Satire and Parody in the Early Evelyn Waugh

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Abstract

The article aims to examine the various humorous modes used by Evelyn Waugh in his early fiction, these modes comprising value-based satire and clan-based satire, and by contrast two types of what is here termed parody, as distinguished between the naïve, embodied in comical innocents, and the knavish as personified in lovable rogues. What is significant is the way in which Waugh, partly by varying his comic modes, devises ambiguous comical combinations within his work, so enhancing the freedom of the reader, permitting different responses and meanwhile largely camouflaging his own principles which were based on a religious code fully expounded only in his later work. The contrast between a subtle and perceptive author and a curmudgeonly and snobbish narrator is one of the many complexities and attractions of Waugh's fiction.

Key words: Satire, parody, reader response, ingénus, rogues

For the purposes of this article the early Evelyn Waugh comprises the six novels that he published prior to *Brideshead Revisited* and to his shift away from comic writing. Secondly the terms satire and parody require further explanation as I use them in particular ways not currently received. Satire I construe as being of at least two kinds: value-based, where the satirist uses his work to promote a norm or value, be it moral, political or merely technical, but one that his target figure is failing to embody, and clan-based, where one derides a figure less for what they have done or not done than for what they are: fat, bald, black, small, Irish, Jewish, anything that one is not. The latter can be a very improper mode, but it obviously exists, witness racist and sexist humour to name but two, and its aim however unfairly pursued is to reaffirm one's own clan identity as slim, tall, male, Anglo-Saxon, Christian, whatever.

Parody is for me an entirely different mode, though still dependent on incongruity for its effect and I sought to confirm its significance in the Conclusion to my own *Humour Theorists of the Twentieth Century*. However, some further explanation may yet be needed, as

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the term cuts across standard usage where it is applied more to the spoofing of a text[2] than to the broader patterns of bizarre or indeed immoral behaviour which for me illustrate it. In this connexion naïve parody is generated by figures who behave incongruously when they cannot fairly be expected to do otherwise. So as generating naïve parody, children, animals and drunks are less ridiculous in their ineptitude than sympathetic in their ineptitude: how often have we laughed indulgently at puppies stumbling about, or been told by foreigners amused at our malapropisms that, "It is not you that we are laughing at but at the thing you said"? By contrast knavish parody is stimulated by a figure who knows that he or she is defying norms and is doing so to our delight at their daring. That figure, be he the comic hero, the lovable rogue or the wily trickster, is very ancient and in some cultures even had religious significance.

In the case of Waugh numerous studies exist of his satire, particularly as developed in the early novels focussing on the social scene of post-World War One when the Bright Young Things of, say, *Vile Bodies* were leading thoroughly futile and self-indulgent lives bolstered by inherited wealth of a quantity that the author himself did not enjoy but rather envied:[3] the book has been called a masterpiece of inconsequence (Ralph Straus in Stannard, 1984, p. 95), while the Oxford scenes beginning *Decline and Fall* reveal the same pattern. However to attack these representatives of the idle rich as worthless egocentrics, which they certainly are, is to deny them the glamour that their youth connotes, it being a quality which Waugh was inclined to laud on its own terms ("another boom in Youth is coming […] quite different from its predecessors […] today the more modest claim of my generation is [merely] that we are young": *Essays, Articles and Reviews*, p. 46), and it is a quality with which Waugh sought himself to identify: "We are all of us young at Oxford" (Hastings, p. 88, quoting Waugh's *Isis* article).

As Michael Davie notes in editing Waugh's journals (*Diaries*, p. 159) he was on the fringe rather than at the centre of this world, and Stephen Greenblatt (1965, p. 22) sees *A Handful of Dust* as a savage assault on London society. Conversely in his article of 1956 Stephen Marcus (p. 349) claimed that Waugh was not satirising Mayfair but rather celebrating it, Agatha Runcible of *Vile Bodies* and Lady Metroland, a frequent feature in the early novels, being less his despised than his beloved creations, laughed at less spitefully than tenderly and admiringly. Now Waugh went on record as disclaiming any satiric intention (*Essays, Articles*

[2] As in the cornerstone anthology edited by Simon Brett as *The Faber Book of Parodies*, London: Faber, 1984.

[3] Thus his comment, quoted by Hastings, p. 361, "I would like to have been descended from a useless Lord."

and Reviews, p. 303), a statement too obviously false to be taken seriously.[4] By contrast he also claimed, and no more accurately, that "I can only be funny when I am complaining about something" (Hastings, p. 590), i.e. when having a satiric agenda. In that respect he did indeed have his targets – newspaper proprietors in *Scoop*, Africans in *Black Mischief* and communists in *Put Out More Flags* – while being an opponent of many trends in what was for him contemporary Britain, witness John Betjeman's comment (1948, p. 148) that he detested 20th century life. However, it is to his credit that these attitudes are portrayed with at least a measure of restraint, while being variously contaminated with alternative modes of humour, for instance that naïve parody that accompanies his portrayal of the Mayfair set and their "feckless innocence" (cf. Marcus, 1956, p. 349). Thus, while Greenblatt sees *Vile Bodies* as the "culmination of his [satiric] art" (1965, 22), Waugh's friend and neighbour Frances Donaldson (1967, p. 30) notes the zest that marked him out from the flatly pessimistic satire that Betjeman and Greenblatt sought to highlight.

Such a zest is apparent in many ways and has been noted by many critics, for instance Rose Macaulay (1946, p. 362) when she talks of his comic anarchism, and that leads into the theme of knavish parody, which includes black humour as when an author deliberately stretches our tolerance by celebrating cruelty, wickedness and vice. The "cathartic laughter" generated by this comic mode (cf. O'Faolain, 1956, p. 55) belongs to a pattern in Waugh noted by various critics (e.g. Greenberg, 2003, p. 351), one famous example being the death of Lord Tangent in *Decline and Fall*, where that innocent boy is shot during a school sports day and ultimately dies of the wound. Here a callous narrator, be he equatable or not with the author, is inverting the norm of human sympathy and encouraging us to do the same.

Knavish figures are, moreover, not hard to find in the early Waugh. I would discount John Beaver in *A Handful of Dust*, reading him instead as a hostile character based somewhat on the man for whom Waugh's first wife deserted him in 1929. Much more representative are Captain Grimes, the pederast schoolteacher whom in *Decline and Fall* Paul Pennyfeather encounters at the school where he goes to work after being sent down from Oxford, and Basil Seal, central figure in both *Black Mischief*, where he proves the somewhat unscrupulous and exploitative accomplice of an African potentate, and *Put Out More* Flags where he re-emerges

[4] His remark depends in fact on too narrow a definition of the concept: "Satire is a matter of period. It flourishes best in a stable society and presupposes homogeneous moral standards" (*Essays*, p. 304). Satire can in fact flourish in any society and may be irrelevant to morality.

as a caddish profiteer and treacherous associate of the left-wing aesthetes he frequents in London during the Phoney War.

At least two responses are available to the reader encountering Grimes, a character whom we may praise:[5] one can rejoice in his defiance of the responsibilities of school-teaching which has him seduce his pupils with unnerving regularity, but one can also condemn him for perverting the innocent, perhaps a commoner response in our current climate. What clues are given by Waugh, whose homosexual period was well known, if not fully documented in his surviving diaries? Well it is noteworthy that Grimes has been protected from ultimate disaster by the clan loyalty pervading the public school system: when faced with a court martial following another undescribed homosexual adventure in the army, the major sent to judge him announces that, "it's out of the question to shoot an old Harrovian" (*Decline and Fall*, p. 29), and that pattern has continued throughout his life: "I've been in the soup pretty often since then, but never quite so badly. Someone always turns up and says, 'I can't see a public school man down and out. Let me put you on your feet again' " (p. 30).

So whatever the reader's response, the author grants him a charmed life, and this may even spread over to Grimes's demise, a fictitious event that is reported twice, once when he fakes his own drowning in order to avoid marrying Flossie, his headmaster's daughter, and a second time when he disappears from a prison work party and leaves his hat floating on a nearby pond: another supposed death by immersion. Paul's comment is interesting; he knew that Grimes was not dead: "Lord Tangent was dead; Mr Prendergast [the erstwhile school chaplain], was dead; the time would even come for Paul Pennyfeather; but Grimes, Paul at last realized, was of the immortals. He was a life force" (p. 199). So, having revised his earlier accounts of the character's suicide,[6] Waugh responds again to the undoubted fascination of his anti-hero and foreshadows his advice to young novelists that they avoid killing their characters (cf. Alexander Waugh, 2004, p. 207). That said, unlike some other anti-heroes Grimes in fact never reappears in his fiction: the life force lives on in the reader's imagination, not on the pages of any book.

As indicated above, this is not true of Basil Seal, whom we first meet in *Black Mischief* where he is recovering from a drunken binge after which he makes hasty plans to leave for Africa where his remote acquaintance from Oxford has become emperor of Azania (read Abyssinia). Unkempt, disorderly, unreliable, manipulative and thieving (he funds his trip to

[5] Cf. J. B. Priestley and John Willett as quoted in Stannard, 1984, pp. 84 and 93.

[6] As noted by Pasternak, 2016, p. 11.

Africa in part by stealing his mother's emerald bracelet), Seal is a character in whom Waugh does invest a number of positive qualities, including in particular his sex appeal, witness the fact that it is his mistress who finances the remainder of the Africa trip. And again it is the reader's choice to what extent Seal is redeemed by these features, acknowledged as they are by some other characters: his mother's confidant opines that, "Of course, there's plenty of good in the boy" (*Put Out More Flags*, p. 84), a point adumbrated in the Azania adventure where he does work hard if intermittently at his friend's doomed plans to modernise the country. The point is to mitigate such reader hostility as is articulated by Pasternak (2016, p. 35) for whom "Basil is the ultimate embodiment of western barbarism", and so to dilute the value-based satire.

That friend moreover is an example of a frequent pattern in Waugh whereby a naïve figure comes into conflict with stronger forces, in this case the regressive power of native traditions, and often is defeated by them. Pennyfeather has already provided one example in *Decline and Fall*, though he is saved by the influence of the aristocratic class whom he almost managed to penetrate by marrying one of his pupils' mothers. His case leads to a lucky draw in that he is able to resume his old identity as an undergraduate studying to enter the Anglican Church. A contrasting example is Tony Last whose outdated sense of aristocratic tradition is mocked and thwarted by his wife's adultery and by her friends, a worthless bunch drawn straight from the pages of *Vile Bodies* but minus the allure. Agreeing initially to their divorce, he then sees through his deceitful wife and departs on a doomed expedition to South America, becoming in due course a slave to the illiterate madman Todd who condemns him in perpetuity to read aloud the works of Charles Dickens: this is a shattering defeat. A further contrasting example comes in *Scoop* where William Boot, an innocent and somewhat likeable English nature columnist, is mistakenly sent by his editors to cover the war in Ishmaelia (Abyssinia again) and ends up besting his rival correspondents with an account that eclipses their own. This is a victory where unlike Tony this innocent abroad is saved from serious harm, but like Paul returns to base, which for him is a beloved rural retreat, and to his former occupation, namely the compiling of *Lush Places*, a weekly set of bucolic articles composed for his paper the Daily Beast.

The appeal of the naïve hero, likened by James Carens (1966, p. 35) to Voltaire's Candide and reflecting Waugh's admiration for youthful innocence, depends again on a reader response stimulated by the character's childlike but comical inability to adapt to or understand the world that surrounds him: this is its fundamental incongruity played out in a series of

misadventures, blunders and misunderstandings. When he triumphs, as in *Scoop*, that result has a fairy-tale quality, and Waugh even creates a kind of magical genie who ensures Boot's success. When he fails, as in *A Handful of Dust*, the quality is more nightmarish with the fairy godfather Baldwin replaced by the evil genius Mr Todd, but no more than William Boot deserves his success does Tony Last deserve his fate. They live in a world parallel to reality and that fact somewhat points up the limit of their appeal.

While Frederick Stopp (1958, p. 199) sees all Waugh's heroes as innocents, though of different types, for Anthony Dyson (1966, p. 189) Pennyfeather lacks any firm values: he is "a wasteland character, without convictions"; while Eric Linklater (q.v. Stannard, 1984, p. 130) condemns Seth, the naïve would-be reformer of Azania, as a fatuous young man, and one anonymous reviewer of *A Handful of Dust* (Stannard, 1984, p. 149) holds Tony Last to be "so incapable of helping himself that he is not worth helping", a somewhat harsh view given that I for one would dig him out of the jungle and return him to English society, perhaps even in triumph. However those hostile reactions remain significant. Naïve parody fails at the point when the ingénu character embodying it becomes tiresomely stupid rather than merely charmingly innocent, and one seeks to return him from his make-believe existence to the real world of which it is a parody, so destroying any comic incongruity. It is the readerly equivalent of a parent's calling time on the kids' play hour and getting them ready for bed.[7]

By analogy knavish parody loses its effect when one reimposes the values that it defies, so reviving one's conscience and re-entering the world of established criteria and serious morality. This can happen in Waugh, particularly in the case of Basil Seal. A waster and a cad, he readopts those roles in *Put Out More Flags* particularly when exploiting the population around Malfrey, his sister's home, and where his trick is to billet on that population three impossible children, cheekily named after his frenemy Cyril Connolly, and then blackmailing his victims into paying for their relocation. This is only one of his schemes, though by far the most lucrative, but it comes to an end when he sells the said children to a neighbouring billeting officer, so funding his return to London. On arrival he then swindles his way into a job at the Ministry of Information, secures his position by betraying a set of friends whom he falsely accuses of being fifth columnists, whereupon, mirabile dictu, he turns sincere and undertakes to become a genuinely responsible army officer: "There's only one serious occupation for a chap now, that's killing Germans" (*Put Out More Flags*, p. 233).

[7] In this connexion it is intriguing to read of Waugh's unpredictable attitude to his own children and their games: q.v. Hastings, pp. 527 ff.

Clearly this patriotic declamation, which Pasternak fails to consider,[8] was stimulated by the fact that at the time of writing Britain was fully engaged in war, but as a conclusion to Seal's knavery it somewhat undermines those (e.g. Carens, 1966, p. 70) who say that the early novels' negative and destructive nature denotes a lack of moral centre, for even when defying responsible norms, which is the essence of knavish parody, Waugh like any parodist is implying those norms and so, potentially at least, stimulating his readers' awareness of them. For James Nichols (1962, p. 52) occasional glimpses of a moral standard emerge even in *Decline and Fall*, though Sean O'Faolain (1956, p. 60) is surely right to see authorial detachment rather than authorial commitment as important for the early novels' success. Malcolm Bradbury endorses the point, illustrating it via Gilbert Pinfold who is as close a self-portrait as one finds anywhere in Waugh: "He regarded his books as objects which he had made, things quite external to himself to be used and judged by others" (Bradbury 1964, p. 2, quoting *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, p. 2).

It is thus not a weakness in his satiric apparatus that in those novels he deliberately suppressed his religious convictions, having the grieving Tony Last even say in *A Handful of Dust*, and on the very day of his son's death, that "the last thing one wants to talk about at a time like this is religion" (p. 115). He has in fact just been conversing with a man of the cloth, namely his local parson, the addle-pated Father Tendril, while the early Waugh portrays only one Catholic of substance, namely the mysterious Father Rothschild who appears on the very first page of *Vile Bodies* but is far from being its central character. Nevertheless for Pasternak (2016, p. 16), following the collapse of Waugh's first marriage "his religious commitment stands behind all his subsequent work" (including no doubt *Vile Bodies*) and he would, clearly enough, go on to reveal that commitment in many succeeding works, *Brideshead* included. By contrast, though *Vile Bodies* was written at the very time of his own reception into the Roman Catholic Church, he never openly condemns the Bright Young Things populating the novel for neglecting their duty to God, that element of his satire remaining determinedly implicit.

In his journalism it does become explicit, as when in a *Spectator* article of 1929 he condemned "the perverse and aimless dissipation" displayed by the post-war breed, himself tacitly included (*Essays, Articles and Reviews*, p. 62). Journalism, however, is not literature, a point made emphatically by Waugh when declaring that, "It isn't the novelist's business to feed readers with emotions. If your novel's any good the reader should get emotions from it, perhaps

[8] "By the end of the novel he withdraws sympathy […] for […] Basil's […] singularity" (2016, p. 95). By contrast, the change expressed can be read as a somewhat propagandistic attempt to revive that sympathy.

not the ones you intended but they should be there".[9] In fact Waugh's own confessional position seems to have been based, at least initially, on an intellectual rather than emotional response to Catholicism,[10] an important distinction, but one which hardly lends itself to comical exploitation and would surely stand way beyond the thinking or perhaps even understanding of the characters he invented in that period. An exception would be the Jesuit Father Rothschild who in fact brings some of Waugh's sincere values close to the surface in what is perhaps the one serious passage of *Vile Bodies* and where he declares that: "I know very few young people [perhaps an odd statement for a priest], but it seems to me that they are all possessed with an almost fatal hunger for permanence" (*Vile Bodies*, p. 132), which hunger in fact is revealed via its opposite, namely a hedonistic and flighty cultivation of immediate and transient pleasure. So the stock platitude, "If a thing's worth doing at all, it's worth doing well", has been replaced by the parodic motto, "If a thing's not worth doing well, it's not worth doing at all" (*ibid.*), a useful dictum for any moneyed idler.

Otherwise the permanence that Waugh himself found within the Church of Rome, "his island of sanity" (Hastings, p. 230), does not push him at this stage into articulating the fundamental value basis to his satire which points to "the absurdity of life without God" (Stannard, 1984, p. 5). Instead he deflects some of its power in an interesting way. The problem with value-based satire is that the reader may be entirely indifferent or even hostile to the values on which it depends: who actively responds when in *Decline and Fall* Waugh lampoons modern prison reform or modernist architecture? Thus we read in Angus Wilson's review of Sykes's biography that that the social and religious flavour of Waugh is today "no longer […] a relevant eccentricity, but rather an irrelevant one",[11] perhaps too dogmatic a stance. Nevertheless whilst the value-based satire can lose by being passé for a readership unprepared to accommodate these authorial positions, it can also gain by being infected with an alternative, parodic mode redolent of the zest and comic anarchy that critics have highlighted.

Of course in *Decline and Fall* the academic authorities in Oxford are attacked as venal, self-serving hypocrites, for instance as condoning the outrages of the Bollinger club because of the fines they will in due course precipitate to the College's advantage. Of course in *Vile Bodies* the political elite are reduced to the level of bumbling imbeciles, and the professional

[9] Cf. Pasternak, 2016, p. 309 quoting a televised interview with Waugh from 1964: the point somewhat undermines Bradbury's claim (1964, p. 61) concerning Waugh's "remarkable moral and emotional control over the reader."

[10] Cf. O'Brien, 1950, p. 20, quoting Waugh himself.

[11] Q.v. Stannard, 1984, p. 487.

journalists in the African scenes of *Scoop* portrayed as deliberately falsifying events rather than conscientiously recounting them. But at such points a satire which borders on cynicism is being conflated with parody: the reader surely knows that these exaggerations are the work of an author who is inverting his own concern to reflect reality and inciting one to accompany him into another dreamland where he will become a travesty of himself as prepared to accept distorted half truths, simplified caricatures and absurd generalisations as having some bearing on the true state of man, albeit a comic one.

As for clan-based satire, its success depends at least to an extent on the audience's own identity: consider how inadvisable it would be to crack anti-Jewish jokes in a room full of Zionists. In fact Waugh was self-confessedly prejudiced himself ("I'm afraid I must admit to a shade of anti-Jew feeling": *Letters*, p. 369), but which clans does he expressly target? The super-rich, politicians, anyone in power, hence Auberon Waugh's claim (1991, p. 46), that his father and his wife held all authority in derision,[12] and as an offshoot of his notorious snobbery, the poor, or what he calls "the lower orders", hence his comment from the diary of 1961: "It is impudent and exorbitant to demand truth from the lower classes" (*Diaries*, p. 784).

Given this prejudice it may be fortunate that we encounter the said classes so rarely, but one example comes on the trip to Brighton undertaken by Tony Last to provide divorce evidence for his wife and which involves an uneasy but entirely chaste night spent with Milly, the hostess-cum-prostitute he picked up at the Old Hundredth Club in Soho. More strikingly obnoxious are the Connolly children, described as follows by their first fostering adult in *Put Out More Flags*:

> There's the boy […] Nasty, unfriendly ways he had […] Then the little un, she's a dirty girl […] It's not only her wetting the bed; she've wetted everywhere, chairs, floor and not only wetting, mum." [...] "But doesn't the elder girl do anything to help?" "If you ask me, mum, she's the worst of the lot. (p. 87)

In fact the Connolly trio become so infamous that their names are even mentioned in parliament, but can we be relied on to share in their author's amused aversion?

[12] Auberon even extends this attitude on his mother's part to the whole of humanity (1991, p. 208).

Once more it is a matter of choice. Frances Donaldson (1967, p. 20), a neighbour and friend, observed from personal experience that Waugh could not communicate with ordinary people, and this shortcoming may have vitiated his military career as an officer: thus Selina Hastings (1994, p. 399) for whom, "His chief flaw was an inability to get on with other ranks, veering awkwardly in his manner between contempt and condescension." One notes accordingly the treatment of Hooper in *Brideshead*, though that character's weaknesses for Walter Gore Allen (1949, p. 20) and indeed for me, scarcely command the reader's disapproval. In fact we cannot be relied on to share Waugh's clan loyalty to the upper classes, Edmund Wilson being presumptuous when he asserts that in *Put Out more Flags* "his snobbery carries us with it" (Wilson, 1950, p., 145), and as with certain aspects of his value-based satire, it demands much of the reader that he fully enjoy the clan-based satire of his social inferiors: the Brighton weekend spent with Milly and Winnie in *A Handful of Dust* has a gaggle of townsfolk follow Tony round the town in uncomprehending amazement at his kind attempts to indulge the daughter of his fictitious mistress. The factional bias is obvious.

What is at issue is (a) the demands a writer can legitimately make of his readership and (b) the problematic link between his satiric agenda and his own life; one notes Carens in this latter connexion: “I think that an attempt to interpret Waugh’s satires now in terms of his biography, or his biography in terms of his satires, would be wildly presumptuous” (1966, p. x). In fact, it is by varying his humorous modes, say by mocking the Bright Young Things, a clan to whom he had sought throughout his Oxford and post-Oxford years to belong, that Waugh loosens his authorial control and offers his readers the choice between condemning, pitying or celebrating his targets. Greenblatt (1965, p. 4) takes the first option, decrying the carnival revels of Oxford University's Bollinger Club as sustained by a "drunken crowd of epileptic royalty, illiterate lairds and uncouth peers" (p. 7) before extending his attack to Llanabba castle: "a marvelous initiation into the savagery of society" (p. 9). Lapicque (1957, p. 198) for his part takes the second, regarding the Bright Young Things as more pathetic than contemptible. Nevertheless while one's response can be ethical (the young are wasting their youth), or even religious (they have turned away from God), it can also be instinctive: one wishes to belong to such a clan despite the positive values that their lifestyle denies. This might well have been the problematic that faced Waugh himself, though to stress the point would be to stray from literary criticism into psychology.

Some critics defy that danger, as when Gore Allen (1949, p. 17) detects a note of masochism in the writer's social attitudes: "When Waugh ridicules the English upper classes,

he is punishing something which he loves." Clan loyalty, however, does not of itself determine one's response to clan-based satire: women, Jews and the English, to name but three, are famous for enjoying jokes that focus on their own weaknesses. A clan may thus target itself, and such an ambivalence perhaps emerged in the distaste which, even when writing *Vile Bodies*, he expressed towards that very book (q.v. Wykes, 1999, p. 67), plus the antipathetic treatment he affords the Mayfair set in *A Handful of Dust* where they are seen less as affable eccentrics than as normal but contemptible people. Perhaps even by 1927 Waugh was already beginning to dislike "the gay social round" (cf. Sykes, 1975, p. 74), but it is clearer still that as he moved towards more obviously serious fiction, as in *Brideshead* and the *Sword of Honour* trilogy, and as he moved out of society anyway to his own rural retreat in the Quantocks, and as he moved into a premature senescence (one recalls his somewhat early death at age 62), he may have revisited his clan loyalties, seeing them them as relatively superficial elements within his own personality. Hence perhaps the challenges that some, including Auberon, have made to his image, perhaps even his pose (cf. St John, 1973, p. 24), of being an inveterate snob. In this connexion his son observed that, "[t]he common touch was certainly not something he cultivated, but in rather a surprising way, when he needed it, he had it" (Auberon Waugh, 1991, p. 49), while he describes his father's latter years as "bland and benevolent" rather than bad tempered and aggressive (*ibid*., p.185), even if that change may also signify a regrettable dilution of the humour which I have sought to dissect.

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