BLACK HUMOR: AN AMERICAN ASPECT

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I. An Outline

An age of spiritual instability inevitably calls for a harshly comic vision of the world, and the past decade has witnessed the rising currency of the term, "black humor." At once convenient and vague, it now appears to have found an enduring place as a description of a literary genre, representing sufficient number of fictional and dramatic works today. The term seems to be particularly favored in the United States, where Ambrose Bierce has at last come to be advertized as "America's first 'Black Humorist'."

Obviously, the trend is not merely limited to the American literary scene; enough "black humor" is inherent in the works of, say, Kingsley Amis, Samuel Beckett or Harold Pinter. Nevertheless, American writers on the whole appear to be more articulate about it, and American audience more susceptible to the form.

The form and nature of black humor are discussed in some details by two of its proponents—by Contad Knickerbocker in his spirited article in The New York Times Book Review entitled "Humor With a Mortal Sting," and by Bruce Jay Friedman in his rather wry Foreword to Black Humor, an anthology of thirteen authors edited by himself. Their common point of departure is more or less sociological; both envisage black humor as a sort of satirical protest against the world gone completely insane. Consequently, the satire tends to assume a most violent form exceeding the bounds of ordinary decency—"bitter, perverse, sadistic and sick... the new humor is black in its


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pessimism, its refusal of compromise and its mortal sting”.¹ (In fact “sick humor” perhaps is the most frequent synonym for “black humor”.) Also, since the daily social and political happenings have increasingly become illogical, grotesque and mysterious, the resulting satire often requires the guise of fantasy, reality itself having lost any logical sequence—“There is a fading line between fantasy and reality, a very fading line . . . almost invisible line.”² (Interesting to note is the fact that the name of Jack Ruby is mentioned by both; to them, apparently, a “reality” that could contain a Jack Ruby is simply too much to be handled by any ordinary literary forms.) Again, while both admit that as a literary concept black humor is nothing original, its prevalence and popularity may as well signify the end of something and the beginning of a new something. Knickerbocker asserts that “its appearance in American fiction may signal the end of certain innocences,” and its practitioners’ views, “which have in common the savagery of their conclusions, signal a major new, and perhaps the only new, development in American fiction since the war.” (p. 3) Friedman insists that with the deluge of macabre reports on deranged daily affairs, “the satirist has had his ground usurped by the newspaper reporter,” and “the novelist-satirist, with no real territory of his own to roam, has had to discover new land, . . . has had to sail into darker waters somewhere out beyond satire and I think this is what is meant by black humor.” (p. x)

As to the question of who are and who are not the representative black humorists, there still does not seem to be a reliable consensus, since the question more concerns itself with the individual writers’ mood and frame of mind, which might very well vary from work to work, as well as with the individual readers’ or audience’s perception of humor and satire, white, black or any color. A “white” humorist like James Thurber or E. B. White always is ready to turn “black,” or at least gray, when enough bile and bane diffuse his work. A

squeamish reader will discern a distinct darker tinge when the husband in Thurber’s "The Unicorn in the Garden" upsets his wife’s machinations and sends her, "cursing and screaming," to the madhouse, whereas a reader with a larger tolerance for grotesquerie will turn to the next "Fable" with nothing beyond an amused smile. However, as exemplified in Friedman’s anthology, certain American authors’ names recur whenever the subject is mentioned—Terry Southern, J. P. Donleavy, Joseph Heller, James Purdy, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Friedman himself, and sometimes Vladimir Nabokov. In drama, Edward Albee is almost a specialist in black humor; but, then, as black humorists’ concept of universe invariably claims strong kinship with existentialists’ negative cosmology, the so-called "absurd" school of dramatists appear to indulge themselves heavily in "black comedies."

Some fine specimens of black humor are observable in Arthur Kopit’s *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma’s Hung You in the Closet and I’m Feelin’ So Sad* (a splendid black humor title!); also pertinent is Jack Richardson’s *Gallows Humor* with its Prologue delivered by a grumbling Death in black costume, to speak nothing of its title.

Nasty sense of humor and taste for the grotesque have always been part and parcel to human imagination, and the lineage of black humor unquestionably is as old as the civilization itself; Aristophanes must have been a black humorist of his age; Swift, Bierce and Twain undoubtedly had played a similar role. More recently, Evelyn Waugh has displayed enough touch of the ridiculous and the macabre in his comic novels of manners; Kafka certainly had been another practitioner. From the Thirties, Louis-Fedinand Celine and Nathanael West are often accredited with blazing the trail for a number of black humorists to follow.¹ In its explosion of the Horatio Alger theme through an inverted parody, West’s *A Cool Million* indeed provides a copybook pattern for the later American writers bent on demolishing the American Dream. Their ground evidently has since been fertilized further by exposures to the violence and atrocities of the World War II and the subsequent outbreaks, as well as by the bloated materialistic dreams of an affluent society ready to be puffed out in a nuclear burst. In an age when religion or political philosophy merely adds to, rather than subtracts from, the universal pandemonium with a distinct im-

¹ Cf. Kinckerbocker and Friedman, above.
pression that everything has been tried with no better results, a basically hostile means of literary expression quite readily takes its root. Another obvious factor is the rapidly disappearing social taboos and the increasingly lenient attitude toward such means of expression. Human beings at their utmost grotesque now freely flit about the pages and stages without any concern to conventional decency; death, violence, mutilation, narcotics, physical deformities, sex ordinary and extraordinary—all anything just goes.

Stendhal found the essence of laughter in the figure of a well-dressed, handsome, self-satisfied youth who, on his way to a ball, slips down right into a pile of mud. If, Stendhal thought, the youth came to his feet with a broken leg, the laughter would immediately cease, because the spectators then would have an ominous feeling that the same accident could equally befall on themselves. On the other hand, Hazlitt knew that men laugh simply because they ought not, but it would have been the common sense of his time to refrain from laughing before such a spectacle. To the black humorists, however, the real mirth begins when the youth continues to wriggle on the ground with a leg, or more preferably with both legs, broken. Squeamishness has no place in the new era of black humorists to whom no holds are barred, no blasphemous utterances prohibited or inhibited. Indeed, there is something liberating, even breath-taking, in the fireworks of four-letter words that find their way into their writing, many of which have come up from the "underground" status both domestic and abroad. (Donleavy's The Ginger Man is a comeback from France, and Berlin first saw the stage production of Albee's The Zoo Story.) Some spring from and many others find fervent followers among the hipsters, who recognize in these writers "cool" agents of destruction mercilessly assaulting the manners and moralities of the ignoble "squares." It can be safely assumed that at no other point in history, a satirist has enjoyed so free a choice of weapons, so rich a range of targets.

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Black Humor: An American Aspect

II. This Mad Universe

"Life is a lie, my sweet. Not words but Life itself. Life in all its ugliness. It builds green trees that tease your eyes and draw you under them. Then when you're there in the shade and you breathe in and say, 'Oh, God, how beautiful,' that's when the bird on the branch lets go his droppings and hits you on the head. Life, my sweet, beware. It isn't what it seems. I've seen what it can do..." (Arthur Kopit, Oh, Dad, Poor Dad... Scene II)\(^1\)

I've tried to be a member of Christian society, for I am a Calvinist at heart, with one or two reservations of course... And we're all within a stone's throw of heaven. O happy humping ground.

(J. P. Donleavy, The Ginger Man, Chapter 22)\(^2\)

If, it might be said, the whole attempts of existentialists have centered on creating something positive out of the omnipresent negative, on finding a way to live in the midst of irrational, incoherent chaos which is our universe, or, failing it, on at least establishing a semblance of value in the very Sisyphean process, the new black humorists set up shop on mocking the futility of such processes in an I-told-you-it's-no-good spirit. In this sense, they are a bastard second-generation to the existentialists, patricidal in their contempt and mockery. No longer a question of despair or disillusionment, the question that might still have held validity to the first-generation, the black humorists’ sole concern lies in bluffing their way out to laughter by sheer force of scorn; Kopit’s Madame Rosepettle and Donleavy’s Sebastian Balfe Dangerfield, “alias Danger, Bullion, Balfe, Boom and Beast,” blow apart Life and Heaven with a single scatological charge. God himself, when not evoked in vain, is subjected to fierce ridicule for creating all the sorry state of the world:

“He's not working at all. He's playing. Or else He's forgotten all about us. That's the kind of God you people talk about—a country bumpkin, a clumsy, bungling, brainless, conceited, uncouth hayseed. Good God, how much reverence can you have for a Supreme Being who finds it necessary to include such phenomena as phlegm and tooth decay in His divine system of creation...”

(Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*, Chapter 18)¹

Even when a character attains a kind of peace with God, as Jerry does in Albee’s *The Zoo Story*, a tone of ambiguous irreverence remains. Jerry, impaling himself on the knife in the hand of Peter, the personification of his arch-enemy, the middle-class “square,” finally manages to communicate not only with the world of squares but with the world of God, whom Jerry has earlier identified with the comically pathetic shapes of neighborhood sufferers, a kimono-clad Negro homosexual and a permanently crying woman recluse. In death agony, he repeats Peter’s shouts, “Oh my God!”—“in a combination of scornful mimicry and supplication.”² A rather heavy demand on the actor, but the stage direction apparently envisages a Jerry who is ready to pray to the “square’s” God, even though part of him still holds Him in scornful regard.

To turn God into a butt or a comical “straight man” is a grist to black humorists’ mill, for whose purpose they invent a variety of ingenious pseudo-religious settings aimed at a laughter-inducing anticlimax. In all likelihood, one of their major technical contributions to general literature is the art based on the formula of the Black Mass, which they seem to have brought to an impressive perfection. An outstanding example is the requiem scene in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*; Donleavy equally excels in reducing the holy into the vulgar. Sebastian Dangerfield, a fanatical worshipper of St. Oliver, sticks his finger into the “mouldy nose hole” of the saint’s mummified head, “for you can’t have too much luck these days.” Throughout his misadventures in *The Ginger Man*, he repeatedly identifies himself with Jesus: “I may be just a bit younger than Christ when they tacked him up but they’ve had me outstretched a few times already. And Mary you’ve got me pinned right here on the bed.”³ (“Mary,” actually, is one of his numerous mistresses.) The same trait leads to a rich assortment of sacrilegious puns and *double entendres*, as in Jerry’s orgasmic murmur with the knife buried deep inside him, “Peter... thank you. I came unto you and you have comforted me. Dear

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Peter.”¹ (Jerry at heaven’s gate with St. Peter?) Less subtle are the group of addicts comparing heroin injection to religious rituals in Jack Gelber’s *The Connection*, another black comedy. Cowboy, the titular “connection,” calls the act “our baptism,” while Sam, with the drug taking effect, cries out, “I am redeemed! From my eternal suffering I am redeemed! Like a pawn ticket.”² These mock-religious references undoubtedly enable the characters to act as deicidal *agents provocateur* who draw out the divine and render the sacred comically absurd.

Surrealistic nightmares are a form characteristically appropriate to black humorists’ concept of the ludicrous universe where merely “a fading line between fantasy and reality” exists. Their inclination being to place all possible spheres under their attack and mockery, the nether world is no exception—hence, devils fare no better with the new humorists. In one of Bruce Jay Friedman’s short stories, “A Foot in the Door,” the devil is a small-time insurance salesman who sells on the side earthly pleasures in exchange for a series of minor mishaps, a slightly bent nose for the client’s coming baby, the death of an unwanted uncle, the loss of the client’s hair, etc.; finally, he elopes with the wife of the client, a Mr. Gordon, who upon pursuit discovers that the devil himself has paid dearly: “I took asthma, a bleeding ulcer and let a Long Island train wreck have six of my grandchildren for your wife. . . . It was under a special incentive plan for us employees.”³ In another, “The Big Six,” he is in the service of a canned food company specializing in broccoli clumps that have a power of re-enacting and “consummating” a man’s past unsuccessful love affairs; the devil, in the guise of a fat, bald man in a pair of ridiculously abbreviated underpants, helps the customers through their fumbling attempts, but, having been caught moonlighting as a bartender and warned by a customer, “I’m reporting you for taking a spare-time job which I’ll bet is against company rules,”⁴ in a fit of rage he undoes the customer’s only one successful seduction in his life time. That the devil himself is no more than a wretched pawn in a world of organized enterprise seems to be the moral of these stories.

III. "American Dream"

It naturally follows that the organized society of free enterprise with its false success myths receives the heaviest bludgeoning. The demolition of American Dream, as pointed out earlier, may find its prototype in Nathanael West’s *A Cool Million* which, even three decades ago, had traced in a black humorist manner the fate of a rags-to-riches country boy in an inverted Horatio Alger pattern; instead of discovering diligence finally triumphant, Lem Pitkin the hero is met with gradual mutilation of his body followed by a meaningless violent death, itself turned into a dictator’s scheme to make a martyr out of him. “Jail is his first reward. Poverty his second. Violence is his third. Death is his last.”1 At the end of the novel, paraders roar, “All hail, the American Boy!”2

West anticipates Albee’s corresponding treatment of the “All-American” figure who, through thought transference with his physically mutilated twin brother, is converted into a moron morally, mentally, as well as spiritually. Albee’s play, “an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity,”3 is in many ways a more advanced, concentrated assault on the American ethos. Whereas in West’s fantasy the hero is brutalized by the assorted social forces including racial riots and political assassinations, Albee’s twin suffers at the hands of a diabolical, modern fairy-tale stepmother—he has his eyes gouged out by Mommy because he “only had eyes for ” Daddy, his hands amputated and genitals removed to keep him from abusing himself. The surviving twin brother the Young Man, whom Grandma tags “the American Dream,” still retains his physical beauty, a “clean-cut, midwest farm boy type, almost insultingly good-looking in a typically American way,”4 but underneath this cliché-ridden physiognomy, he is a mere vacuum. Except for a greed for money—

“I no longer have the capacity to feel anything. I have no emotions. I have been drained, torn asunder . . . disemboweled. I have, now, only

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3 The author’s Preface to *The American Dream*. Albee, p. 53.
my person...my body, my face...but, that is all it comes to. As I told you, I am incomplete...I can feel nothing. I can feel nothing..."
(p. 113)

Albee's nomenclature demonstrates his intention to present types rather than individual persons. Mommy evidently stands for the stereotyped predatory female, a subject of so much onslaught by black humorists—Friedman performs it in a variety of stories, notably "The Trip" and "The Good Time"; Kopit sneers at Mommism in his Madame Rosepettle, who in turn parodies Mrs. Veneble in Tennessee Williams's Suddenly Last Summer, a play considerably short on humor but a savage satire nonetheless. Yet Albee's Mommy takes on a further significance with her reiterated complaints, "You just can't get satisfaction, you just try." Life to Mommy, as it seems, is entirely a matter of consumer's satisfactions and commodity values. Through her "satisfactions" she has depleted Daddy both in body and in soul until he is just another empty hulk of a man; in her consumer's eyes, Grandma, who represents decency, common wisdom and humanity, has declined into a household inconvenience that should be "carted off" as soon as possible.

With the arrival of the "American Dream," Grandma sees to it that everybody at last is "happy," getting "what he wants" or "what he thinks he wants." The empty Dream finds a home; Mommy finally gets her "satisfaction"; Mrs. Barker, the carnival "barker" of a professional woman and a procurer of false dreams, in contented in her illusion instigated by Grandma that her "Bye-Bye Adoption Service" has made good its promise; Daddy, a living dead, just does not care any more. The irony of it is that none of the characters knows what he or she has "got" or is foisted on except Grandma, only to whom is the true identity of the Dream Boy revealed. Very likely, she, too, is happy now that in her presumable death she could be far from all this ignoble strife, for in the play's miniature version, "The Sandbox," the same Grandma is quite happy in her encounter with another handsome Young Man who actually announces himself as "the Angel of Death." Grandma's last line in the second play, uttered in acknowledgement of the Young Man's gratitude for her praise, may doubly signify her relief in death—"You're...you're
welcome . . . dear.”¹ The ultimate irony in Albee’s mind may very well be that, under the vain mask of All-American Dream, there lurks death—the natural consequence of the Dream’s “fall from grace,” as the Young Man describes his predicament to Grandma.

In a related way, James Purdy’s Malcolm traces a similar theme of the fall from grace in the hero’s gradual deterioration through exposures to the cannibalism of twisted mentalities that society breeds; Malcolm, beginning with an almost moronic innocence, “a cypher and a blank,” remains throughout the unrelieved victim of multitudinous symptomatic violations, his utter passivity drawing out the worst in people with whom he comes into contact, until he dies in a typically black humor manner from “acute alcoholism and sexual hyperaesthesia.” Complete with the rumored resurrection of the hero, Malcolm once more is an example of the mock-religious black comedy. (That Albee undertook the novel’s dramatization is never coincidental.)

IV. The Catcher and the Runner

The reality to most of the black humorists is nothing more than a huge playground for a cat-and-mouse game, the mouse being played by a variety of runaways and outcasts who occupy a central spot in so many of their products. Forever at odds with the surrounding world, these characters see in it nothing but malign, predatory agents at work, against whom their best defence seems to be merely to run, to escape and not to belong. Admittedly, such interest in misfits and the fugitive kind is a phenomenon predominant in this age of anti-heroic literature, but at least it is of some technical significance that the figures of the “vague, little men” of middle-class mien, the figures representative of the “white” humor in the works of Thurber, White and others,² have been replaced by these shadowy Ishmaels perennially on the move. Albee’s Jerry calls himself “a permanent transient”;³ Yossarian in Catch-22 declares, “I’m not running away from responsibilities. I’m running to them”;⁴ and Donleavy’s Sebastian, the self-avowed

³ Albee, p. 37.
"eternal tourist," is presumably nicknamed after the fairy tale Gingerbread Man who goes on challenging, "I can run away from you."

Sociologically, the black humorists' preoccupation with the maladjusted is explained by Bruce Jay Friedman:

"...if you are doing anything as high-minded as examining society, the very best way to go about it is by examining first its throwaways, the ones who can't or won't keep in step (in step with what?). And who knows? Perhaps 'bad' behavior of a certain kind is better than 'good' behavior." (Foreword to Black Humor, p. xi.)

Further reasons would be that, through the characters' refusal to be involved, determination not to belong, the author is enabled to maintain a sufficient comic detachment and perspective; also that a certain freedom of movement could be secured for the characters, such freedom being essential for picaresque indulgence as well as for creating fantasy.

Joseph Heller's Catch-22 is perhaps the most ambitious and successful fugitive fiction of the kind so far brought out by black humorists. Through the insane escapades of more than twenty U.S.A.F. officers and men engaged in action in the final European phase of the World War II, Heller effectively devastates the ills and absurdities of the gigantic military machinery, which in turn symbolizes the whole overorganized industrial society intent on a single supreme purpose of self-destruction, whether at war or in peace. The helpless paradox of universal human situation is reflected in the title, a non-existent yet binding military code that "catches" the individual human being in its legal falderol:

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. (Catch-22, p. 47)

The same paradox, usurping the place of divine providence and dispensation, controls every sphere of human activities. It is almost

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1 The Ginger Man, p. 80.
as if, the whole mankind having been deprived of the right to be either sane or mad, a man has to be simultaneously both sane and mad. Every positive value is cancelled out by the inherent negative, resulting in a paralyzing relativity:

McWatt was the craziest combat man of them all probably, because he was perfectly sane and still did not mind the war. (p. 61)

He (Nately) had lived for almost twenty years without trauma, tension, hate, or neurosis, which was proof to Yossarian of just how crazy he really was. (pp. 254, 255)

It was almost no trick at all, he (the Chaplain) saw, to turn vice into virtue and slander into truth, impotence into abstinence, arrogance into humility, plunder into philanthropy, thievery into patriotism, and sadism into justice. (p. 372)

Odd characters afflicted with odder names pervade Heller's microcosm, enhancing absurdity with ridiculousness—Orr, Doc Daneeka, Major Major Major Major, Lieutenant Scheisskopf (!), General Peckem (peck'em?), Milo Minderbinder, Corporal Snark, and so on. (Inventing nice names seems to be black humorists' favorite pastime; already in West's A Cool Million there are Shagpoke Whipple, Levi Underdown, Sylvanus Snodgrass, with Lemuel Pitkin hailing from the Rat River district.) In a kaleidoscope of spectacular follies, they add up to one enormous farce mocking the beaurauratic futility of human attempts. A colonel keeps raising the required number of bombing missions in fits of nerves; officers are ordered to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" before they are allowed to use salt, pepper and ketchup in the mess hall; a squadron doctor is pronounced dead through a mistaken file; two C.I.D. agents keep popping in and out in search of mythical "Washington Irving" and "Irving Washington"... The archknave of the novel undoubtedly is Milo Minderbinder the mess officer who, in the traditional spirit of free enterprise, organizes a mammoth blackmarket syndicate covering the entire European and African Continents with franchises in the Near- and Middle-East. Claiming he is just putting war "on a businesslike basis," he has free use of all Allied military airplanes together with some from enemy Luftwaffe under his commission; his planes fly all over the globe with smuggled cargoes, even hauling the tow signs that advertise "the day's
specials.” His spot commercials are daily broadcast by Lord Haw Haw, and his contracts even include an air raid on his own squadron base for Germany.

Throughout all this extravaganza Yossarian the “Assyrian” remains a loner. Quite likely, his racial origin signifies that he is a lone survivor of a lost kingdom, a homeless wanderer in the world as it is. A coward, a shirker, a joker and a lecher, he attains the status of a hero only in his steady refusal to prostitute his unfitness. He, in other words, tries to be sane by default amid the jungle of insanity which doubtless amounts to another form of insanity in such a world of paradox; consequently, he is just another “crazy” man to the rest of the fellows. Being a flexible moralist and decidedly not a rebel with a cause, Yossarian never attempts to distinguish himself in noble and valorous isolation, a quality a Hemingway hero might have displayed in his voluntary exile. Instead, Yossarian is as willing as the rest to participate in the act of being another piece of incoherence; what he manages to salvage out of the whole fracas is a moral perception of solitude which enables him to know “how Christ must have felt as he walked through the world, like a psychiatrist through a ward full of nuts, like a victim through a prison full of thieves.” (p. 424)

Yossarian’s ultimate desertion, his slapstick escape to Sweden, the land of his dream “where the level of intelligence is high and where he could swim nude with beautiful girls with low, demurring voices,” is a black humorists’ lesson that the best a human being can achieve in this non-exit world is a certain comic dignity. Tragic downfall is obsolete, ridiculous even; by all means escape and “drop out,” choose the lesser disgrace of running away rather than the worse disgrace of staying in line with the nonsense. Thus Yossarian proclaims, “There’s nothing negative about running away to save my life,” before he runs to his “responsibilities” in Sweden.

Like the ubiquitous knife of Nately’s streetwalking girl friend threatening Yossarian everywhere, death often lies in wait at the end of fugitive’s journey. Since death itself is a comedy, these anti-heroes could not care less—just as the Death in Richardson’s Gallow’s Humor plaintively confesses, there is nowadays not much to distinguish death from quotidian life. Yet some of them still seem to explore the pos-

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1 Catch-22, p. 318.
2 Ibid., p. 461.
sibility of human dignity as final solution. While Jerry "the permanent transient" in *The Zoo Story* is essentially a comic character, in his self-chosen death he acquires a lyrical quality that dissolves the necessity for any comic distinction, leaving a strange, nevertheless rich sense of fulfilment that the things have finally worked out as they should. He has succeeded in an ultimate escape from his world, from the misery-ridden "humiliating excuse for a jail"; in doing so, he has exculpated Peter not only from his murder but from his material obsession, because Peter is now "dispossessed," rendered incapable of ever returning to the bench for his moment of middle-class self-contentment; from now on, Peter cannot help being a different man entirely with his eyes opened to a wider world, the world outside his pocket zoo of parakeets and cats—in short, Peter now is transformed into a full "animal" man, relegating his "vegetable" existence. Thus Jerry's vengeance, perhaps a very necessary and a well-justified one in this day and age, is at last complete, and he is ready to declare peace, however ambiguous his countenance in residual sneer.

Even Donleavy's Sebastian Dangerfield, the Gingerbread Boy and a master escape artist, appears to entertain the question of dignity in death in the midst of all his self-pity. *The Ginger Man* ends with Sebastian's cryptic rumination on horses "running out to death which is with some soul and their eyes are mad and teeth out." (p. 347) The theme is more clearly outlined in the author's *The Saddest Summer of Samuel S* which apparently picks up Sebastian's story under a different guise of one Samuel S, a lonely elderly schlemiel living in Vienna with "a long trial of failure" behind him. A perpetual loser who still "will not be bought," Samuel S dies in comic dignity:

And then he was dying and you think that you don't want your friends to know you died screaming in pain but that you were brave, kept your mouth shut and said nothing at all.

Like
A summer fly
Waltzes out
And wobbles
In the winter.2

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1 Albee, p. 35.
V. The Good and Awful

Humor is an assault and retreat. It is at once a lance that can hurt and a shield behind which one may lick his wounds. A smile indicates an amiable welcome; it equally as often conceals an embarrassed evasion. Laughter both disarms and pains. If universe to black humorists is nothing but a grotesque carnival where hoax predominates, such duplicity in the art of laughter inevitably entitles them to represent man as a promoter, not the clown, of the whole game; furthermore, they may even do so through an art form which in itself is a hoax. To put a Barnum in his place, one of the assured means is simply to enlist another Barnum.

The pattern, already observable in Catch-22, in The Ginger Man, as well as in the same author’s The Singular Man, is most successfully carried out in Terry Southern’s The Magic Christian whose multi-billionaire hero, “The Grand Guy” Guy Grand, probably is the happiest invention the black humorists have introduced so far in sheer hilarity and gusto. In a series of some fifteen elaborate, expensive practical jokes, Guy Grand mows down man’s greed, pretension, fanaticism, inanities of mass media and insolence of hard-sell culture; his resourcefulness reaches its crowning moment when he promotes a world cruise in the luxury ship The Magic Christian in which a horde of rich snobs are captivated and tormented throughout the voyage—with, among numerous other tricks, the jammed fog-horn that keep blasting on, the toppled stacks that feed oily smoke into the ship’s dining room, and the passengers’ daily menu solely consisting of potatoes. Guy Grand’s single purpose is “making it hot” for the people, and every fantastic project “costs him pretty to clear it.” Yet he is beyond blame or retribution in a world enthralled by money, which he possesses in an unlimited amount. Besides, he has the additional prerogative of being a supreme practical joker, which renders him immune to any kind of reproach. No one, unless one wants make a further fool of himself, could or would retaliate a joker except perhaps through another joke, the best defence being to endure with as much good grace as possible. In short, Guy Grand holds the position of a privileged irresponsibility.

The consideration of Guy Grand here seems to be particularly relevant in its association with the artist’s responsibility in such basically aggressive an art form as black humor is. There is enough evidence
to believe that not all but at least some of its practitioners are quite evasive in their commitment to their creations. Indeed, when Kopit’s Madame Rosepettle calls down the curtain with her last line addressed to her son—“What is the meaning of this?”—there remains a suspicion that her question might be interpreted in quite another way, that the laughter was not only directed upon the business on stage but also on the audience themselves. Donleavy’s Sebastian appears to keep on escaping endlessly and always getting away with it. (Pity on his deserted wife and baby!) Even Heller’s Yossarian invites the reader to wonder what really are his “responsibilities” in Sweden he is running to. (Just to swim in nude?) Again, amused chuckles are heard at foolish mortals.

In a memorable article on contemporary art, The New Yorker has categorized black humor as part of a nation-wide culture infiltrated by the spirit of “put-on” or practical joke, along with the Pop Art, the Camp, the Happenings, self-conscious hyperbole in advertisements, and “spoof” motion pictures. In it, the “put-on” art forms are explained as equipped with “a built-in escape clause” through which artists can disclaim any responsibility in the name of self-mockery and part-seriousness. “I might have been serious...then again, I might not,” is the all-purpose defence the artists can put forth against a critical accusation, wherewith a critic cannot but retreat with a smile and a slightly raised eyebrow. Behind the whole hocuspocus is a “spirit of apocalyptic laughter” serving “as a rationale for any extravagance and for the dramatization of brutal and regressive fantasies.” (The New Yorker, p. 44) Yet, after recognizing the elements of “put-on” as having always existed in the undercurrents of art, the article concludes:

...it has taken the contemporary sensibility to discern and articulate these latent elements, to turn facetiousness into a full aesthetic, or even moral, category. It may be that the put-on offers the only remaining possibility for aesthetic or philosophical synthesis in a world that has become staggeringly confused and grotesque. (p. 73)

If black humor, which without doubt reflects an aspect of spreading mentality in the contemporary world, consists of two opposing elements

that simultaneously repulse and attract, the statements above pertinently illuminate their sources. Truly, reading through Friedman's anthology, one tends to lose his way in the miasma of sadism and morbidity which reminds one of the lurid showcase display at some dingy novelty shop in the thick of screaming metropolitan traffic. It is veritable Hell. Nevertheless, these writers seem to tell, if such Hell is the rainbow end of American Dream, an American Tragedy in fact, it is merely symptomatic of a larger Hell, a larger tragedy that envelopes the rest of the world. And the demoniacal laughter that rings out brings enough excruciating pain to keep one's jaded sensibility awake and aware that there might still exist a way, in the midst of all the dire phantasmagoria, to reach for human dignity, however pathetically comic, or even failing that, at least for some authenticity which would suffice in its stead. Finally, in a less verbalized mood, one is tempted to stretch a bit Miss Susan Sontag's clever definition of the Camp, which after all is black humor's spiritual cousin: "it's good because it's awful."

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