ABORIGINAL HUMOUR*

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A life by flood and field is a hard one and Aboriginal life was very hard indeed. Unknowledgeable Europeans have thought it joyless, but this was far from being the case. The Aborigine's culture was materially simple, but it was adequate to his needs; his social organisation was exceedingly complex, but it allowed him a life of great satisfaction when not too much interrupted by Europeans; we are slowly discovering that he had a rich aesthetic capacity and an interesting metaphysical conception of life and world; and I can testify from much acquaintance that he added to these a very marked sense of humour. He had, in short, fundamentally all that we have. At least he once had. He was fully equipped to meet life on even terms and, with humour, to get a little the better of it in passing. To understand and appreciate his humour is one of the best ways of rounding out an estimate of him as a human personality.

Much of what I shall say amounts in the end to a roundabout statement that the Aborigines found amusing much the same kind of things which we find amusing. In other words, we are dealing with human universals. It is therefore, perhaps, as well for me to begin by saying that there were of course major differences.

We find a certain amusement — kindly, but still amusement — in much Aboriginal custom. This is parochialism on our part, but it is well matched: the Aborigine felt (and feels) much the same way about European custom. Much of our scheme of life does not 'make sense' to him. A quick handful of things that baffle him about us, and for which he laughs *at* us behind our backs, would include our inexplicable passion for unremitting work; the fact that men willingly carry things when there are women to carry them; that we actually thrash small children; that we accumulate, and hold in perpetuity, stupidly large amounts of goods instead of dispersing them to gain reputation; that we have no apparent rules of marriage — I could give many such instances to show how the two schemes of living lie across each other. It is remarkable, in the circumstances, that the universals of humour show through so strongly. Sometimes, of course, all communication breaks

* The late Emeritus Professor W.E.H. Stanner identified this manuscript as the reading script for an informal talk given to the Canberra Fellowship of Australian Writers in September 1956. He intended it as an entertainment for a small circle of friends but a quarter of a century later his words have considerable historical importance as a unique anthropological account of Aboriginal humour. Professor Stanner had discussed publication with the editors but had not completed his planned revision. Mrs W.E.H. Stanner kindly gave permission for publication in the present form. Handwritten corrections on two copies of the manuscript were collated and incorporated (for example the change to past tense in the first two paragraphs) but except for capitalising the word Aborigine(s) the editors have made no further changes.

down, and blackfellow and European look helplessly at each other over an uncrossable frontier.

Several years ago I was making some psychological tests which required the Aborigines to repeat, days and weeks later, a story I had told them. Many of the recalls broke down, the blacks being overcome with laughter at the same point. The story was about two brothers who had quarrelled over a girl. As the blacks began to tell me how one brother sneaked up and killed the other with one stroke of a stick, their self-control failed and they hooted with mirth. Something about the idea seemed to them quite risible. I suspect it may have been the connotation of romantic love. I saw too late that this kind of theme suffused the story. Sexual passion of course they know and understand, but the sensible thing for Aboriginal brothers to do if they like the same girl is to *share* her favours. The cult of romantic love, as far as they can comprehend it, possibly seems to them a sort of lunacy, very much as some of us look on tooth avulsion, the cutting of bodily cicatrices, or widow-strangling.

You will appreciate the difficulties. I have to rule out of my discussion a certain amount of Aboriginal humour since it rests on — indeed, only makes sense within — the context of their own outlook and customs. But I cannot go to the other extreme and propound a general theory of laughter to account for what I call 'the universals'. One of the most distinguished of anthropologists, Bronislaw Malinowski, once said that 'anthropology is the science of the sense of humour'. That is not the impression you would derive from a study of the standard texts. I am simply telling the truth when I say that humour is not a subject to which the discipline of anthropology has given much serious thought. I find this, on reflection, a curious matter. I know of only one anthropologist who has written on the subject — Professor Ralph Piddington, an Australian; but he did so when he was still a professional psychologist; and he subsequently had to go to New Zealand. The only 'theory' I have is that 'humour', as we ordinarily use the word, is a way of looking at things or situations. The 'humorousness' is first of all *in* the things. Laughter is a sign of acknowledgment, our way of relating ourselves to 'humorousness'.

The underlying philosophy of Aboriginal humour is likely, therefore, to baffle a European mind. This is not surprising. The philosophy of all humour is baffling. If it were not, we should not have had wit likened by Burton to 'the rust of the soul', and we should not have had Ogden Nash advising us that

It is better in the long run to possess an abscess or a tumour
than to possess a sense of humour.

There are, I know, delicate souls to whom the idea of fingering the anatomy of humour is repulsive. The anatomy of melancholy, they feel, is a fit subject. Men's sadness has a wistful fascination. It also often allows the sad to live very comfortably writing about their almost incommunicable sensibility. But they make an examination of why men laugh seem to be a

kind of morbid hepatoscopy. True, there is some kind of affinity between humour and tragedy, an affinity which is almost too painful for many minds to wish to know too much about.

O, unseen jest, inscrutable, invisible,

As a nose on a man's face, or a weathercock on a steeple.

But this is no reason for not studying it. Everyone who thinks or reads is aware of the affinity, and of a strangely concealed antinomy within it. What is it, Horace asked, that forbids us to speak the truth, laughingly? The paradox which humour forms with truth is one of man's oldest insights into himself and his situation. I think I have recognized its evidences among the Aborigines.

An Aborigine of whom I was fond was once discussing with me the extinction of his tribe. He was being dispassionate about it — I thought too dispassionate, for the area was one in which there had been violence, betrayal and murder. Many of his countrymen had been translated to a higher place by European marksmanship, disease and the genial use of strychnine in the waterholes. My old man had observed much and had thought much. Perhaps because his thoughts went too deep for words, perhaps only from good manners — his were impeccable — he parried my questions and showed some amusement. I said: 'In a few years you will all be dead; there will be no blackfellows left; but you laugh about it. Why do you laugh? I see nothing amusing'. He would not be drawn for some time. Finally he said, 'Bye-and-bye, altogether blackfellow dead. Plenty white man sit-down this country. White man walkabout longa bush. Him losim himself longa bush. Altogether white man try findim. Altogether white man losim himself longa bush. No blackfeller. Can't findim. Whitefeller dead. Blackfeller dead'. And he smiled sardonically.

This is Lancashire humour. '*Wit's nowt, till it's dear bowt*'. There is a good deal of dear-bought Aboriginal humour, pointing to their insight into the 'gravity concealed behind the jest' and also to their courage to proceed, nevertheless, to make the jest. At a mission station which I know, a certain conflict was raging. The issue was between what the old Aborigines wanted to do, and what God wanted them to do. The matter was not at all clear to the Aborigines. They *knew* what they wanted. They were being told what God wanted. They thought there was something second-hand about the instructions. The questions turned on *how* their instructor *knew* what God wanted. Some said the clergyman just knew; others that he only said he knew; both these unreasonable theories failed to convince them. One man finally volunteered: 'might-be him got telephone longa God'. I was appealed to. Did he or didn't he? I said I did not know, but that I had always found the clergyman truthful. I also said that he had a lot of tea, sugar, flour and tobacco. This argument appealed to the Aborigines. One of them said: 'That man, him good man, y'know. Him got plenty everything. Plenty tucker. Plenty *wian* [i.e. tobacco — the word also means human excrement]. Plenty mouth [i.e. words]. Might be him got plenty savvy-belong-himself

[i.e. private knowledge or wisdom]'. I said that this might be so. I was then asked if I had a telephone. I said that I had; but it was only a small one. 'You savvy belong God?' I was asked. I said that I sometimes thought I heard a voice, a long way away. I was asked what the voice said. I replied that I could not quite make out the words. My inquisitor said: 'that's what blackfeller reckon'. I then said: 'Well, what are you going to do?' My friend said: 'Today, tobacco. Sunday, God'. We both laughed.

I do not feel called upon, or indeed competent, to prove anything to you about Aboriginal humour. I can simply narrate some of the things they say, describe some of the things they laugh at, and add a sort of minimum glossary. The main point to keep in mind is that the Aboriginal scene is in most respects the universal scene. Humour wears familiar garments, but with a twist all its own. There is coarse buffoonery, salacity, punning, practical joking, and all the rest. I would not mention them were it not that a perfectly intelligent European once asked me, quite seriously, if the Aborigines laughed and cried 'just like other people'. It made me wonder what image of savage life many Europeans can possibly have in mind to suggest such idiocies. The hammer on the thumb, the slip on banana peel, the sudden loss of dignity — all these 'reversals', the basis of a universal class of humour, evoke much the same responses among the Aborigines as among Europeans. Perhaps the principle is carried a little far: I have seen Aborigines roaring with laughter at another chased by a crocodile, or at an old man trying to climb a slippery tree to escape a rogue buffalo. The sentiments of pity and compassion are, on the whole, a little on the weak side, a fact which itself requires another kind of explanation. But it is not of this level of humour that, I imagine, you would wish me to speak. I myself would rather try to bring out, if I can, the aspect of humour we call wit, which Aristotle described as 'cultured insolence'. For it is a capacity which the Aborigines unmistakably have. At least, we can recognize a certain pawky vein of wit in spite of the surrounding crudity.

I was once building a bush hut as a shelter from the wet season. I was putting on the ridge-pole when an old blackfellow called out to me to come down. He said that he would fix it himself. He was twice my age and very authoritative in his manner to me, as Aborigines frequently are when they know you well. He said: 'Bye-and-bye you fall down, breakim leg'. I told him to mind his own business. 'You', I replied, 'have one leg in the grave anyway'. 'No matter me', he said, 'you come down, like I bin tellem you. Straightaway. Me blackfellow. Supposim you fall down, breakim leg, every policeman from Darwin race up longa this country, chasim up altogether blackfellow. Full up humbug. Plenty trouble. You come down. Straight-away'.

Then there was the day my old bush friend Charlie Dargie and I went hunting. We did not see even a lizard all day. We came home out of spirits and rather grumpy. Charlie suddenly found a solution. 'We'll go and *shoot* a barramundi', he said. The barramundi is the best-eating fish in Australian

waters, fresh, salt or mineral. We walked some miles to Bamboo Creek, a slack tributary of the Daly River, where barramundi often lie sunning themselves a foot below the surface. We stood on the top of the steep jungle-covered bank and sought our quarry. Charlie soon pointed to a fine fat fish faintly swishing near the surface. He shot like a Bisley marksman, swift and true, and the stunned fish floated to the top. We had it, in imagination, almost sizzling in the pan when a shrill '*yackai*' came from a nearby bush and the face of Jarawak, a Madngella man, thrust out. 'What-the-matter you Charlie', he cried, 'you try stealim fish belonga me?' We had touched the depths. To shoot a caught fish tied up to the bank by a string. Jarawak saw that the tale spread. The blacks never forgot it. To this day, half a lifetime later, they still laugh. When I go fishing with them, someone is sure to say in an innocent tone: 'You got plenty bullet?'

On a nearby station they were breaking-in some rough colts in the horse-yard. One mankiller threw every stockman and black 'stockboy' on the place until only the manager and Jacky were left. The manager said: 'Come on, Jacky, your turn now'. Jacky, slouched on the top rail, looked in turn at the wild-eyed and perspiring colt, at his dishevelled companions, and back at the colt. He seemed lost in thought. 'Well, come on', the manager snapped. Jacky gave him an under-the-eyebrows look and said 'No-more', which meant 'nothing doing'. He then added: 'You better go first-time, boss. Plenty more white man. Blackfellows getting scarce round here just now'.

But these, after all, are but episodes. They may make us smile but they do not necessarily help us to understand what humour is. There is another and very distinct kind of Aboriginal humour which, I think, to some extent does: it can be spoken of as 'formal' humour. That is to say, there are certain well-known situations in Aboriginal life which, in their understanding, have to be *signalized* and resolved by a kind of banter, half-serious, half-humorous.

I shall draw a parallel with a situation which we will recognize in European life. Among a close company of friends, some occasion arises - say, the departure of one person to live elsewhere, or a retirement from active life - and the occasion is thought appropriate for him to be entertained in a rather formal way: perhaps a presentation, perhaps a dinner. At such times a certain embarrassment is felt, especially perhaps among men. Their feelings, and what they are met to do, lie a little across each other: it is embarrassing to appear sentimental, but they desire and are expected to express emotion; they wish and are expected to say words of praise but feel self-conscious about doing so. Their relations with the guest of honour are 'ambivalent': they are pulled one way, pushed another. Not uncommonly, men solve this little social problem by a very patent conversion. They praise, but they praise mockingly; they show affection, but tinge it with malice; they make use of what we may call the venomous endearments; they may use bad, even indecent language. Everyone knows and understands the convention and few take it amiss. No one 'means' to be really offensive. It is a symbolic way of dealing with ambivalence.

When an Aborigine meets his wife's brother, he utters (in certain tribes I know) a very odd expletive sound (by forcing air between his lips) — a sound which, to European ears, is extraordinarily vulgar. He will sit or stand some distance away and, in a high-pitched voice (quite unlike the voice he ordinarily uses) will call out a long series of insinuating epithets, vulgarities and sometimes obscenities about his wife's brother. They are our 'venomous endearments'. He doesn't 'mean' any of them. The tone and pitch of voice show this — both are consciously stylized. A chorus of appreciative laughter from the audience, if he thinks of something really outrageous, also shows the presence of formal convention. The men often say astonishing things. The anthropologist calls this the 'joking-relationship'.

The ambivalence here comes from the common interest of the two men in one woman, wife to one and sister to the other. The Aborigines have the idea that there is something embarrassing in such a relationship between men. Anthropologists are not agreed as to the precise way in which they should describe or examine the nature of the embarrassment. I mention it for several reasons. One is to show the common form, between Aborigines and Europeans, of dealing with a comparable situation. Among the Aborigines, to avoid *showing* embarrassment, the two men act *as if* they were not being embarrassed. They pretend there is a different *kind* of situation. They act *as if* to say that two men who can say such things about each other cannot possibly be embarrassed. As if no tension could possibly exist between them — for, look! — they are laughing at each other, taking liberties with each other. *As if* the relationship had no ambivalence at all. The symbolisms — laughter and mock hostility intermingled — are the means of this *as if* solution. They are expressive and symbolic means of dealing socially with feelings resting on ambivalence.

Anthropologists are so used now to this kind of custom that they tend to take it for granted: there is a good and, on the whole, satisfying theory about it; but the theory explains everything except the humour — the 'joking' in the 'joking-relationship'.

The embarrassment a man feels in the presence of his wife's brother is a modified form of a man's feelings toward his wife's mother. The Aborigines have the idea that there is something excessively shameful, even dangerous, in the mother-in-law relation. An Aborigine cannot bring himself to mention her name. If he is compelled to do so, it seems to cause him an agony of embarrassment. Since he cannot avoid all reference to her, he speaks of her as *aiyanimbi*, which means 'the stinging hornet'. But he goes out of his way to avoid meeting her. If by chance the two encounter one another on the same path, the man makes a wide detour through the bush. In camp, he always faces away from her. He sleeps on the opposite side of the camp circle, as far away as possible. He never hands things to her direct, but always through a third person. If some emergency compels him to say something to her, he turns away and shouts at the top of his voice. This is a way of suggesting

that, in actuality, the two are really an immense distance apart, and are not having any close relationship.

The analysis of what lies behind this 'shame' relationship (as it is called by the blacks) is very complex and it concerns my paper only in one respect: the connection between humour and shame in the particular relationships mentioned. The only way to make the connection is to consider briefly the use of expressive symbols or signs in human affairs. It is part of the vastly larger question of the communication of meaning by signs of all kinds. The expressive symbols or signs I am speaking of are those which communicate states of feeling about the 'significance' of things, as the Aborigines have been taught to see them.

They regard the bullroarer as so 'significant' that they treat it with something very close to 'reverence'. They keep its whereabouts a secret; they smear it with human blood; they give it names which only initiated men can hear; they kill women who stray near its hiding place; when they show it on formal occasions they sing certain songs, dance certain dances, use certain musical forms, and wear certain bodily decorations which call forth their highest capacity for visual, plastic and mimetic art. The word 'reverence' is a piece of shorthand for all these activities. We have to interpret the activities as 'signs' symbolic of the significance, worth or value which the Aborigines attribute to the bullroarer. The bullroarer itself is a sign of almost ineffable and immensely significant meanings: it 'points beyond itself', as any sign or symbol does. What it points to is the metaphysic of The Dreaming. The Aborigines use songs, dances, music, secrecy and so on as a means to convey and express their grasp of these larger significances.

Anything — literally anything — which can stand for, or represent, or designate, or indicate something about something else can be a 'sign': a mark, a word, a number, a gesture. The signs are gathered up into different kinds of systems. The Aborigines have hit on the device of using aesthetic means — song, music, dancing, art — as one sign-system for expressing their grasp of and attitudes to the significance of the most important things in their life. This will seem strange only to people of other cultures who use different types of symbolic idiom.

If one studies Aboriginal life closely, one can see several gradations in their system of significances. Some things are treated with 'reverence'; other things with 'respect', i.e. something less than reverence; other things with 'formality', i.e. a little less than respect. It is possible to range the signs in a perfectly logical series, strange though the idiom may seem to be to Europeans. The 'strangeness' simply means we are too wrapped up in our own sign-languages. The signs are simply the means of outward expression of inward sentiments in some convenient idiom. The Aboriginal idiom is part of the mystery of their past. The peculiar significances they see in particular things and situations are not always easy to grasp.

Some of the signs, or sign vehicles — music, songs, dances, art — belong, as I have said, to an aesthetic order. But bodily movements and gestures of all kinds can also be used. Laughter and the display of shame, in the circumstances I have described, are both 'signs' belonging to the large and complex class I have outlined.

By laughing *at* the brother-in-law, and showing shame *in the presence* of the mother-in-law, the Aborigines are *expressing* attitudes or sentiments towards the relationships in which they stand, not towards the individual persons themselves. And the expressions are *formalized*, i.e. they are socially stylized, set in form and pattern for everyone. But they belong to what we may call the negative signs — that is, they fit in the same group as the signs which indicate grief, disrespect, irreverence, informality, hostility and so forth.

The signs used between brothers-in-law are, as I have said, a mixture — partly signs of hostility, partly signs of levity and jocularly. The signs of hostility (criticism, depreciation, mocking) can be traced to the fact that an Aborigine is never fully reconciled to the loss of his sister by marriage. But women *have* to marry and, because of exogamy, they have to marry out of the group; they *have* to be 'lost' to their brothers; yet brothers cannot forget. The only solution is to do what the blacks do. They couple two sets of signs — one positive (good humour), one negative (hostility) and, in a way, reverse them. They use humour to convey hostility. The symbolic signs are turned, as it were, inside out.

This custom is a perfect model for the analysis of much that lies within humour. If we study the 'humour' of things or situations, we will see that it nearly always consists of some incongruity, paradox, contrast or antinomy which our minds perceive. Hobbes said the perception was due to the passion he called 'sudden glory'. Leigh Hunt saw the nature of humour in 'the clash and concealment of incongruities, the meeting of extremes around a corner'. One revealing epigram was attributed to Montesquieu: 'wit consists in knowing the resemblance of things which differ and the difference of things which are alike'. The 'humour' of things is external to us: laughter is the sign we make towards what is humorous. It reconciles us to the humorous. But the sign can also be put to many other uses — some of them ambivalent, some hostile. European life is filled with equivalents of the Aboriginal 'joking-relationships'. We are all familiar with the humour — at least with the smile or laugh — of malice, of inner superiority, of condescension, of concealed hatred, of emotional falsity. So are the Aborigines. They can laugh and dance on the graves of their enemies about as well as we can. The only difference between us is that we make the savagery worse by doing so politely. Behind the ghastly 'social' smile is the image of the painted savage.

I have mentioned Horace's question: 'What is it that forbids us to speak the truth, laughingly?' There are clearly some truths, personal

and social, which we cannot ignore, cannot solve by laughter — even insincere laughter — and from which we can only turn away.

The 'shame' felt between an Aboriginal mother-in-law and her son-in-law — felt actually on both sides — is, I think, of this kind. It has not, in my opinion, a sexual basis, although this has been attributed as a reason. I do not think any single reason can be attributed. But if I were asked to find a single reason I would say that in my opinion it is due to the fact that, typically, a brother's loss is less than a mother's loss. One can find other possible explanations from Aboriginal society, but this comes somewhere near the heart of it, in the sociological sense — i.e. the sense in which one looks for 'general' explanations. A mother-in-law and son-in-law simply cannot come to terms, yet if they are to associate they must come to terms. Brothers-in-law can: the tie between each man and the girl is a degree less intense than between mother and girl. The Aborigines draw an arbitrary line and 'formalize' the relation of mother-in-law and son-in-law by actually preventing the characteristic clash which often disfigures the counterpart relation in European society. I would argue that the Aborigines tag the relation with the sign of 'shame' because the relation is irreconcilable, and that this is why they 'show' shame. The brother-in-law relation is irreconcilable, but it can be solved partly by an *as if* fiction — the fiction that no hostility exists; partly by humour; and partly because it *has* to be solved. By rule brothers-in-law exchange sisters in marriage, by convention they are trading partners, and (in a small community) they have many other necessary relations, being of the same sex and usually of the same age. But the mother-in-law and son-in-law relation is thought wholly irreconcilable. Its solution, however, has a logically equivalent form: there is an *as if* fiction — the fiction that they never really meet; complete avoidance so that in most circumstances they do not meet; and a logically compatible sign, 'shame', if they do meet.

This has taken me rather far afield. But only in a sense, for it reveals as clearly as any situation can part of the social background in which any humour is to be understood. When Tacitus said that 'a bitter jest that comes too near the truth leaves a sharp sting behind' he may not have had marriage in mind; but our mother-in-law jokes are truly his 'bitter jests'. Understood, they tell us something very important about the inward anatomy of 'the humorous' and the logic as well as the pathos of the human sign-language. I must not be supposed to be attacking marriage; I think that every family should have one; but, as Radcliffe-Brown used to say, one aspect of every marriage is, fundamentally, that it is an act of hostility. It creates for one set of people a kind of incongruity — inevitable loss, lamented loss; for another set a different incongruity — the eating and being eaten in marriage. I simply point out that the Aborigines recognize one of these situations more clearly than we do. Our means of dealing with the incongruities is to raise the value of marriage itself, or

each person in it, to so high a value that the 'signs' — respect, love, obedience, deference, dignity — ennoble it. Our way of dealing with the perpetual antinomy of love and not-love within marriage is to make it a sacrament, as permanent as baptism, though not as one-sided; as necessary as penance, though not as just; and as final as extreme unction. The Aborigines do not sacramentalize marriage: but they formalize a different set of relations from those which we stress. Their sign-system avoids one set of clashes and treats another set with humour, as far as possible.

Luckily, laughter does not only antagonize: it also ameliorates and heals. It is the good angel of enmity. I think the story that best illustrates the gift is that of one of my Aboriginal companions who had an unconquerable passion for tinned milk. In other ways he was thoroughly honest, but he stole milk at every opportunity. His conscience pricked him, especially as he had the complete freedom of my few bush stores, but he always lost his battle. I gloomily watched a carefully hoarded case of milk dwindle day by day. Now and then it irritated me, but I usually took the view that he was just a crazy mixed-up septuagenarian. Finally I found *every* tin except one empty, but all carefully repacked in the case. I looked at him and he looked at me. We both knew it was a crisis. I gave him the last tin, and with the true feeling which makes the martyr, said: 'Go on, you like milk'. He took it in silence (there is no Aboriginal word for thank-you and perhaps anyway it would hardly have been appropriate) and with great dignity. Then he went to the case of empty tins, and held up one or two so that I could *see* the tiny holes through which he had sucked them dry. He held one tin speculatively, poked at the hole, looked across at me, and said: 'Rust'.

I shall close with the story of a patrol — one of Stanner's Irregulars — in the war. The patrol was out looking for Japanese visitors. The men were crossing a plain and the track skirted a vast cluster of termite pillars in such a way as to create the illusion that the plain was in two halves, one covered with ant-beds, the other wholly bare. A soldier asked the detachment commander for the explanation. He could think of none, and put the question to an Aboriginal tracker. 'What name, boss?' the blackfellow asked in a puzzled way, not catching the drift of the question. The officer said: 'You puttim eye longa track'. 'Yowai [all right, will do, O.K.], said the tracker, all discipline, 'I puttim eye'. 'Now you look', said the officer, 'One side, nothing ant-bed. Ain't it?' 'Yowai', agreed the tracker. 'Now you look nother-one side. Million ant-bed. Ain't it?' 'Yowai', agreed the tracker. 'Well', enquired the officer, 'how did it all come about? *Why* were there so many ant-beds on one side and none on the other?' The tracker grinned impishly. 'That side', he said, gesturing magnificently towards the ant-beds, 'plenty ants. That side, no ants'. This seems to fit Pope's 'midwives' phrase' concerning humour — a perfect conception, and an easy delivery.