HUMOUR IN DISSENT

By PETER STEELE

'A BRILLIANT SELF-PUBLICIST, he gained his greatest triumphs by dancing jigs as comic epilogues to plays in which he had just appeared. These jigs, which included words and music, probably suggested to him his most notorious stunt: a long-distance Morris dance from London to Norwich. Nine days of dancing on the road were interspersed with fourteen days of resting his feet. Prosperous and famous, for a while he jigged through Europe, but returned to act and end his days in London. For one so ebullient in life, accounts of his death are obscure. A Southwark church register has a terse entry: "William Kempe, a man".'[1]

So much for Will Kempe, player to William Shakespeare, the man who occasioned the term 'nine days' wonder'. Hard lines on him, though nobody could be less surprised than Shakespeare that it turned out that way in the end: Kempe's fate is the kind of thing which that ironical man made the staple of his art. Yet it leaves me musing, musing on that interplay between proficiency and mortality which is the stock-in-trade of the clown. Were he nothing but hobbledehoy, we might watch him briefly, but then forget him: were he only the reminder of our frailties, we should expect a different decorum of him. It is because, in his antics, we find a revelatory vein, that we give him elbow-room in our imaginations. Thinking very well, or very ill, of our own behaviour or our own insights, we must leave him kicking his heels outside. It is when we are in two minds about ourselves that we find him after all at our side. William Kempe, a man, paces all of us.

The clown is always at least a potential dissenter. In part this is because such is his temperament, such his habit. All of us are cruciform physically and some of us are much that way mentally: tell us to go straight on, and we will, adroitly or no, go crabwise. There is not much use in flying into a rage with us for doing so, any more than one should rage at the bias in the bowl. If we do not go that way, we are not going to go at all: and that is not perversity—to go otherwise would be perverse. Many a clown, old or new, takes his warrant from this. In the water of his mind, the

swordlike instruments of others are bent, the day's unremarkable silver is clouded, fish and coral and unplumbed deeps have the priority. As, in the classic costume of the Europe clown, dark and bright lozenges play against one another, so is his mind costumed. He has a dappled habit, and it is there to stay.

We like these contrarities, some of the time. They work very well when it is 'our boy' who exhibits them. I will go to my own grave with no tithe of my debt to Chesterton paid, and that on many counts, and so I am predisposed to let this wag of Catholicism have most of the room he wants, whereas others find him repellent or contemptible. Chesterton played the contrary part for all it was worth, as his thousands of aphorisms attest. Calling a very early book *Heretics* for the jaunty reason that the thinkers discussed were heteredox from him was fair enough: calling a later book *Orthodoxy* in hopes of showing what the true state of affairs is was also fair enough, but gives no hint of the swagger and sparkle which informs its writing. He tried to be God's fool, the saboteur of falsehood, the brilliant blunderer into what, because true, must surely prevail against prevalent misconception. Pennies from the Catholic side of the house rain down upon him.

But the fool may always have his licence withdrawn, because we may find his sallies intolerable. They may be thought indecorous, blasphemous, libels upon the state, even in league with that chaos which, we all fear, may come again. And so indeed they may be: the fool enjoys no infallibility, no particularly good conscience: if the divinity which hedges kings about is as questionable as the fool claims, so is any counter-regality or counter-divinity to which he himself lays claim. The charge against fool or clown or wag or jester will almost always lie, for he too is 'a man'. Seeing that, and breathing a sigh of relief at having the appropriate sanctions brought home, outraged society may easily be distracted from the fact that the crooked man is emblematically important to us even when he happens to be wrong, and stubborn in his conceits. Auden, in that wise and sumptuous poem 'In praise of limestone', prizes limestone country and its indulged and self-indulgent ways because 'it disturbs our rights'. 'The poet', he says, 'admired for his earnest habit calling the sun the sun, his mind Puzzle', gets a jolt from living in such a milieu. Literally true or not, this points us in the right direction. Our minds, after all, stale even more rapidly than our hearts. We need some contrariety amongst us to give ourselves a chance.

Contrariety, perhaps, but why the humour, why the jesterly behaviour? Cannot we have the thing managed through a *sic et non*? As A. P. Herbert says, pokerfaced, in *Uncommon law*, 'People must not do things for fun. There is no reference to fun in any Act of Parliament'. Well of course much of the intellectual life, and its social policies, can be managed in that way. Comb through, say, F. C. Copleston's magisterial history of philosophy, and you will not find many references to tatterdemalion styles or intellectual raffishness: wait for the jokes in *Capital* or *The origin of the species*, and you will be waiting for a long time. By the same token, and whatever the sorrowing readers of *Hansard* may sometimes suppose, we do not hire our parliamentary representatives to clown it along: and no more do we wish Peter Sellers to play the detective or Spike Milligan the alderman. Things are hard enough, God knows, without our deliberately making them worse. Maybe so: but to come back to the earlier point, for some at least the mind is instinctively a tumbler, and such people refuse except at moments of gross self-pity to regard themselves as other than human. For them, thought, and perhaps feeling, is constantly fissiparous: and they refuse to believe that this makes them two-headed.

Humour is not an idiolect merely, nor even just a dialect: it is a language, one of humanity's languages. Like every language, it is an attempt not simply to report upon what has been noticed on the way, but is an attempt to make a way. The professor who rejects an undergraduate's opinion because 'I've never heard that said'—he is not apocryphal—is in doubtful case, but most of us have some of that professorial blood in us. We like our converse to be unadventurous. It is not commonly praise when we say of someone, 'You can never tell what he'll say next': fear or vexation, not delighted expectation, is what is being signalled. But for the man thoroughly humorous in mind, talk is his entrée into that zone of being—the world—which has not given any undertaking that it will not be pluriform, and which as time goes by looks determined to be more and more protean. It is as if what has often been attested by great thinkers, namely their increasing bemusement in the face of affairs, is something instinctively felt by the humorist. St James thought that little member, the tongue, unruly indeed. Improbably enough, that makes him the patron saint of humorists.

We praise other social functionaries not only because of specific accomplishments, but because of their dedication and tenacity in pursuit of processes. It is the cook's shopping, culling, deliberating,

ordering, juxtaposing and consigning which earns our endorsement, as well as the emerging viand. The general, the doctor, the teacher, the artist, the parson—what we want of them is fidelity to process, being men or women for the long haul. The least noble instance of this is the person praised for mere survival, and yet even that is not ignoble: think how eloquently many a humble patient is praised for having had the 'will to live'. Now something similar is to be said of the humorist, when we are looking at something deeper than a few party tricks. He—and increasingly she—is prized because of a readiness to go on exploring this one of humanity's languages. We recognize particular comic styles readily enough, and very various they may be, but presumably we stay with one or another not only because we like the familiar, but also because we have hopes that it will again as it has before come good with insight. Implicitly, this is an accolade for pertinacity. When Michael Frayn says of one of his characters that he had an open mind—'it was open at the front and it was open at the back'—we may whoop with joy at the *jeu*, but I think that we also rejoice in the fact that Frayn has done it again, that that particular language has given us in crystalline form what has been held in suspension for a long time. When one of Wodehouse's characters says, 'I spent the afternoon musing on Life. If you come to think of it, what a queer thing Life is! So unlike anything else', the long, meditative Wodehousean murmur through all the volumes is vindicated once again. Hopkins praised all that was 'counter, original, spare, strange'; he might have been playing apologist for humorists, and if he had been no one could have done it more suitably, given his near-obsession with the ubiquity of process.

What I have been saying presses towards a view of the humorist as anthropologist, social, philosophical, even theological. Chesterton was clearly all three of these, however often he begged off such titles and claimed to be that modest thing, a journalist. His demurrer never had more plausibility than Will Rogers's claim when he introduced a political tone into his act in 1915, 'I don't make jokes; I just watch the government and report the facts'. Both men were up to more elaborate games than they easily allowed, and both were characteristic of others in their craft. Perhaps we may say that the most valuable attribute for any kind of anthropologist, over and above an eye for 'the facts', is a fresh eye. And as other momentous human activities call for proficiency

in technique, so does the getting of the fresh eye. Randall Jarrell said that a poet is a person who by dint of standing out in the rain for a lifetime manages to get struck by lightning once or twice, and that is a technique of sorts. A more deliberate method, used by many a comic writer, is the de-familiarizing of what is around him. In principle, he may share this with all sorts of other thinkers and writers, but for him it is likely to be a *sine qua non*. Mercator's projection of the world is all very well for some quite limited purposes, but to make a new projection must be at the heart of the humorist's project.

Hence the alternative views of society of the satirist—rueful, contemptuous, exuberant, melancholy, zany. By now there can hardly be any *genus* from among the animal kingdom which has not been pressed into service to take a view of our own rather dotty species. From microbe to mastodon, they have all been imagined as having their say, all de-centring us in one sense, but of course re-centring us in another, we being the ones who can make mock of ourselves, we being the witty anthropoids. The ghost of Will Kempe seems to preside over this venture too, coupling still resilience with mortality's interrogation. The gambit is philosophical, whether one is looking to the beast-fables of the middle ages, the interrogatory beasts of Swift and more than one of his contemporaries, *Animal farm*, or the aesopean literature through which many an Eastern-European writer has kept both his head and his morale in difficult circumstances. The beasts are a convenience, being both so alarmingly like and so temptingly unlike us: but anything would do which gave sufficient of a tilt to our ordinarily flat-earthed perception of ourselves for us to be slid off it in disarray. Imaginary figures from space or time, conflations of members of one civilization or pre- or post-civilization with those of others, mutants from our supposed norm to another condition become habitual—any of these may come to hand, and be paraded before the wry comic eye, in an attempt to see what is to be said about 'the human'.

And perhaps that is a useful way of putting it—'an attempt to see what is to be *said*'. What is at issue here is not only a Montaignean quizzicality about our fluctuating reality, and not only a trying on for size of one kind of talk after another, but some kind of relationship between the two of them. Back a comic into a corner and ask him for his opinions, and he is as likely to be a dead bore as anyone else: let him carry on in narcissistic

isolation, and he is as likely to be shallow as anyone else: the trick of the thing—for him far more importantly than for his penny-throwing audience—is to bite off neither more nor less than can be chewed, to tongue neither more nor less dexterously than can be telling. The moral equivalents of the intellectual abuses in such situations are our old friends, presumption and despair, presumption in being non-accountable to things as they are, while offering to mesmerize the observer: and despair in having no hope that the Lord also known as the Word will somehow conjoin world with tongue.

'You will always find some Eskimos ready to instruct the Congolese on how to cope with heat waves.' So said Stanislaw Lec, in his *Unkempt thoughts*, which belongs to a genre well-known to Nietzsche and Sinyavsky: here is unruliness quite serious about its business. The trouble with his excellent and appallingly true remark is that his 'always' is apropos. The humorist may be the Eskimo or the Congolese, and so may his supposed butt or straight-man. Archimedes, reportedly, said that he would move the world if he had a place to stand on: but it is a commonplace of intellectual commentary that, while most of us at times share the Archimedean ambition, we can no more stand clear of the world, ludicrous or luminous, than he could. When we try to do so, we are cast in odd lights indeed. Some years ago, in St Louis, I bought a postcard which showed Manhattan by night, photographed handsomely from above, in all of what the unkind would think of as its self-congratulating glory. Far in the distance in the night-sky was that well-known planet, the Earth. The joke was on Manhattan, palpably: but was there no joke on St Louis?

By now, I am glad to say, there is accumulating a handsome set of scholarly reflections on the social identity of the fool, and those of us who tinker with notions about play in life must surely welcome that. But we are playing with fire, or I hope that we are. If humour is merely a palliative, like port, or watching *Dallas*, or working on one's suntan, a lot of us have been misled for a long time. Kempe did not have to wait for his death to become 'a man', jettisoning foolery at the end only to come to his senses. The fact is rather that the affronts brought to the others by the fool are ones which he also suffers in his own being. That commonplace, the greenroom fool whose downturned mouth mirrors, as on some horizon, the uptilted lips displayed on stage, is not only generally historically true: it is founded on the daily

experience of millions. I said earlier that we are cruciform in mind: Lord knows, we are so in heart, else every spiritual director would be out of a job: mind and heart conspire, confusedly, to play what we tellingly call 'merry hell' with our stable self-appraisals. Our dreams attest, or protest, that we are more sardonic, head-tilting, body-canting, world-flipping, than the daylight's respectabilities declare, often with a computerized monotonous voice, that we must be. To talk about 'Humour in dissent', in other words, is not necessarily, and in fact not very interestingly, to talk about an ameliorative role played by a zany in a hard but given world. It is rather to talk about the bent of the alternator, the one who plans at least to replace the zipper with buttons, and God knows what even less suave things besides. It is not that the dispirited king, or the tired businessman, has at his shoulder a memento-mori who is also a memento-vivere, as anonymous as Socrates's daimon, and as potentially vitalizing. This sprite, perhaps our truest guardian angel, keeps on adding scholia to our theses, Jeeves-like coughs to our Woosterian affirmations. In *Piers Plowman*, not a conspicuously indulgent work, Langland quotes a dictum of Augustine's: *Ecce ipsi idioti rapiunt celum, ubi nos sapientes in inferno mergimur*, which Neville Coghill renders as, 'See! very fools take Heaven by assault, where we, the wise, are sunk into the pit'.[2] That parting of the ways goes on daily, nightly, in our own beings.

In all beings? Who really knows? Some talk things up as if it is not so for them. More persuasively, perhaps, to those accepting a Christian rhetoric, some make their own, with apparently unvexed proprietorial instinct, the riddles of Jesus and Paul. 'He who loses his life will save it': 'I have food to eat of which you know nothing': 'He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me'—how such phrases have rung, tellingly but sometimes lethally, in the ears and imaginations of fanatics! As a Jesuit, I prize especially the Ignatian stress on the fact that there is absolutely nothing which the deviant heart cannot misread and turn to ill purposes, no mask the Evil One cannot, with insidious flair, take to himself. And so, in the history of Christianity, one sees sinful and therefore silly men and women, facing other sinful and therefore silly men and women, battering away at one another, all of course claiming to be licensed by the Spirit in one of his seasons, and few ready for that conversion, that jester's flip to the heart, which would lay them open to an ampler insight or a more profound allegiance. One's zip-code does not of itself give much

clue as to how, in these respects, one will be behaving from day to day: God is not the Postmaster General.

'Conversion': now there is a word! How serviceable to instincts either conservative or radical, but in neither case necessarily open! True, life has its crudities, valuable or vile: every lumpish human being is the first, and every cross or its equivalent is the second, and we cannot put either of these on hold while we flirt with the subjunctive. Very sophisticated people may have to die for very simple truths—indeed, this is a large part of the social history of martyrdom. But it is also true that conversion is often conversion to the not yet, the unfolding, the 'land which I will show you'. Abraham, father of faith, culture-hero of Christ himself as well as of Jews and Christians, went out, 'not knowing where he was going'. For some people, the clown-figure is conversational, the sponsor of the playground or the cocktail party: for others, he is conversional, yanking Abraham onto his camel, and turning that unloveable beast's head out into the sands. For my money, he is the second.

The humorist is prized and occasionally rewarded because he is thought to be saying, 'It will all be all right'. At one level this is laudable indeed: but that is not a shallow level. We expect that message to come to us from gentry who have perfected techniques—stockbrokers, consulting psychologists, persons with an extra set of uniforms to put on, like General Macarthur, when the previous one became sweat-stained. I cannot judge their divine gradation: for all I know, it will be they who enter the Kingdom of Heaven first. But it is the humorist's business to say, instead, 'It will not be all right—anyway, *that* will not be all right', as he gestures, damningly, at any feature of our unfinished condition. The acridity which hangs around the humorist, and makes the rest of us uneasy, comes from his being secretly in league with the Lord of Critique. Kafka said that the last judgement is something which is in permanent session; grim and all though the dictum may be, it is one which fits the comic as he taunts or teases us into skewing our view away from its customary doggedness into something like insightfulness.

To all of which I hear the protest, 'come on now, you are loading the dice'. Am I not scuffing over Danny Kaye and investing all in Lenny Bruce? Not at all. The figure, or the style, which can take you by the sleeve and haul you around to think again is as distinctive as you are. Try these, as a sampler, all from *The Oxford book of aphorisms*[3]: 'Faith is under the left nipple' (Martin Luther); 'A philospher trying to extinguish his passions is like an alchemist

putting out his fire' (Chamfort); 'When people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate each other' (Eric Hoffer); 'How many "coming men" one has known! Where on earth do they all go to?' (Sir Arthur Pinero); 'It is only the poor who are forbidden to beg' (Anatole France); 'When smashing monuments, save the pedestals—they always come in handy' (Stanislaw Lec); 'The precursor of the mirror is the mother's face' (D. W. Winnicott). They solicit my attention only because they have solicited someone else's—their maker's, of course, but then their collator's. And they are all, no two of them in the same way, troublesome. All are urbane, but it is not with the urbanity of the person intent upon the right press to the wedding-garment. They disturb our rights: and it is one of our rights that they should.

For we are well-placed when we can demand to have the jesters among us—the glinters, the flashy ones, the implausibles. H. L. Mencken, donor of scars to the deserving and no doubt to some of the undeserving, wrote once, 'If, after I depart this vale, you ever remember me and have thought to please my ghost, forgive some sinner and wink your eye at some homely girl'. It deserves remark if only because it is a reminder that humour's 'perversity' may often take compassionate forms. And if it seems an odd usage to move automatically from Mencken to Jesus the Lord, that seeming must stem from a very unalert sense of what that Lord had to represent, which is to say to reveal, to us. The curlicue of shaving over his carpenter's ear, like the cigar-stub jammed into Mencken's journalistic mouth, signalled industry, mortality, commonalty. The one would be blown away, as the other was burned away, in the winds of time: but the eyes of both men gazed at the peculiar human performance, as well as being met by the all-creating and all-knowing eyes of the Father. Mencken died for nobody, and nobody died for Mencken—nobody but the all-important One. In a zone to which we all hope one day to have access, where humour never singes but may perhaps still spur, the two, we may also hope, trade views upon us all.

NOTES

[1] Unger-Hamilton, Clive (ed): *The entertainers* (London: Pitman House, 1980), p 37.
[2] Coghill, Nevill: 'Wags, clowns and jesters', *More talking of Shakespeare*, (ed) John Garrett (London: Longman, 1959), p 9.
[3] Gross, John: *The Oxford book of aphorisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).