By W. H. Auden

POEMS

ANOTHER TIME

THE DOUBLE MAN

ON THIS ISLAND

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THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES

HOMAGE TO CLIO

THE DYER'S HAND

W. H. AUDEN

THE DYER'S HAND

and other essays

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For

NEVILL COGHILL

Three grateful memories:

a home full of books,
a childhood spent in country provinces,
a tutor in whom one could confide.

FOREWORD

It is a sad fact about our culture that a poet can earn much more money writing or talking about his art than he can by practicing it. All the poems I have written were written for love; naturally, when I have written one, I try to market it, but the prospect of a market played no role in its writing.

On the other hand, I have never written a line of criticism except in response to a demand by others for a lecture, an introduction, a review, etc.; though I hope that some love went into their writing, I wrote them because I needed the money. I should like to thank the various publishers, editors, college authorities and, not least, the ladies and gentlemen who voted me into the Chair of Poetry at Oxford University, but for whose generosity and support I should never have been able to pay my bills.

The trouble about writing commissioned criticism is that the relation between form and content is arbitrary; a lecture must take fifty-five minutes to deliver, an introduction must be so and so many thousand, a review so and so many hundred words long. Only rarely do the conditions set down conform exactly with one's thought. Sometimes one feels cramped, forced to omit or oversimplify arguments; more often, all one really has to say could be put down in half the allotted space, and one can only try to pad as inconspicuously as possible.

Moreover, in a number of articles which were not planned as a series but written for diverse occasions, it is inevitable that one will often repeat oneself.

A poem must be a closed system, but there is something, in my opinion, lifeless, even false, about systematic criticism. In going over my critical pieces, I have reduced them, when possible, to sets of notes because, as a reader, I prefer a critic's notebooks to his treatises. The order of the chapters, however, is deliberate, and I would like them to be read in sequence.

W. H. A.

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> It may be foreseen in like manner that poets living in democratic times will prefer the delineation of passions and ideas to that of persons and achievements. The language, the dress, and the daily actions of men in democracies are repugnant to conceptions of the ideal. . . . This forces the poet constantly to search below the external surface which is palpable to the senses, in order to read the inner soul; and nothing lends itself more to the delineation of the ideal than the scrutiny of the hidden depths in the immaterial nature of man. . . . The destinies of mankind, man himself taken aloof from his country and his age, and standing in the presence of Nature and of God, with his passions, his doubts, his rare prosperities and inconceivable wretchedness, will become the chief, if not the sole, theme of poetry.

If this be an accurate description of the poetry we call modern, then one might say that America has never known any other kind.

PART SEVEN

The Shield of Perseus

NOTES ON THE COMIC

If a man wants to set up as an innkeeper and he does not succeed, it is not comic. If, on the contrary, a girl asks to be allowed to set up as a prostitute and she fails, which sometimes happens, it is comic.

SØREN KIERKEGAARD

A man's character may be inferred from nothing so surely as from the jest he takes in bad part.

G. C. LICHTENBERG

General Definition

A contradiction in the relation of the individual or the personal to the universal or the impersonal which does not involve the spectator or hearer in suffering or pity, which in practice means that it must not involve the actor in real suffering.

A situation in which the actor really suffers can only be found comic by children who see only the situation and are unaware of the suffering, as when a child laughs at a hunchback, or by human swine.

A few years ago, there was a rage in New York for telling "Horror Jokes." For example:

A mother (to her blind daughter): Now, dear, shut your eyes and count twenty. Then open them, and you'll find that you can see.
Daughter (after counting twenty): But, Mummy, I still can't see.
Mother: April fool!

This has the same relation to the comic as blasphemy has to belief in God, that is to say, it implies a knowledge of what is truly comic.

We sometimes make a witty remark about someone which is also cruel, but we make it behind his back, not to his face, and we hope that nobody will repeat it to him.

When we really hate someone, we cannot find him comic; there are no genuinely funny stories about Hitler.

A sense of humor develops in a society to the degree that its members are simultaneously conscious of being each a unique person and of being all in common subjection to unalterable laws.

Primitive cultures have little sense of humor; firstly, because their sense of human individuality is weak—the tribe is the real unit—and, secondly, because, as animists or polytheists, they have little notion of necessity. To them, events do not occur because they must, but because some god or spirit chooses to make them happen. They recognize a contradiction between the individual and the universal only when it is a tragic contradiction involving exceptional suffering.

In our own society, addicted gamblers who make a religion out of chance are invariably humorless.

Among those whom I like or admire, I can find no common denominator, but among those whom I love, I can: all of them make me laugh.

Some Types of Comic Contradiction

1) The operation of physical laws upon inorganic objects associated with a human being in such a way that it is they who appear to be acting from personal volition and their owner who appears to be the passive thing.

Example: A man is walking in a storm protected by an umbrella when a sudden gust of wind blows it inside out. This is comic for two reasons:

a) An umbrella is a mechanism designed by man to function in a particular manner, and its existence and effectiveness as a protection depend upon man's understanding of physical laws. An umbrella turning inside out is funnier than a hat blowing off because an umbrella is made to be opened, to change its shape when its owner wills. It now continues to change its shape, in obedience to the same laws, but against his will.
b) The activating agent, the wind, is invisible, so the cause of the umbrella turning inside out appears to lie in the umbrella itself. It is not particularly funny if a tile falls and makes a hole in the umbrella, because the cause is visibly natural.

When a film is run backwards, reversing the historical succession of events, the flow of volition is likewise reversed and proceeds from the object to the subject. What was originally the action of a man taking off his coat becomes the action of a coat putting itself on a man.

The same contradiction is the basis of most of the comic effects of the clown. In appearance he is the clumsy man whom inanimate objects conspire against to torment; this in itself is funny to watch, but our profounder amusement is derived from our knowledge that this is only an appearance, that, in reality, the accuracy with which the objects trip him up or hit him on the head is caused by the clown's own skill.

2) A clash between the laws of the inorganic which has no *telos*, and the behavior of living creatures who have one.

Example: A man walking down the street, with his mind concentrated upon the purpose of his journey, fails to notice a banana skin, slips and falls down. Under the obsession of his goal—it may be a goal of thought—he forgets his subjection to the law of gravity. His goal need not necessarily be a unique and personal one; he may simply be looking for a public lavatory. All that matters is that he should be ignoring the present for the sake of the future. A child learning to walk, or an adult picking his way carefully over an icy surface, are not funny if they fall down, because they are conscious of the present.

Comic Situations in the Relationship Between the Sexes

As a natural creature a human being is born either male or female and endowed with an impersonal tendency to reproduce the human species by mating with any member of the opposite sex who is neither immature nor senile. In this tendency the individuality of any given male or female is subordinate to its general reproductive function. (*Male and female created He them . . . Be fruitful and multiply.*)

As a historical person, every man and woman is a unique individual, capable of entering into a unique relation of love with another person. As a person, the relationship takes precedence over any function it may also have. (*It is not good for man to be alone.*)

The ideal of marriage is a relationship in which both these elements are synthesized; husband and wife are simultaneously involved in relations of physical love and the love of personal friendship.

The synthesis might be easier to achieve if the two elements remained distinct, if the physical, that is, remained as impersonal as it is among the animals, and the personal relation was completely unerotic.

In fact, however, we never experience sexual desire as a blind need which is indifferent to its sexual object; our personal history and our culture introduce a selective element so that, even on the most physical level, some types are more desirable than others. Our sexual desire, as such, is impersonal

in that it lacks all consideration for the person who is our type, but personal in that our type is our personal taste, not a blind need.

This contradiction is fertile ground for self-deception. It allows us to persuade ourselves that we value the person of another, when, in fact, we only value her (or him) as a sexual object, and it allows us to endow her with an imaginary personality which has little or no relation to the real one.

From the personal point of view, on the other hand, sexual desire, because of its impersonal and unchanging character, is a comic contradiction. The relation between every pair of lovers is unique, but in bed they can only do what all mammals do.

Comic Travesties

Twelfth Night. The pattern of relationships is as follows:

1) Viola (Caesario) is wholly in the truth. She knows who she is, she knows that the Duke is a man for whom she feels personal love, and her passionate image of him corresponds to the reality.

2) The Duke is in the truth in one thing; he knows that he feels a personal affection for Caesario (Viola). This is made easier for him by his boylike appearance—did he look like a nature man, he would fall into a class, the class of potential rivals in love. The fact that he feels personal affection for the illusory Caesario guarantees the authenticity of his love for the real Viola as a person, since it cannot be an illusion provoked by sexual desire.

His relation to Olivia, on the other hand, is erotic-fantastic in one of two ways, and probably in both: either his image of her does not correspond to her real nature or, if it does correspond, it is fantastic in relation to himself; the kind of wife he really desires is not what he imagines. The fact that, though she makes it clear that she does not return his passion, he still continues to pursue her and by devious strategies, demonstrates that he lacks respect for her as a person.

3) Olivia has an erotic-fantastic image of Caesario (Viola). Since she is able to transfer her image successfully to Caesario's double, Sebastian, and marry him, we must assume that the image of the kind of husband she desires is real in relation to herself and only accidentally fantastic because Caesario happens to be, not a man, but a woman in disguise.
4) The illusion of Antonio and Sebastian is not concerned with the erotic relationship, but with the problem of body-soul identity. It is a general law that a human face is the creation of its owner's past and that, since two persons cannot have the same past, no two faces are alike. Identical twins are the exception to this rule. Viola and Sebastian are twins, but not identical twins, for one is female and the other male; dress them both, however, in male or female clothing, and they appear to be identical twins.

It is impossible to produce *Twelfth Night* today in an ordinary theatre since feminine roles are no longer played, as they were in Shakespeare's time, by boys. It is essential to the play that, when Viola appears dressed as a boy, the illusion should be perfect; if it is obvious to the audience that Caesario is really a girl, the play becomes a farce, and a farce in bad taste, for any serious emotion is impossible in a farce, and some of the characters in *Twelfth Night* have serious emotions. A boy whose voice has not yet broken can, when dressed as a girl, produce a perfect illusion of a girl; a young woman, dressed as a boy, can never produce a convincing illusion of a boy.

Der Rosenkavalier and Charley's Aunt. To Baron Lerchenau, the seduction of young chambermaids has become a habit, i.e., what was once a combination of desire and personal choice has become almost an automatic reflex. A costume suggests to him the magic word *chambermaid,* and the word issues the command *Seduce her.* The baron, however, is not quite a farce character; he knows the difference between a pretty girl and an ugly one. The mezzo-soprano who plays Octavian should be good-looking enough to give the illusion

of a good-looking young man, when dressed as one. In the third act, when she is dressed as what she really is, a girl, she will be pretty, but her acting the role of a chambermaid must be farcical, and give the impression of a bad actor impersonating a girl, so that only a man as obsessed by habit as the Baron could fail to notice it.

Charley's Aunt is pure farce. The fortune-hunting uncle is not a slave of habit; he really desires to marry a rich widow, but her riches are all he desires; he is totally uninterested in sex or in individuals. He has been told that he is going to meet a rich widow, he sees widow's weeds and this is sufficient to set him in motion. To the audience, therefore, it must be obvious that she is neither female nor elderly, but a young undergraduate pretending, with little success, to be both.

The Lover and the Citizen

Marriage is not only a relation between two individuals; it is also a social institution, involving social emotions concerned with class status and prestige among one's fellows. This is not in itself comic; it only becomes comic if social emotion is the only motive for a marriage, so that the essential motives for marriage, sexual intercourse, procreation and personal affection, are lacking. A familiar comic situation is that of *Don Pasquale.* A rich old man plans to marry a young girl against her will, for she is in love with a young man of her own age; the old man at first looks like succeeding, but in the end he is foiled. For this to be comic, the audience must be convinced that Don Pasquale does not really feel either desire or affection for Norina, that his sole motive is a social one, to be able to boast to other old men that he can win a young wife when they cannot. He wants the prestige of parading her and making others envy him. If he really feels either desire or affection, then he will really suffer when his designs are foiled, and the situation will be either pathetic or satiric. In *Pickwick Papers,* the same situation occurs, only this time it is the female sex which has the social motive. Widow after widow pursues Weller, the widower, not because she wants to be married to him in particular, but because she wants the social status of being a married woman.

The Law of the City and the Law of Justice

Example: Falstaff's speech on Honour (*Henry IV*, Part I, Act V, Scene II.)

If the warrior ethic of honor, courage and personal loyalty were believed by an Elizabethan or a modern audience to be the perfect embodiment of justice, the speech would not be sympathetically comic, but a satirical device by which Falstaff was held up to ridicule as a coward. If, on the other hand, the warrior ethic were totally unjust, if there were no occasions on which it was a true expression of moral duty, the speech would be, not comic, but a serious piece of pacifist propaganda. The speech has a sympathetically comic effect for two reasons, the circumstances under which it is uttered, and the character of the speaker.

Were the situation one in which the future of the whole community is at stake, as on the field of Agincourt, the speech would strike an unsympathetic note, but the situation is one of civil war, a struggle for power among the feudal nobility in which the claims of both sides to be the legitimate rulers are fairly equal—Henry IV was once a rebel who deposed his King—and a struggle in which their feudal dependents are compelled to take part and risk their lives without having a real stake in the outcome. Irrespective of the speaker, the speech is a comic criticism of the feudal ethic as typified by Hotspur. Courage is a personal virtue, but military glory for military glory's sake can be a social evil; unreasonable and unjust wars create the paradox that the personal vice of cowardice can become a public virtue.

That it should be Falstaff who utters the speech increases its comic effect. Falstaff has a fantastic conception of himself as a daredevil who plays highwayman, which, if it were true, would require exceptional physical courage. He tries to keep up this illusion, but is always breaking down because of his moral courage which keeps forcing him to admit that he is afraid. Further, though he lacks courage, he exemplifies the other side of the warrior ethic, personal loyalty, as contrasted with Prince Hal's Machiavellian manipulation of others. When Falstaff is rejected by the man to whom he has pledged his whole devotion, his death may truly be called a death for the sake of his wounded honor.

The Banal

The human person is a unique singular, analogous to all other persons, but identical with none. Banality is an illusion of identity for, when people describe their experiences in clichés, it is impossible to distinguish the experience of one from the experience of another.

The cliché user is comic because the illusion of being identical with others is created by his own choice. He is the megalomaniac in reverse. Both have fantastic conceptions of themselves but, whereas the megalomaniac thinks of himself as being somebody else—God, Napoleon, Shakespeare—the banal man thinks of himself as being everybody else, that is to say, nobody in particular.

VERBAL HUMOR

Verbal humor involves a violation in a particular instance of one of the following general principles of language.

1) Language is a means of denoting things or thoughts by sounds. It is a law of language that any given verbal sound always means the same thing and only that thing.
2) Words are man-made things which men use, not persons with a will and consciousness of their own. Whether they make sense or nonsense depends upon whether the speaker uses them correctly or incorrectly.
3) Any two or more objects or events which language seeks to describe are members, either of separate classes, or of the same class, or of overlapping classes. If they belong to separate classes, they must be described in different terms, and if they belong to the same class they must be described in the same terms. If, however, their classes overlap, either class can be described metaphorically in terms which describe the other exactly, e.g., it is equally possible to say—the plough swims through the soil—and—the ship ploughs through the waves.

4) In origin all language is concrete or metaphorical. In order to use language to express abstractions, we have to ignore its original concrete and metaphorical meanings.

The first law is violated by the pun, the exceptional case in which one verbal sound has two meanings.

> When I am dead I hope it may be said:
> His sins were scarlet, but his books were read.

For the pun to be comic, the two meanings must both make sense in the context. If all books were bound in black, the couplet would not be funny.

Words which rhyme, that is to say, words which denote different things but are partially similar in sound, are not necessarily comic. To be comic, the two things they denote must either be so incongruous with each other that one cannot imagine a real situation in which a speaker would need to bring them together, or so irrelevant to each other, that they could only become associated by pure chance. The effect of a comic rhyme is as if the words, on the basis of their auditory friendship, had taken charge of the situation, as if, instead of an event requiring words to describe it, words had the power to create an event. Reading the lines

> There was an Old Man of Whitehaven
> Who danced a quadrille with a raven

one cannot help noticing upon reflection that, had the old gentleman lived in Ceylon, he would have had to dance with a swan; alternatively, had his dancing partner been a mouse, he might have had to reside in Christ Church, Oxford.

The comic rhyme involves both the first two laws of language; the spoonerism only the second. *Example:* a lecturing geologist introduces a lantern slide with the words: "And here, gentlemen, we see a fine example of erotic blacks."

So far as the speaker is concerned he has used the language incorrectly, yet what he says makes verbal sense of a kind. Unlike the pun however, where both meanings are relevant, in the spoonerism the accidental meaning is nonsense in the

context. Thus, while the comic nature of the pun should be immediately apparent to the hearer, it should take time before he realizes what the speaker of the spoonerism intended to say. A pun is witty and intended; a spoonerism, like a comic rhyme, is comic and should appear to be involuntary. As with the clown, the speaker appears to be the slave of language, but in reality is its master.

Just as there are people who are really clumsy so there are incompetent poets who are the slaves of the only rhymes they know; the kind of poet caricatured by Shakespeare in the play of *Pyramus and Thisbe:*

> Those lily lips,
> This cherry nose,
> These yellow cowslip cheeks,
> Are gone, are gone,
> Lovers make moan;
> His eyes were green as leeks.
> O Sisters Three,
> Come, come to me
> With hands as pale as milk;
> Lay them in gore,
> Since you have shore
> With shears his thread of silk.

In this case we laugh at the rustic poet, not with him.

One of the most fruitful of witty devices is a violation of the third law, namely, to treat members of overlapping classes as if they were members of the same class. For example, during a period of riots and social unrest when the mob had set fire to hayricks all over the country Sidney Smith wrote to his friend, Mrs. Meynell:

> What do you think of all these burnings? and have you heard of the new sort of burnings? Ladies' maids have taken to setting their mistresses on fire. Two dowagers were burned last week, and large rewards are offered. They are inventing little fire-engines for the toilet table, worked with lavender water.

The fourth law, which distinguishes between the occasions when speech is used to describe concrete things and those in which it is used for abstract purposes, provides an opportunity for wit, as in Wilde's epigram:

> Twenty years of romance make a woman look like a ruin, and twenty years of marriage make her look like a public building.

Ruin has become a "dead" metaphor, that is to say, a word which normally can be used as an abstraction, but public building is still a concrete description.

Literary Parody, and Visual Caricature

Literary parody presupposes a) that every authentic writer has a unique perspective on life and b) that his literary style accurately expresses that perspective. The trick of the parodist is to take the unique style of the author, *how* he expresses his unique vision, and make it express utter banalities; *what* the parody expresses could be said by anyone. The effect is of a reversal in the relation between the author and his style. Instead of the style being the creation of the man, the man becomes the puppet of the style. It is only possible to caricature an author one admires because, in the case of an author one dislikes, his own work will seem a better parody than one could hope to write oneself.

Example: As we get older we do not get any younger.
Seasons return, and to-day I am fifty-five,
And this time last year I was fifty-four,
And this time next year I shall be sixty-two.
And I cannot say I should like (to speak for myself)
To see my time over again—if you can call it time:
Fidgeting uneasily under a draughty stair,
Or counting sleepless nights in the crowded tube.

(HENRY REED, *Chard Whitlow.*)

Every face is a present witness to the fact that its owner has a past behind him which might have been otherwise, and a future ahead of him in which some possibilities are more probable than others. To "read" a face means to guess what it might have been and what it still may become. Children, for whom most future possibilities are equally probable, the dead for whom all possibilities have been reduced to zero, and animals who have only one possibility to realize and realize it completely, do not have faces which can be read, but wear inscrutable masks. A caricature of a face admits that its owner has had a past, but denies that he has a future. He has created his features up to a certain point, but now they have taken charge of him so that he can never change; he has become a single possibility completely realized. That is why, when we go to the zoo, the faces of the animals remind one of caricatures of human beings. A caricature doesn't need to be read; it has no future.

We enjoy caricatures of our friends because we do not want to think of their changing, above all, of their dying; we enjoy caricatures of our enemies because we do not want to consider the possibility of their having a change of heart so that we would have to forgive them.

Flyting

Flyting seems to have vanished as a studied literary art and only to survive in the impromptu exchanges of truckdrivers and cabdrivers. The comic effect arises from the contradiction between the insulting nature of what is said which appears to indicate a passionate relation of hostility and agression, and the calculated skill of verbal invention which indicates that the protagonists are not thinking about each other but about language and their pleasure in employing it inventively. A man who is really passionately angry is speechless and can only express his anger by physical violence. Playful anger is intrinsically comic because, of all emotions, anger is the least compatible with play.

Satire

The object of satire is a person who, though in possession of his moral faculties, transgresses the moral law beyond

the normal call of temptation. The lunatic cannot be an object of satire, since he is not morally responsible for his actions, and the wicked man cannot be an object because, while morally responsible, he lacks the normal faculty of conscience. The commonest object of satire is the rogue. The rogue transgresses the moral law at the expense of others, but he is only able to do this because of the vices of his victims; they share in his guilt. The wicked man transgresses the moral law at the expense of others, but his victims are innocent. Thus a black marketeer in sugar can be satirized because the existence of such a black market depends upon the greed of others for sugar, which is a pleasure but not a necessity; a black marketeer in penicillin cannot be satirized because, for the sick, it is a necessity and, if they cannot pay his prices, they will die.

After the rogue, the commonest object of satire is the monomaniac. Most men desire money and are not always too scrupulous in the means by which they obtain it, but this does not make them objects of satire, because their desire is tempered by a number of competing interests. A miser is satirizable because his desire overrides all desires which normal selfishness feels, such as sex or physical comfort.

The Satirical Strategy

There is not only a moral human norm, but also a normal way of transgressing it. At the moment of yielding to temptation, the normal human being has to exercise self-deception and rationalization, for in order to yield he requires the illusion of acting with a good conscience: after he has committed the immoral act, when desire is satisfied, the normal human being realizes the nature of his act and feels guilty. He who is incapable of realizing the nature of his act is mad, and he who, both before, while, and after committing it, is exactly conscious of what he is doing yet feels no guilt, is wicked.

The commonest satirical devices therefore, are two: 1) To present the object of satire *as if* he or she were mad and unaware of what he is doing.

> Now Night descending, the proud scene was o'er,
> But lived in Settle's numbers, one day more.
>
> (POPE.)

The writing of poetry which, even in the case of the worst of poets, is a personal and voluntary act, is presented as if it were as impersonal and necessary as the revolution of the earth, and the value of the poems so produced which, even in a bad poet, varies, is presented as invariable and therefore subject to a quantitative measurement like dead matter.

The satiric effect presupposes that the reader knows that in real life Settle was not a certifiable lunatic, for lunacy overwhelms a man against his will: Settle is, as it were, a self-made lunatic.

2) To present the object of satire as if he or she were wicked and completely conscious of what he is doing without feeling any guilt.

> Although, dear Lord, I am a sinner,
> I have done no major crime;
> Now I'll come to Evening Service
> Whensoever I have time.
> So, Lord, reserve for me a crown,
> And do not let my shares go down.
>
> (John Betjeman.)

Again, the satiric effect depends upon our knowing that in real life the lady is not wicked, that, if she were really as truthful with herself as she is presented, she could not go to Church.

Satire flourishes in a homogeneous society where satirist and audience share the same views as to how normal people can be expected to behave, and in times of relative stability and contentment, for satire cannot deal with serious evil and suffering. In an age like our own, it cannot flourish except in intimate circles as an expression of private feuds: in public life the evils and sufferings are so serious that satire seems trivial and the only possible kind of attack is prophetic denunciation.