

## INEXTINGUISHABLE LAUGHTER

FATHER Ronald Knox\* thinks, but is not sure, that modern humour is degenerate satire. However uncertain he may be in his theories in his practice of both humour and satire he has the certainty of a very great master. Success in satire is readily proved by the way those who are ridiculed sit up and take notice. In the case of Father Knox there are still more eloquent witnesses to success; namely, those who are accustomed to satire, yet find themselves omitted by a master as too easy or venerable a prey. Witness, indeed, the rage against this book by our venerable friend *The Tablet*.

Every line of Father Knox's introductory Essay is richly suggestive. I select the only two of his remarks that provoke me to a difference of opinion.

He thinks that St. Thomas has omitted from the *Summa Theologica* the question of humour before the Fall; and that, for lack of space. The *Summa* is an encyclopedia, but not the modern sort. It classifies its subject-matter according to place in the universe, not according to place of first letter in the local alphabet. Therefore, you will not find a special paragraph beginning HUMOUR BEFORE THE FALL, with elsewhere, FALL, HUMOUR BEFORE THE. You will not even find a special section on Humming Birds. But you will find St. Thomas explaining very spaciouly that the Fall was a Sin; that sin means loss of grace and virtue; that before the Fall man had all the virtues: that one of the greatest virtues is justice; that one of the principal exercises of justice is to pass judgment; for any judgment

\* *Essays in Satire* by Ronald A. Knox. (Sheed & Ward; 6/-.)

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or criticism to be virtuous it must be (a) just in intention, (b) permitted by the Lord Chief Justice, (c) according to the strict rules of prudence. Judgment may be tacit or expressed in words; the words may be spoken in a court of law or outside it. *Derision* (that is the word wanted, is it not?) is any speech outside a court of law intended to put anyone to shame. It is next akin to laughing to scorn (*subsannatio*); but whereas we laugh others to scorn by wrinkling our noses at them, we deride them with our mouths, using words and laughter. If derision is just in intention, licensed by authority, and prudent, nothing can be said against it. Therefore, given occasion for satire before the Fall there was no reason why Adam should not have practised it. Indeed satire has its place in any Paradise, for it is written (Ps. ii, 4): *He that dwelleth in heaven shall laugh at them.*

But the question is whether there could have been occasion for satire in the Garden of Eden. As St. Thomas will tell you there would always have been the devil, who has occasioned a good deal of satirical literature as things are. But, you object, human defects are the proper material of satire, therefore Morality Plays are not strictly satirical. Well, even so, without the Original Sin committed and transmitted by our First Parents, there would have been other possible, and even probable, sins in one or more of their descendants. And even if nobody sinned, sin remains a possibility and therefore material for fiction. Under no circumstance could Cain and Abel have been educated to manhood without fables in which the unborn wicked were derided and laughed to scorn.

I have taken more seriously than Father Knox intended it his hypothesis that St. Thomas was cramped for space by an editor or publisher. I am so cramped

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myself that even my bad humour is not allowed to run to satire; much less to all the hard things St. Thomas has to say about satire as it is commonly practised. But read (II. IIae; 75, 2.) his reasons for maintaining that it is often a mortal sin, and usually a venial sin. Father Knox's Satires avoid this condemnation by prudently leaving their victims unnamed, and so putting no living persons to the blush; except, of course, dons, who do not blush and are lost to all sense of shame for being dons. Even so, *Absolute and Abitofhell* is humorous rather than satirical; for, when he wrote it, Father Knox was in the same shameful case as the *septem nequiores se*.

My second criticism is of the inclusion of Blessed Thomas More amongst the humorous writers of antiquity who were always and exclusively satirists. Is not Blessed Thomas More the real father of modern English humour? I would even maintain that according to Father Knox's definition he is not a satirist at all. He has a gospel, it is true, and that would seem to exclude him from the mere humorists. But would it have disqualified him from writing for our latter-day *Punch*, 'the home of superbly finished humour'? Many, holding his gospel and always glad to preach it, have helped to make that excellent journal what it is to-day. This means we must alter Father Knox's phrase that the pure humorist is a man without a message, who cannot preach a gospel. We must be content to say that a man ceases to be a humorist the moment he begins to be a propagandist. And is not this precisely true of Blessed Thomas More? When he is preaching against heretics he is deadly serious, as St. Thomas Aquinas says we should be in our attitude towards great evils. If you notice carefully you will rarely find More making fun of heresy or heretics, or of the King and his counsellors who are guilty of so great evil against him. When he speaks of evil

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deeds or evil doers, all his laughter vanishes. It only returns as an aside; and then the jest is always at the expense of himself, or of someone he dearly loves. He swears by the Mass and by Mary, for swearing is serious and these names are sacred. But he does not swear by his beard; that, poor thing, is a joke. So is his wife, poor thing. The things he laughed at were all poor things and dear things, like himself, his Oxford days, and the man in the moon. As for *Utopia*, if that is a satire, so is *The Flying Inn*. Whatever satire must be, it must not be pure make-believe. It must deal with something nearer to real life than are remote romantic possibilities. Even make-believe with a moral or a sting in it will not do. Make-believe is a child's game. You cannot make believe without making believe that you are a child or a simpleton; and you succeed best when seriously you rather fancy yourself to be nothing more. To my mind that brings both Blessed Thomas More and Mr. Chesterton very safely within Father Knox's definition of pure humorists. I am not sure that it does not include Hans Andersen also. Indeed, it even raises a question about Father Knox himself. My doubt about him increases when I remember that all satire must have malice in it; and that in the process from bad humour to good humour, bad humour has not quite ended when satire begins.

Very interesting conclusions, well supported by facts, are suggested by the contention that modern humour is satire out of employment, and therefore demoralised. It would follow that the new modern sense of humour is a sense of futility and demoralisation; and the things which now most move the multitude to laughter are proven—by the very fact of the laughter—to be, from an eternal standpoint, the most serious and sacred. It follows, too, that when a modern humorist good-naturedly makes a fool of

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himself to raise a laugh, unless, like Blessed Thomas More and St. Philip Neri, he is making a fool of himself for Christ's sake as much as for the laugh's sake, then he is doing so to obtain an indulgence exempting him from some clause or other of the moral law.

But why should such a form of humour be considered new? The obscene has always excited laughter amongst the majority of mankind, and does so still. Though Father Knox dismisses it as outside his scope, the obscene joke usually answers to his description of modern humour at every point.

The fact is that modern humour has all the characteristics of obscene humour, save only one; it is not obscene. The very breath of its life is to be not obscene. *Punch* would rather go out of print next week than publish an obscene joke. It would even blush at a joke that would not have been too coarse for St. Francis de Sales. Let his comparison of vanity with the turkey serve as an example. Begging the printer's pardon, may I repeat it? Vanity is like a turkey, because, when it spreads out its feathers to show itself off, all it shows off is its uncomely bottom. That sort of joke went out of print quite early in the nineteenth century. It became much too serious to be called a joke by modern humorists. One of the few things sacred to modern humour is propriety. Propriety in the last analysis is either proper to man by nature, or it is a matter of pure agreement. Modern propriety is of the second kind. If you say a thing is not proper, you mean it is not done, and that simply because we are agreed not to do it. There is no longer any question of morality, but merely of agreement, when we speak of propriety. Modern humour came into being when agreements began to be reached by a majority vote. The majority decided what things were to be serious and what things funny. To a majority nothing is serious but

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'Bread and the Circus.' When Bread becomes a serious matter, you must be serious in the dining room, and you must never make a joke, or laugh at one, about the Bank of England, or your own or anybody else's private income. When the Circus becomes serious all amusement becomes serious. You must not be too funny or you will be vulgar. Therefore the funniest thing in the world to the majority—the obscene joke—must never be laughed at. With that taboo, nothing else need be sacred or serious.

Note the historic connection between the rise of modern humour and the law of Supply and Demand. Demand creates Supply. As Father Knox says, modern humour has its value so long as people want it. Now this goes to show, against Father Knox, that the Stock Exchange joke is really the standard modern joke. The Stock Exchange is the forum in which the Demand for goods and games meets and is married to Supply. There Bread and Fun reside as gods in a temple, and prudery is their rubric. The Stock Exchange joke is symbolic, like Stock Exchange prices. It is not in itself funny any more than bonds or brokerage are in themselves eatable or otherwise fungible. No more, in fact, than a crucifix is in itself adorable. All other modern jokes, except that one, have still some ancient element of fun in them. Otherwise they would not be funny in a human sense. But to be funny in a modern sense they must not treat lightly what the Stock Exchange takes seriously. Now, Fun is one of the most serious things on the Stock Exchange, for this reason: that the majority has voted for it, therefore it has value, therefore there is money in it. Therefore you must not treat lightly anything that amuses the majority; as, for instance, cricket. You must always observe the restraints observed by the Stock Exchange. You must not be as funny as you can be in a human

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sense, or even in a continental sense. You must make the sacrifice of fun to seriousness which is canonised and symbolised in the Stock Exchange joke. That joke shows you just how far you may go in making fun of private incomes, or cricket. It does not speak lightly of these things—God forbid. It merely makes a mock pretence of speaking lightly about them. *That* is its humour. It is very serious humour, of course, being the standard for all other humour. It is so severely humorous as not to be humorous at all : it is merely mock humour. It is an Aristotelian purge for the human weakness we call fun. Without being any more funny than a Sophoclean tragedy is really tragic, it helps us to deal with our cacchinatory complexes in the same way that the *Oedipus* Trilogy helps us to deal with our obscene complexes. Facts do certainly go largely to confirm the theory that modern English fun is demoralised humour ; that money and sport move us only to prayer, while everything else moves us only to laughter. You can say in any company that Queen Anne is dead and raise a laugh. You may say that God is dead and the Kingdom of Heaven blown up with exploded theologies, and even *Punch* will keep you on its staff as long as a majority of readers relish your humour. But woe betide you if you say that the Minister of Transport, or anybody remotely like him, is being roasted alive, or that Big Ben has been blown up with anything. You fail to touch people's fancy if you touch their pockets. They become very serious : they are not amused. And that is all because there is money and amusement in the Ministries and in Greenwich Time ; but there is none in heaven, for God is a nobody on 'Change. He has not a penny invested anywhere. I am certain that Father Knox has never failed to amuse anybody who had not shares in something. Even *The Tablet* measures his offences in shillings and pence.

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There is a great deal more to be said on the points suggested by Father Knox's stimulating essay on Humour and Satire. Like him I cannot be sure what I think about it until I have thought it all out. But I am quite sure that thinking would only lead to conclusions of which I am sure, not because I think them, but because I believe them. I am quite sure that the defect of modern humour is not that it makes fun of everything, but that it misses the true seriousness of everything. I am sure that true humour can never become an art for its own sake, but only for the sake of things that are absolutely and utterly serious. Take God seriously, and you will be able to caricature him deliciously as the hysterical father of a prodigal, as a king about to become a father-in-law, even as a stock-broker with credit in the oil market and the wheat market; and the result will be perfect art. And I am perfectly sure that the best example of humour and satire in the world is the story of Christ's trick played upon the braggart he nicknamed Peter. When I read that story I laugh till I cry. And it is those tears that enable me to recognise genuine humour and genuine satire whenever I meet them anywhere else. My experience of Father Knox's satire—and when he used my name in one of his books I thought he meant me by it!—is that it has always helped me to laugh at the things at which Peter was taught to laugh, and to cry for the things over which he was made to cry. And it has never put me to the blush or robbed me of the glory of my conscience—which is St. Thomas's canon for good satire. I can say as much for Mr. Chesterton. I wish I could say as much for the only writer I know whose talent for satire is greater than either of theirs. I mean, of course, Mr. George Bernard Shaw. Until he weeps like Peter over his Introduction to *Androcles and the Lion*, I shall know for certain that he is not a person to be taken seriously;



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and therefore only funny in the modern sense—because he is a buffoon. He is a living proof that Father Knox is right in saying that the ridiculous is human nature falling short of its proper dignity—while claiming it, he ought to have added. And is not G.B.S. more exquisitely ridiculous than anything he says?

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