoughts but to enlarge their independent powers of perception.

Kelly was a self-conscious artist deeply committed to developing the artistic possibilities of his medium. He frequently spoke and wrote about his work and as president of the National Cartoonists Society vigorously defended comics against the threat of censorship, but he also employed critical parody to highlight his rivals' failures to use the full possibilities of the medium. His favorite target was Harold Gray's *Little Orphan Annie*, a strip that presented a simple world view" in which the hardworking captains of industry struggle against a vicious and uncompromising underground."<sup>23</sup> Kelly demonstrated his belief that the artistic conventions adhered to by rivals such as Gray were inadequate with direct parodies such as the "Li'l Arf An' Nonny" sequence of 1952 (see figure 2). When sightless Pogo (his eyes blanked in imitation of Gray's heroine) eventually falls into a shallow creek, Beauregard's verbose and inflated speech communicating his intention to save Pogo, which is finally interrupted by heckling frog who pushes Beauregard in, mocks the melodramatic heroism of *Little Orphan Annie* and other popular adventure strips. For Kelly sight, or rather insight, is all important, and he feels that comics that depend on easy answers and artistic formulas reflect a dangerously myopic tendency in society as a whole.



Direct parody is only one way in which Kelly calls attention to his medium. In an effort to increase his readers' awareness, Kelly sometimes employs Brechtian alienation effects. For example, his characters' favorite reading is the funny papers, and in the midst of the "Li'l Arf An' Nonny" parody, Kelly directs some of the attention back to himself, by having Albert complain in an aside: "I don't understand' this comic 'about a alligator an' a possum."<sup>24</sup> In an earlier strip (February 28, 1950) Howland Owl instructs Porky Pine in the fine art of comic-strip writing by pointing out the mechanics of date,

copyright notice, and signature (see figure 3). Howland's pragmatic attention to mechanical details ironically alerts Kelly's audience to their participation in the artistic experience.



*Pogo* is set in the Okefenokee Swamp, and this gives Kelly both freedom and insulation. Although Kelly borrows a real geographical name, it is clear that his swamp is purely imaginative: “The Okefenokee swamp in which those animals live is not an odd corner of the state of Georgia . . . but on the outskirts of Arcadia.”<sup>25</sup> It is a timeless, primeval realm of fantasy, and its primitivism and seclusion make it an ideal locale for investigating the essential nature of man. The natural surroundings parallel the natural disorder of the strip, provide a suitably pastoral setting for contemplation, and focus the reader’s attention on Kelly’s anthropomorphic animals.

Against this stylized background, Kelly’s menagerie of characters display a baffling variety of comically limited viewpoints. In the original strip Kelly used a small, black boy named Bumbazine, but soon dropped him because he was “not as believable as the animals.”<sup>26</sup> As many cartoonists have discovered, animals are not immediately limited by race, sex, or age, and although less concerned with the serious business of survival, Kelly’s animals share with Aesop’s a sense of universality.

As rustics, Kelly’s characters demonstrate varying degrees of comic naiveté, but they are far from faultless. Albert, Churchy, Howland, Weevill, and the numerous other residents of Okefenokee enact the range of human vices, but the true villains usually arrive from beyond the borders of the swamp. Despite their stupidity, greed, and general foolishness, and regular characters show compassionate concern for one another on many occasions and the ability to pull together in a crisis. Their errors are errors of their natures rather than willfully evil acts. But, as Kelly observes, Pogo Possum is “the glue”<sup>27</sup> that holds the strip together. He is “the reasonably patient, soft-hearted, naive, friendly little person we all think we are”<sup>28</sup> and stands in placid contrast to the histrionics of the other characters. Pogo is a necessary center for the strip, but he is too innocent to represent Kelly’s whole man. He is not beyond criticism, even within the confines of the strip. Albert, for example, once called pogo a “two minute egghead . . . A bleedin’ heart.”<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Pogo’s compassionate naiveté represents Kelly’s optimistic belief “that the good life, even in our complex world, might be achieved by living a few basic ideals”<sup>30</sup>

Stylistically, *Pogo* stands out from its rivals because of its linguistic complexity. The dialect employed by the majority of the characters has been identified as southern, but it is actually a stylized language, a polyglot combination of influences that is uniquely Kelly’s. The nonstandard grammar, which identifies the speakers as naive rustics, is incongruously spiced with sophisticated diction and complex allusions, a comic mix of high and low: “Ever since I heard you is got a million dollars I notice you is fraught with

perspicacity,” notes Uncle Baldwin slyly. To which Churchy responds with fearful confusion, “‘At’s funny! I feels same as ever.”<sup>31</sup> When Beauregard attempts to celebrate Groundhog Day 1950 by awakening a groundhog (that turns out to be a hibernating bear), he recites the opening stanza of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, and his effusion is stifled by a thrown alarm clock (see figure 4).



Kelly explores the limits of language by creating distinct voices for many of his over one hundred and fifty characters. He emphasizes some of these voices through his innovative use of varying fonts: Barnstable Bear’s words are drawn as circus posters; Sarcophogus McAbre speaks in funeral announcements; Deacon Mushrat Mole’s self-righteous remarks are drawn in dark gothic letters; and when Mouse joins the “Li’l Arf An’ Nonny” parody win the rich guardian F. Olding Money, he speaks in the curt form of telegrams.

The variety of voices is unsettling in itself, but the usefulness of language as a means of reliable communication is continually under direct attack in *Pogo*: “Semantic and phonetic mutilation of words, metaphors taken literally galore result in communication without comprehension.”<sup>32</sup> This linguistic confusion is part of Kelly’s satiric method, for it underscores the difficulty of solving social problems. Kelly recalls his father, a great believer in the efficacy of pictures, proclaiming that “Language is the worst means of communication known to man.”<sup>33</sup> But Kelly adds to his father’s distrust a delight in the unpredictable aspects of language and uses its unreliability as a weapon in his rebellion against the tradition illustration. *Pogo* explores the limitations of language and embraces the wonder of the irrational. The misspoken and misunderstood messages that amuse and confuse *Pogo*’s readers represent “a stream of individual and group consciousness . . . which cannot be adequately represented by conventionally ordered speech in one language but only by dipping into the muttered dream language.”<sup>34</sup>

Kelly, like a latter day surrealist, even embraces the comic possibilities of chance: “some of the more notable successes in the field of gobbledegook in the strip were due to lettering men not being able to keep tight rein on my handwriting.”<sup>35</sup> He similarly acknowledges the help of children whose imperfect pronunciation (Give us to stay our daily bread) inspired numerous original phrasings. Kelly’s appreciation for the accidental underscores his desire for liberation from conformity, his desire to maintain a childlike spontaneity. Thus, when Kelly writes parodies such as “Good King Sourkraut looked out/ On his feet uneven,” he is simultaneously deflating our unskeptical belief in the reliability of language and celebrating its liberating unpredictability.

*Pogo* stands as an emblem of the comically incomprehensible wholeness of life and as an indication of the range a man’s eye must encompass if he aspires to wholeness himself. Walt Kelly was a thoughtful humorist who elevated comic strip writing to the level of serious art, appreciated the earthly value of a hearty laugh and a good cigar. He

knew that even the serious business of humor should not be pursued with a straight face: “Don’t take life so serious, son—it ain’t no how permanent.”<sup>36</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Heinz Politzer, “From Little Nemo to Li’l Abner,” in *The Funnies: An American Idiom*, ed. David Manning White and Robert H. Abel (New York: The Free Press, 1963), p. 43
- <sup>2</sup>Arthur Asa Berger, *The Comic-Stripped American: What Dick Tracy, Blondie, Daddy Warbucks and Charlie Brown Tell Us About Ourselves* (New York: Walker and Company, 1973).
- <sup>3</sup>Walt Kelly, *Ten Everlovin’ Blue-Eyed Years with Pogo* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), p. 134
- <sup>4</sup>Walt Kelly, “Now For the Commercial,” introduction to *Pogo’s Sunday Punch* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957).
- <sup>5</sup>Berger, pp. 175-177
- <sup>6</sup>Walt Kelly, “Pogo Looks at the Abominable Snowman,” in *The Funnies*, p. 292.
- <sup>7</sup>Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs, *Comics: Anatomy of a Mass Medium*, trans. Nadia Fowler (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1972), p. 50.
- <sup>8</sup>Kelly, *Ten Years*, p. 67.
- <sup>9</sup>A. Capp, “Discourse on Humor: The Comedy of Charlie Chaplin,” in *The Funnies*, p. 265.
- <sup>10</sup>Kelly, *Ten Years*, p. 41.
- <sup>11</sup>Kelly, “*Abominable Snowman*,” p. 289.
- <sup>12</sup>Stephen Becker, *Comic Art in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), p. 357.
- <sup>13</sup>David Manning White and Robert S. Abel, “Introduction,” to *The Funnies*, pg. 30.
- <sup>14</sup>Kelly, “Commercial.”
- <sup>15</sup>Kelly, *Ten Years*, p. 259
- <sup>16</sup>Kelly, “Abominable Snowman,” p. 289
- <sup>17</sup>Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 5.
- <sup>18</sup>Kelly, “Commercial.”
- <sup>19</sup>Reuel Denny, “The Revolt Against Naturalism in the Funnies,” in *The Funnies*, p. 71.
- <sup>20</sup>Kelly, *Ten Years*, p. 72.
- <sup>21</sup>Kelly, *Ten Years*, p. 73.
- <sup>22</sup>Kelly, *Ten Years*, p. 6.
- <sup>23</sup>Lyle W. Shannon, “The Opinions of Little Orphan Annie and Her Friends,” in *Mass Culture*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David M. White (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press). p. 215.
- <sup>24</sup>Kelly, *Ten Years*, p. 62.
- <sup>25</sup>Edward Mendelson, “Possum Pastoral,” *Yale Review*. 67 (Spring 1978). 473.
- <sup>26</sup>Kelly, *Ten Years*, p. 9.
- <sup>27</sup>Kelly, *Ten Years*, p. 251.
- <sup>28</sup>Bard of Okefenokee,” *Time*, 29 Oct. 1973, p. 88.
- <sup>29</sup>Kelly, *Ten Years*, p. 251.
- <sup>30</sup>Daniel Mishkin, “Pogo: Walt Kelly’s American Dream,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, 12 (Spring 1979), 683.
- <sup>31</sup>Kelly, *Ten Years*, p. 76.
- <sup>32</sup>Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs, *Comics*, p. 49.

<sup>33</sup>Walt Kelly, "Over the Shoulder is a Home Run," in *Five Boyhoods*, ed. Martin Levin (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962). p. 84.

<sup>34</sup>Denny, p. 67.

<sup>35</sup>Kelly, *Ten Years*, p. 47.

<sup>36</sup>Kelly, *Ten Years*, p. 28.