2 The Ethics of Humour

In order to understand another's view of humour we need to be lucid about our own views, because our culture has rules, assumptions and conventional wisdom about humour to which we may or may not subscribe, but of which we are probably at least subliminally aware. Overall, for the last century and more, authors who have written about humour in English have tended to write eulogies.

An audience of charitable ladies — perhaps in flowered hats — gathered in New York in 1852 to hear the English novelist William Makepeace Thackeray lecture on *Charity and humour*. And this was the burden of his argument:

Besides contributing to our stock of happiness, to our harmless laughter and amusement, to our scorn for falsehood and pretension, to our righteous hatred of hypocrisy, to our education in the perception of truth, our love of honesty, our knowledge of life, and shrewd guidance through the world, have not our humorous writers, our gay and kind weekday preachers, done much in support of that holy cause which has assembled you in this place; and which you are all abetting — the cause of love and charity, the cause of the poor, the weak, and the unhappy; the sweet mission of love and tenderness, and peace and good will towards men? That same theme which is urged upon you by the eloquence and example of good men to whom you are delighted listeners on Sabbath-days, is taught in his way and according to his power by the humorous writer, the commentator on every-day life and manners.²

For Thackeray, humour was the tool of religious love and charity. This was an Englishman lecturing to Americans, and his lecture tour was a huge popular success. He was able to assume in 1852 that they shared a common culture — literature, religion, ‘every-day life and manners’, everything. He was talking about the role of humour in the life of speakers of the English language. He was addressing himself to the sentiments of ‘the myriads here [America] and at home [Britain] who speak our common tongue’.³

He went on to describe the ‘gay and kind week-day preachers’:

A literary man of the humoristic turn is pretty sure to be of a philanthropic nature, to have great sensibility, to be easily moved to
pain or pleasure, keenly to appreciate the varieties of temper of people round about him, and sympathise with their laughter, love, amusement, tears. Such a man is philanthropic, man-loving by nature, as another is irascible, or red-haired, or six feet high.

... in esteeming the benefaction, we are grateful to the benefactor too, somewhat; and so of men of genius, richly endowed, and lavish in parting with their minds' wealth, we may view them... kindly and favourably, and be thankful for the bounty of which Providence has made them dispensers.4

No doubt Thackeray was putting his point of view in an extreme form, but it was a form that was acceptable to his audience and to many who have read his lecture and echoed his views since. But they are not mere echoes. This is the conventional wisdom of a society that explicitly approved of humour.

Making allowance for rhetorical flourish, for the religious and sentimental proclivities of the time, and for the lecturer’s enthusiasm for his own profession, Thackeray’s lecture puts the same view as a great many more recent essays on humour. Since his time, humour has been the panacea for the world’s ills; the ‘best medicine’ for the ills of the flesh. It is the universal oil for the works of the society, compulsory for politicians, entertainers, advertising persuaders and all those who would court the love of the public. To say that someone ‘has no sense of humour’ is the ultimate calumny and all will indignantly deny it. Hearing a laugh brightens a dark day; the incapacity to laugh bespeaks depression so deep as to constitute mental illness. Humour is one of the social graces, but it is far more than that. It is, in the cultural tradition of the English language, a totally positive quality; an essential qualification for full humanity.

And yet it has not always been so. Thackeray said that humour contributed not only ‘to our harmless laughter and amusement’, but also ‘to our scorn for falsehood and pretension, to our righteous hatred of hypocrisy’. These are strong words and dangerous passions. He assumed that the scorn would be for vice and folly, and the hatred would be ‘righteous’, but it is possible to scorn the good and hate the virtuous. Humour has its threatening side. Thackeray wrote:

If I do not love Swift, as, thank God, I do not, however immensely I may admire him, it is because I revolt from the man who placards himself as a professional hater of his own kind; because he chisels his savage indignation on his tombstone, as if to perpetuate his protest against being born of our race.5