Sense of
HUMOUR

STEPHEN POTTER

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EDITOR'S NOTE. In the body of the text, titles printed within brackets are the editor's, not the author's.

THE LINCOLN IMP

Hidden among the angelic faces of the sacred images carved above the columns of Lincoln Cathedral is this figure of a kindly but impertinent devil or imp – symbol perhaps of the intrusion of humour into even the serious moments of English life.

PART I

THE THEME

The English Reflex

The day of English Humour is declining. I am not suggesting that *Punch* is less what it was than tradition demands, nor that at the other end, the acid end, of the scale (towards which *Punch* incidentally has begun to shift after eighty years of alkali), our Barren Leaves and Vile Bodies are pulverised less efficiently by the novelists of 1953 than they were by the Waughs and Huxleys of a quarter of a century ago. It is simply that times have changed. A sub-era in the evolution of Englishness, in which humour has been regarded as an essential part of the Good, as a graceful and necessary congruity of social life, as something to be taken for granted as right, is beginning to pass away.

For many occasions the humorous approach is still the safest diagnostic proof of the Englishness in our blood. 'How are you?' There, at the bar, is my solid friend G., the ornithologist. 'Jolly D.' he says. 'Well played,' I say. No smile, of course: it is something less than being facetious, even. This exhausted parody of prep-school slang is one of our traditional methods of starting a conversation. We shake jokes, as it were, instead of shaking hands, to show that there is no hostility. It is as automatic as the cough reflex for clearing the throat. True, the 'humour' need not necessarily be so worn out and automatic as this. On the other hand it may be worse, taking the shape of the comic story – 'stop me if you've heard it,' (for it is part of the tribal custom never to 'stop me', but to listen helplessly and wait for the point, get the feel and inflexion of the place where the laugh should come, in the story, and then laugh in unison with the teller).

It is true that most of these preliminary parries, these chewings of a worn-out old cud, are a symptom of a decadent tendency to live-off-the-land in the world of humour, without putting anything back. And it is true that most people who deliberately make humorous remarks have no humour in the special English sense which this essay tries to define. An hour from my home by car on the road from London there is a pub which I visit partly for a drink and partly to refresh myself with the character of the landlord. He is, I think, an exceptionally shy man and feels more than most of us the never-admitted horror of meeting strangers – a characteristic which is surprisingly common in his profession. He is without humour, yet he too makes use of humour to bridge the gap. Every now and then he utters some of the accepted comic phrases of our age, quite isolated, quite without reference. 'Mind my bike,' he will say. Then a little later: 'Time I gave it the old one-two.' Gave what he does not say. Nobody smiles or comments, but he will himself laugh. This does not embarrass him – only the absence of the funny saying embarrasses him. Another customer comes in. With reference to nothing: 'Yes,' says the landlord laughingly, as if he and I had been having a rattling good conversation. Then, 'Don't forget the diver,' perhaps is the next phrase which happens to come to the surface. Between times the pause is always uneasy. But the general implication is that common ground has been found, if not a safe conduct into the stranger's territory.

But whether we chew over other people's humour or create it ourselves, our most usual reflex is to detach ourselves by smiling. It might be called the English Reflex. It is part of the framework of our social life. Cockney wit, for instance, shows it particularly clearly. Writing in the nineteenth century, on the habits of the English, French writers like Taine make the strange mistake, as it seems to us, of talking of the 'grim sava-

gery and gloom ' of Cockney humour – a classic misapprehension of a tone of voice which on the contrary is a making ordinary of the grim, taking the sting out of it, to make bearable life in the back streets of the Whitechapel of mid-nineteenth century London. It flourishes in such unsquashable characters as Sam Weller, constantly cheering everybody up by making tragedy ludicrous. . . . ' It's over and can't be helped . . . and that's one consolation, as they always say in Turkey, ven they cuts the wrong man's head off.' Half modern Cockneyisms, equally, are used to take the edge off reality: rhyming slang, shortened as it usually is to the first word of the phrase only, keeps the reality at double remove. Far nearer than rhyming slang to essential English Humour is the slang of the Services – euphemisms like ' fishes ' eyes ' for tapioca pudding or the phrase next below it in Eric Partridge's *Dictionary* – ' the fishing fleet ' for the women who frequent the Ladies' Lounge at the Union Club, Malta; or ' The Flap ' for the great retreat which ended at Alamein.

More specifically Cockney is the extension of this kind of humour to rub in the awkwardness of the slightly embarrassing situation. The bus driver, made to brake rather hard when the woman in the Baby Austin unexpectedly swerves, pretends to faint over the steering wheel. Or a bus conductor I remember. It was in the days when a leather thong had to be pulled to stop the bus. Boldly and breezily, and to show my familiarity with the workings of the thing, I pulled it myself. But too hard – embarrassingly it came off in my hand. The conductor never seemed so much as to glance at me over his shoulder, as he began to move down inside to take tickets. ' Look at Hercules ' was all he said; but it gave universal satisfaction.

Is this English Reflex really peculiar to the English? We are certainly not the only country to fall back on a technique when dealing with first contacts. It is usual to contrast French wit with

British humour. The French have their more supple armour of chain mail; an armoury of *finesse* and poise, an ancient fabric of manners which can be almost hostile in its correctness. Even the irresponsibility and gaiety which seems to deny this, has a slight taste of ritual. The contrast between the North and South German approach is just as strong. Whether 'Heil Hitler' is the phrase or not, the salute to a northern national hero is implied. The Southern Teuton, the Austrian, on the other hand, seems to suggest by humorous implication that he is a sceptic on such matters. 'We are artists together,' he seems to say, 'humouring the junior and philistine races.' The American (U.S.) often makes his approach in solemnity. Voice and manner seem to say 'We believe, you and I, in the great ordinary things. There is nothing whimsical or eccentric about you and me. We are solid citizens, right? Now we can talk.' Some sound British types use the same method; but for the majority of the English, humour is still the way.

Funniness by Theory

It has not always been so. I have my own theory of a date, of a certain piece of writing which could be called the beginning of English Humour. But let us compare notes, for a moment, with the authorities.

Hazlitt on the English Comic Writers is the classic; Leigh Hunt is effectively diffuse on the subject of Wit and Humour: but in their day the word was ambiguous and vague, the culture of the English sense of humour had not begun. On the other hand, there are plenty of modern books on the theory and anatomy of humour: and so far from being inappropriately solid and learned as one might expect from the academic treatment of such a quick-silver subject, they are judicious and entertaining. To take the best since 1900: first comes Bergson's celebrated *Le Rire*, full of audacious theorising, and entertainingly 'explaining' laughter as a shout of 'Beware!' to the rest

PART II

THE THEME ILLUSTRATED

Personal Choice

The selections which follow are intended for enjoyment and have been chosen because they still, or have newly, given me pleasure. If I had chosen from the works which seemed funniest in my whole life, half would not seem funny now. I do not choose The Adventures of Professor Radium in *Puck* (the only coloured comic in 1910), or P. G. Wodehouse's school stories, in the *Captain*, about Psmith, or *When Knights Were Bold*, or the serial in the *Boy's Own Paper* called 'From the Slums to the Quarter-Deck, the Story of a Lad of Grit', or *The Safety Match* by Ian Hay. It is as sadly painful for me not to laugh at these now, as it was unbearably pleasure-painful laughing at them then. Beatrix Potter, early Dickens and early Wells still seem almost as funny now, but the goodness of Mr Polly and Mr Jingle my readers will know and take for granted.

In a secondary way, I have chosen in order to illustrate my theme of the English sense of humour. The extracts are not arranged in time order: the history I have already tried to sketch. For contrast and to give the elements of the theme a re-shuffle, I have enjoyed trying to place the sections so as to suggest the steps which extend between the humourless, at one extreme, and humour at its most intelligent and perceptive at the other.

Looking at this selection as it goes to press, I regret omissions. One boundary to an unmanageably vast field I have allowed myself. The spoken word – plays, speeches and conversations – is little quoted, and I allow myself the excuse that it is often

dependent on inflection and presentation. But I wish now I had included question time in the House, Mr Churchill up. I wish I had included quotations from that wonderfully funny play *Present Laughter*, or the ' very flat, Norfolk ' passage from an earlier comedy by the same author, or Mr Coward's cabaret song ' I wonder what's happened to . . .', or Mrs Worthington. I wish I had had time to comb the seventeenth century antiquarians. I would have included early Evelyn Waugh had I not been earlier an early Huxley man. The full pleasures of the laughter of shocked and incredulous recognition only come once in our lives.

I

The Raw Material

It may seem illogical to include examples of the Unintentionally Funny in an anthology of the humorous. Must there not exist somewhere some kind of argument to the effect that humour and the humourless are opposite characteristics of the same middle? Perhaps it is true that a certain unselfconsciousness or self-forgetfulness provides the necessary raw material for the humorists to work on.

'UNCONSCIOUS HUMOUR'

' Of course,' (I can hear the phrase sounding in my head) ' my favourite humour is unconscious humour.' It is a remark to think, not speak, because it is full of traps. The phrase itself, which Samuel Butler claimed to have invented, seems a silly way of describing the unconsciously humour*less*. And when we come to list our favourite pieces of ' unconscious humour ', are we always completely sure that we are not ourselves the unconscious victims of a leg pull, or that an unpleasing touch of

Sun himself cannot forget his fellow-traveller' is a translation from John Owen; the 'Harington' quotation about pleasing guests not cooks is a translation from Martial. I grumble at the allotting to Porson and Suckling of two straight Shakespeare quotations. I can't see why 'Since first I saw your face' is Anon and 'I did but see her passing by' is Thomas Ford when both are from Ford's songbook and neither is by Ford. Four words seem to be missing from the second Sophocles quotation. Two people are credited with saying that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. 'Go West, young man' is here given to J. B. L. Soule (1815-91); in the 1941 edition it was in the index and not, apparently, in the text. Why are we told that Mr A. C. McAuliffe said 'Nuts' to some Germans? Why are there no post-1904 *Punch* quotations? Is it a matter of copyright, or something like the scent of musk? There are, anyway, they tell us, 'well over 40,000 quotations' in this splendid book, which moved my heart more than a trumpet and held me long at the chimney corner. I'm happy and thankful about it and please do not take my bogglings too seriously.

1953 *The Listener*

CRITICISM BY PARODY

This section is disproportionately long because of my disproportionate liking for this form of humour and my enjoyment of this richest yet most compressed form of negative criticism. Successful parody entails a truly wide, if not a deep, knowledge of the victim. Perhaps my favourite sentence in all parody is Max's summary of Galsworthy's attitude to his Forsyte heroine Irene, whose entrance is 'heralded by that almost unseizable odour that uncut turquoises have' (p. 115). Here again, my choice is from my personal favourites of the moment. I remind the reader that there are wonderful parodies in Chaucer, Shakespeare and Lewis Carroll, and that the pioneers, like James and Horace Smith were men of the highest talent.

I begin with my favourite paragraph from the works of Swift:

by Swift *of The Verisimilitude of Travellers' Tales*
(Gulliver says farewell to the Houyhnhnms.)

When all was ready, and the day came for my departure, I took leave of my master and lady, and the whole family, mine eyes flowing with tears, and my heart quite sunk with grief. But his honour, out of curiosity, and perhaps (if I may speak it without vanity) partly out of kindness, was determined to see me in my canoo; and several of his neighbouring friends to accompany him. I was forced to wait above an hour for the tide, and then observing the wind very fortunately bearing towards the island, to which I intended to steer my course, I took a second leave of my master: but, as I was going to prostrate myself to kiss his hoof, he did me the honour to raise it gently to my mouth. I am not ignorant how much I have been censured for mentioning this last particular. Detractors are pleased to think it improbable, that so illustrious a person should descend to give so great a mark of distinction to a creature so inferior as I. Neither have I forgot, how apt some travellers are to boast of extraordinary favours they have received. But, if these censurers were better acquainted with the noble and courteous disposition of the Houyhnhnms, they would soon change their opinion.

1726 *Travels of Lemuel Gulliver*

by Max Beerbohm *of Galsworthy's 'Forsyte Saga'*

. . . Adrian Berridge paused on the threshold, as was his wont, with closed eyes and dilated nostrils, enjoying the aroma of complex freshness which the dining-room had at this hour. Pathetically a creature of habit, he liked to savour the various scents, sweet or acrid, that went to symbolise for him the time and place. Here were the immediate scents of dry toast, of China tea, of napery fresh from the wash, together with that vague, super-subtle scent which boiled eggs give out through their unbroken shells. And as a permanent base to these there

majesty down the long lane of beseeching suppliants? Or, do we not rather see a foolish, charming boy, parading before his envious brothers an ill-fitting, parti-coloured jacket, stitched by a doting father with a hand that trembled in the last agitations of affection and the first approaches of senility?

1933 *The Table of Truth*

by Henry Reed *of Thomas Hardy*

Stoutheart on the Southern Railway

What are you doing, oh high-souled lad,
  Writing a book about me?
And peering so closely at good and bad,
  That one thing you do not see:
A shadow which falls on your writing-pad;
It is not of a sort to make men glad.
  It were better should such unbe.

No: though you look up, but you do not chance
  To see in the railway-train,
Amid pale trackfarers with listless glance,
  One who enghosts him plain.
You throw him not even a look askance,
And your mind toils on, in a seeming trance,
  To unearth some hap or twain.

No: the wistful hand you do not mark,
  Laid weightless upon your sleeve;
To a phasmal breath you give no hark –
  To a disembodied heave,
That at memories wakened of bliss or cark
Goes sighing across the gritty dark
  In an iterate semi-breve.

No: you don't see the one the night-time brings
  To thuswise hover above
Your pages of quizzings and questionings
  Undertaken (say you) for love,

No: you don't see the shadow the lamp downflings.
But I've come to make sure there are just a few things
You still are unwotful of.

Manuscript

by Lionel Millard *of Elizabethan Prose*
(*For Adults Only*)

. . . The other of the twain is an ancient crone, nurse to Juliet, forever harping on the amorous delights now beyond her save by proxy, who continuously disparages the blessed state of virginity in despite of Christ's holy Mother and the dazzling example of our Sovereign Lady: . . . There is, moreover, an old lecher, father to Juliet, whose mammerings show how his youth was spent, misspent I would say, Master Kemp too, as a foolish follower, sounds with no abridged plummet all the depths of scurrility. And the very centre of this nastiness, the young Romeo himself, is shown at the outset as mistressed (albeit lightly enough), and is continually comforted in his concupiscence by a Papistical and prolixious friar. Nay more and to conclude, we were presented to the lovers hot from their (scarce can I term it so) nuptial bed.

1934 *New Statesman* Competition

by Stephen Potter
of the Script of a B.B.C. Regional Literary Feature, period 1940

ANNOUNCER: One hundred years ago this month, the memorial tablet to Thomas Cobbleigh, the Dartmoor poet, was erected at Worlby Chapel in Ipswich, town of his birth. From the East Coast Regional Wavelength, therefore, we present this evening THOMAS COBBLEIGH, POET. A PORTRAIT.

(*Seven bars of Waltz theme, Dohnanyi's 'Variations on a Nursery Tune', quietly wells and fades behind:*)

NARRATOR: Back, now. Back to 1799 and its quiet streets,

4
The Humour of Satire

No department of the Comic is less exclusively English than Satire. It would be out of place in this book to make excerpts from the hard words of Jonson and Dryden, Swift and Pope, or of the great, grim and not always totally unhumorous *Piers Plowman*. But except in Puritan and anti-Puritan times and the Regency period, our satire has usually been tinged with a national flavour of the humane – or so it seems to me when I read these few extracts of my choice.

Alexander Pope
Chloe

'Yet Chloe sure was form'd without a spot'–
Nature in her then err'd not, but forgot.
'With ev'ry pleasing, ev'ry prudent part,
Say, what can Chloe want?' – She wants a Heart.
She speaks, behaves, and acts just as she ought;
But never, never, reach'd one gen'rous Thought.
Virtue she finds too painful an endeavour,
Content to dwell in Decencies for ever.
So very reasonable, so unmov'd,
As never yet to love, or to be lov'd.
She, while her Lover pants upon her breast,
Can mark the figures on an Indian chest;
And when she sees her Friend in deep despair,
Observes how much a Chintz exceeds Mohair.
Forbid it Heav'n, a Favour or a Debt
She e'er should cancel – but she may forget.
Safe is your Secret still in Chloe's ear;
But none of Chloe's shall you ever hear.
Of all her Dears she never slander'd one,

Doze in your blue-ribboned nest of inertia,
Pop go the Poles and pat-a-cake Persia.

Run to your dreams where the little lambs play,
Mr Vishinsky has come for the day,

And nothing can harm you O infant most blest,
Ride a cock Palestine, peep-bo Trieste.

Lully my darling, till atom bombs fall,
When up will go baby and mummy and all.

1946 *Consider the Years*

Bertrand Russell

(*God and Bishop Berkeley.*)

George Berkeley (1685-1753) is important in philosophy through his denial of the existence of matter – a denial which he supported by a number of ingenious arguments. He maintained that material objects only exist through being perceived. To the objection that, in that case, a tree, for instance, would cease to exist if no one was looking at it, he replied that God always perceives everything; if there were no God, what we take to be material objects would have a jerky life, suddenly leaping into being when we look at them; but as it is, owing to God's perceptions, trees and rocks and stones have an existence as continuous as commonsense supposes. This is, in his opinion, a weighty argument for the existence of God.

1946 *A History of Western Philosophy*

Henry Reed

LESSONS OF THE WAR

I. Naming of Parts

Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But today,
Today we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens,
And today we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,
When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
Which in your case you have not got. The branches
Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,
Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety catch, which is always released
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy
If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms
Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see
Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it
Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
They call it easing the Spring.

They call it easing the Spring: it is perfectly easy
If you have any strength in your thumb: like the bolt,
And the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of balance,
Which in our case we have not got; and the almond-blossom
Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards and forwards,
For today we have naming of parts.

II. Judging Distances

Not only how far away, but the way that you say it
Is very important. Perhaps you may never get
The knack of judging a distance, but at least you know
How to report on a landscape: the central sector,
The right of arc and that, which we had last Tuesday,
And at least you know

That maps are of time, not place, so far as the army
Happens to be concerned – the reason being,
Is one which need not delay us. Again, you know
There are three kinds of tree, three only, the fir and the poplar,
And those which have bushy tops to; and lastly
That things only seem to be things.

A barn is not called a barn, to put it more plainly,
Or a field in the distance, where sheep may be safely grazing.
You must never be over-sure. You must say, when reporting:
At five o'clock in the central sector is a dozen
Of what appear to be animals; whatever you do,
Don't call the bleeders *sheep*.

I am sure that's quite clear; and suppose, for the sake of example,
The one at the end, asleep, endeavours to tell us
What he sees over there to the west, and how far away,
After first having come to attention. There to the west,
On the fields of summer the sun and the shadows bestow
Vestments of purple and gold.

The still white dwellings are like a mirage in the heat,
And under the swaying elms a man and a woman
Lie gently together. Which is, perhaps, only to say
That there is a row of houses to the left of arc,
And that under some poplars a pair
of what appear to be humans
Appear to be loving.

Well that, for an answer, is what we might rightly call
Moderately satisfactory only, the reason being,
Is that two things have been omitted, and those are important.
The human beings, now: in what direction are they,
And how far away, would you say? And do not forget
There may be dead ground in between.

There may be dead ground in between; and I may not have got
The knack of judging a distance; I will only venture
A guess that perhaps between me and the apparent lovers,
(Who, incidentally, appear by now to have finished,)
At seven o'clock from the houses, is roughly a distance
  Of about one year and a half.

1946 *A Map of Verona*

J. B. Priestley
(*Chairmanship*)

Quietly malicious chairmanship. There is no sound excuse for this. It is deeply anti-social, and a sudden excess of it would tear great holes in our communal life. But a man can be asked once too often to act as chairman, and to such a man, despairing of his weakness and feeling a thousand miles from any delight, I can suggest a few devices. In introducing one or two of the chief speakers, grossly overpraise them but put no warmth into your voice, only a metallic flavour of irony. If you know what a speaker's main point is to be, then make it neatly in presenting him to the audience. During some tremendous peroration, either begin whispering and passing notes to other speakers or give the appearance of falling asleep in spite of much effort to keep awake. If the funny man takes possession of the meeting and brings out the old jokes, either look melancholy or raise your eyebrows as high as they will go. Announce the fellow with the weak delivery in your loudest and clearest tones. For any timid speaker, officiously clear a space bang in the middle and offer him water, paper, pencil, a watch, anything. With noisy cheeky chaps on their feet, bustle about the platform, and if necessary give a mysterious little note to some member of the audience.

If a man insists upon speaking from the floor of the hall, ask him for his name, pretend to be rather deaf, and then finally announce his name with a marked air of surprise. After that you can have some trouble with a cigarette lighter and then take it to pieces. When they all go on and on, make no further pre-

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