

Funny, but not Vulgar, George Orwell

The Great age of English humorous writing – not witty and not satirical, but simply humorous – was the first three quarters of the nineteenth century.

Within that period lie Dickens's enormous output of comic writings, Thackeray's brilliant burlesques and short stories, such as 'The Fatal Boots' and 'A Little Dinner at Timmins's, Surtees's Handley Cross, Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, Douglas Jerrold's Mrs. Caudle's Curtain Lectures, and a considerable body of humorous verse by R. H. Barham, Thomas Hood, Edward Lear, Arthur Hugh Clough, Charles Stuart Calverley and others. Two other comic masterpieces, F. Anstey's Vice Versa and the two Grossmiths' Diary of a Nobody, lie only just outside the period I have named. And, at any rate until 1860 or thereabouts, there was still such a thing as comic draughtsmanship, witness Cruikshank's illustrations to Dickens, Leech's illustrations to Surtees and even Thackeray's illustration of his own work.

I do not want to exaggerate by suggesting that, within our own century, England has produced no humorous writing of any value. There have been, for instance, Barry Pain, W. W. Jacobs, Stephen Leacock, P. G. Wodehouse, H. G. Wells in his lighter moments, Evelyn Waugh, and – a satirist rather than a humorist – Hilaire Belloc. Still, we have not only produced no laugh-getter of anything like the stature of Pickwick Papers, but, what is probably more significant, there is not and has not been for decades past, any such thing as a first-rate humorous periodical. The usual charge against Punch, that it 'isn't what it was', is perhaps unjustified at this moment, since Punch is somewhat funnier than it was ten years ago: but it is also very much less funny than it was ninety years ago.

And comic verse has lost all its vitality – there has been no English light verse of any value within this century, except Mr. Belloc's, and a poem or two by Chesterton – while a drawing that is funny in its own right, and not merely because of the joke it illustrates, is a great rarity.

All this is generally admitted. If you want a laugh you are likelier to go to a music hall or a Disney film, or switch on Tommy Handley, or buy a few of Donald McGill's postcards, than to resort to a book or a periodical. It is generally recognized, too, that American comic writers and illustrators are superior to our own. At present we have nobody to set against either James Thurber or Damon Runyon.

We do not know with certainty how laughter originated or what biological purpose it serves, but we do know, in broad terms, what causes laughter.

A thing is funny when – in some way that is not actually offensive or frightening – it upsets the established order. Every joke is a tiny revolution. If you had to define humour in a single phrase, you might define it as dignity sitting on a tin-tack. Whatever destroys dignity, and brings down the mighty from their seats, preferably with a bump, is funny. And the bigger they fall, the bigger the joke. It would be better fun to throw a custard pie at a bishop than at a curate. With this general principle in mind, one can, I think, begin to see what has been wrong with English comic writing during the present century.

Nearly all English humorists today are too genteel, too kind-hearted and too consciously lowbrow. P. G. Wodehouse's novels, or A. P. Herbert's verses, seem always to be aimed at prosperous stockbrokers whiling away an odd half hour in the lounge of some suburban golf course. They and all their kind are dominated by an anxiety not to stir up mud, either moral, religious, political or intellectual. It is no accident that most of the best comic writers of our time – Belloc, Chesterton, 'Timothy Shy' and the recent 'Beachcomber' – have been Catholic apologists; that is, people with a serious purpose and a noticeable willingness to hit below the belt. The silly-ass tradition in modern English humour, the avoidance of brutality and horror of intelligence, is summed up in the phrase funny without being vulgar. 'Vulgar' in this context usually means 'obscene', and it can be admitted at once that the best jokes are not necessarily dirty ones. Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, for instance, never made jokes of that description, and Dickens and Thackeray very rarely.

On the whole, the early Victorian writers avoided sex jokes, though a few, for instance Suttees, Marryat and Barham, retained traces of eighteenth-century coarseness. But the point is that the modern emphasis on what is called 'clean fun' is really the symptom of a general unwillingness to touch upon any serious or controversial subject. Obscenity is, after all, a kind of subversiveness. Chaucer's 'Miller's Tale' is a rebellion in the moral sphere, as Gulliver's Travels is a rebellion in the political sphere. The truth is that you cannot be memorably funny without at some point raising topics which the rich, the powerful and the complacent would prefer to see left alone.

I named above some of the best comic writers of the nineteenth century, but the case becomes much stronger if one draws in the English humorists of earlier ages – for instance, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Swift and the picaresque novelists, Smollett, Fielding and Sterne. It becomes stronger again if one considers foreign writers, both ancient and modern – for example, Aristophanes, Voltaire, Rabelais, Boccaccio and Cervantes. All of these writers are remarkable for their brutality and coarseness. People are tossed in blankets, they fall through cucumber frames, they are hidden in washing baskets, they rob, lie, swindle, and are caught out in every conceivable humiliating situation. And all great humorous writers show a willingness to attack the beliefs and the virtues on which society necessarily rests. Boccaccio treats Hell and Purgatory as a ridiculous fable, Swift jeers at the very conception of human dignity, Shakespeare makes Falstaff deliver a speech in favour of cowardice in the middle of a battle. As for the sanctity of marriage, it was the principal subject of humour in Christian society for the better part of a thousand years.

All this is not to say that humour is, of its nature, immoral or antisocial. A joke is a temporary rebellion against virtue, and its aim is not to degrade the human being but to remind him that is already degraded. A willingness to make extremely obscene jokes can co-exist with very strict moral standards, as in Shakespeare. Some comic writers, like Dickens, have a direct political purpose, others, like Chaucer or Rabelais, accept the corruption of society as something inevitable; but no comic writer of any stature has ever suggested that society is good.

Humour is the debunking of humanity, and nothing is funny except in relation to human beings. Animals, for instance, are only funny because they are caricatures of ourselves. A lump of stone could not of itself be funny; but it can become funny if it hits a human being in the eye, or if it is carved into human likeness.

However, there are subtler methods of debunking than throwing custard pies. There is also the humour of pure fantasy, which assaults man's notion of himself as not only a dignified but a rational being. Lewis Carroll's humour consists essentially in making fun of logic, and Edward Lear's in a sort of poltergeist interference with common sense. When the Red Queen remarks, 'I've seen hills compared with which you'd call that one a valley', she is in her way attacking the bases of society as violently as Swift or Voltaire. Comic verse, as in Lear's poem 'The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò', often depends on building up a fantastic universe which is just similar enough to the real universe to rob it of its dignity. But more often it depends on anticlimax — that is, on starting out with a high-flown language and then suddenly coming down with a bump. For instance, Calverley's lines:

Once, a happy child. I carolled
On green lawns the whole day through,
Not unpleasingly apparelled
In a tightish suit of blue,

in which the first two lines would give the impression that this is going to be a sentimental poem about the beauties of childhood. Or Mr. Belloc's various invocations to Africa in *The Modern Traveller*:

O Africa, mysterious land,
Surrounded by a lot of sand
And full of grass and trees ...
Far land of Ophir, mined for gold
By lordly Solomon of old.
Who, sailing northward to Perim,
Took all the gold away with him
And left a lot of holes, etc.

Bret Harte's sequel to 'Maud Muller', with such couplets as:

But the very day that they were mate
Maud's brother Bob was intoxicated

plays essentially the same trick, and so in a different way do Voltaire's mock epic, *La Pucelle*, and many passages in Byron.

English light verse in the present century — witness the work of Owen Seaman, Harry Graham, A. P. Herbert, A. A. Milne and others — has mostly been poor stuff, lacking not only in fancifulness but in intellectuality. Its authors are too anxious not to be highbrows — even though they are writing in verse, not to be poets. Early-Victorian light verse is generally haunted by the ghost of poetry; it is often extremely skilful as verse, and it is sometimes allusive and 'difficult'. When Barham wrote:

The Callipyge's injured behind,
Bloudie Jack!

The de Medici's injured before;
And the Anadyomene's injured in so many
Places, I think there's a score,
If not more,
Of her fingers and toes on the floor.

He was performing a feat of sheer virtuosity which the most serious poet would respect. Or, to quote Calverley again, in his 'Ode to Tobacco':

Thou, who when fears attack,
Bidst them avaunt, and Black
Care, at the horseman's back
Perching, unseatest;
Sweet when the morn is grey,
Sweet when they've cleared away
Lunch, and at close of day
Possibly sweetest!

Calverley is not afraid, it will be seen, to put a tax on his reader's attention and to drag in a recondite Latin allusion. He is not writing for lowbrows, and – particularly in his 'Ode to Beer' – he can achieve magnificent anticlimaxes because he is willing to sail close to true poetry and to assume considerable knowledge in his readers.

It would seem that you cannot be funny without being vulgar – that is vulgar by the standards of the people at whom English humorous writing in our own day seems mostly to be aimed. For it is not only sex that is 'vulgar'. So are death, childbirth and poverty, the other three subjects upon which the best music-hall humour turns. And respect for the intellect and strong political feeling, if not actually vulgar, are looked upon as being in doubtful taste. You cannot be really funny if your main aim is to flatter the comfortable classes: it means leaving out too much. To be funny, indeed, you have got to be serious. Punch, for at least forty years past, has given the impression of trying not so much to amuse as to reassure. Its implied message is that all is for the best and nothing will ever really change.

It was by no means with that creed that it started out.

1945

THE END