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SIGMUND FREUD

The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious

Translated by Joyce Crick
with an Introduction by John Carey



PENGUIN BOOKS

John Carey
Introduction

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62. [The German terms refer to double and single beds, but Lichtenberg also exploits the double meaning of *einschläfrig*.]

63. Cf. my *Interpretation of Dreams*, section VI, 'Die Traumwerk' ['The Dream-work'].

III *The Tendencies of the Joke*

[A]

At the end of the previous section, as I was writing down Heine's comparison of the Catholic priest with an employee and the Protestant minister with an independent retailer, I was aware of an inhibition prompting me not to use this metaphor. I told myself that among my readers there would probably be some who venerated not only religion, but also its governance and its officers; these readers would only become indignant at the comparison and get into a state of high affect – which would rob them of any interest they might have in distinguishing whether the metaphor appeared to be witty in itself or witty only as a consequence of anything added. With other metaphors – for example, the neighbouring one of the agreeable moonlight cast on things by a certain philosophy – there would be no need to worry about an influence of this kind on some of our readers, which would get in the way of our investigation. The most devout of men would still be in a frame of mind to form a judgement on our problem.

It is easy to make out the character of those jokes associated with differences in audience-reaction to them. Sometimes the joke is an end in itself and serves no particular purpose; at others, it does put itself in the service of such a purpose; it becomes *tendentious*. Only the joke that has a tendency or intention runs the risk of coming up against persons who do not want to listen to it.

Theodor Vischer labelled the non-tendentious joke an 'abstract joke; I prefer to call it 'innocuous'.

Since we have already separated jokes into verbal jokes and

intellectual jokes, according to the material worked on by their technique, we are obliged to examine the relation of this classification to the new one I have just introduced. There is no relationship of reciprocal influence between verbal jokes and intellectual jokes on the one hand, and abstract jokes and tendentious jokes on the other; they are two classifications of the jokes we produce which are quite independent of each other. Perhaps someone might have received the impression that innocuous jokes are predominantly verbal, while the more complicated technique of intellectual jokes is mainly put to use by strong intentions and tendencies. However, there are innocuous jokes that work with verbal play and punning, and equally there are innocuous ones that make use of all the resources of the intellectual joke. It is equally easy to show that a tendentious joke may be simply verbal in technique. Thus, for example, jokes 'playing' on proper names¹ often have an insulting and hurtful tendency, and obviously belong to the verbal jokes. On the other hand, the most innocuous of all jokes are again verbal, for example, the *Schüttelreime* [extended rhyming spoonerisms] that have become popular recently. Their technique is made up of the multiple use of the same material with a quite peculiar modification:

*Und weil er Geld in Menge hatte,
lag stets er in der Hängematte.*

[lit: 'And because he had money in quantity, he always lay in his hammock.'²]

No one will dispute, I hope, that the amusement we have in this kind of otherwise humble rhyming is the same enjoyment that makes us recognize a joke.

Good examples of intellectual jokes and witticisms that are abstract or innocuous are to be found in abundance among Lichtenberg's comparisons, some of which we have already met. I shall add a few more:

'They had sent an octavo volume to Göttingen, and got back a quarto in body and soul.'

'To build this structure properly, the most important thing is to

lay a good foundation, and I do not know of any firmer than if on every course of bricks pro one immediately lays a course contra.'

'One [thinker] begets the thought, another lifts it from the baptismal font, the third produces children with it, the fourth visits it on its deathbed, and the fifth buries it.' (Metaphor with unification.)

'He not only didn't believe in ghosts, he wasn't even afraid of them.' The joke here exists simply and solely in the absurd mode of representation, putting what is usually reckoned to be the lesser in the comparative and taking what is regarded as the more important as the positive. If we dispense with the witty way of clothing it [Einkleidung]³, it would say: it is much easier to dismiss our fear of ghosts rationally than guard yourself against it when the occasion arises. This is no longer a joke at all – though it is a true psychological insight still too little appreciated, the same insight, in fact, as Lessing expressed in his well-known words:

'Not all are free, who mock their chains.' (*Nathan der Weise*, IV.iv.2757–8.)

This is an opportunity for me to clear up a misunderstanding that might be a possibility in any case. For an 'innocuous' or 'abstract' joke should certainly not mean the equivalent of an 'empty' joke with no content [*gehaltlos*], but simply the opposite of the 'tendentious' jokes I shall discuss later. As the example above demonstrates, an innocuous, i.e., un-tendentious, witticism can also be very rich in content [*gehaltvoll*], and say something worthwhile. However, the content [*Gehalt*]⁴ of a joke is separate from the joke, and is the content of the thought, which is expressed as a joke by a particular contrivance. Indeed, just as clockmakers are accustomed to fit a particularly fine mechanism with a precious case, it may also be so with jokes that the finest feats of joke-making are used to clothe thoughts that are richest in content.

Now in the case of jokes based on ideas, if we keep our eye on the distinction between the content of the thought [*Gehalt des Gedankens*] and its clothing as a joke, we shall arrive at an insight that can shed light on much of our uncertainty in judging jokes. For it turns out – and this is the surprising thing – that we ascribe our enjoyment of a joke to the combined impression made by the content

and the success of the joke [*Witzleistung*] together, and we allow ourselves to be pretty well deceived by the one factor over the extent of the other. Only a reduction of the joke will clear up this deception of our judgement for us.

Moreover, the same thing also applies to verbal jokes. When we hear: 'Experience consists of experiencing what we wish we had not experienced' – we are baffled; we think we are being told some new truth, and it takes a while before we recognize behind this disguise the truism: 'One learns from experience' (Kuno Fischer). The splendid achievement of this joke [*Witzleistung*] in defining 'experience' almost exclusively by using the word 'experience' deceives us into overestimating the content of the statement. The same thing happens with Lichtenberg's unification joke about 'January' (p. 57), which tells us no more than we already know: that New Year's wishes are as rarely fulfilled as other wishes – and in many other similar instances.

We meet the contrary in other jokes where we have obviously been captivated by the aptness and truth of the thought, so that we call the statement a brilliant joke, while only the thought is brilliant and the feat of joking [*Witzleistung*] often feeble. In Lichtenberg's witticisms in particular, their central thought frequently has much more value than the way they are clothed as a witticism, though we extend our appreciation of the former quite unjustifiably to it. For example, his remark about 'the torch of truth' (p. 71) as a comparison is scarcely a witticism, but it hits the mark so neatly that we are tempted to draw attention to the statement as being particularly witty.

Lichtenberg's witticisms are outstanding above all on account of their thought-content and sureness in hitting the mark. Goethe rightly said of this author that the jokes and jests flashing into his mind pin-point the places where problems are hiding, more exactly, that they touch on the solution to problems. When, for example, he notes down what came to him as a witty idea:

'He always read *Agamemnon* instead of *angenommen* [lit: 'assumed'] – he had read so much Homer' (technically, this is an example of stupidity + punning). What he has done is nothing less

than uncover the secret of misreading.⁵ That witticism (p. 51) whose technique appeared so very unsatisfactory to us is similar:

'He was astonished that cats had two holes cut in their fur in the very place where they had eyes.' The stupidity on show here is only apparent; in reality, behind this simple-minded remark there lies hidden the great problem of teleology in animal anatomy; it was by no means so obvious that the fissure of the eyelids should open just where the cornea is exposed until evolution shed light on this coincidence.

Let us keep in mind that what we receive from a witty remark is a total impression, in which we are not able to separate the share contributed by the thought-content [*Gedankeninhalt*] from the share made by the success of the joke [*Witzleistung*]; perhaps later we shall find an even more significant parallel to this.

[B]

For our purpose of throwing theoretical light on the nature of jokes, innocuous jokes are bound to be of greater value to us than tendentious ones, jokes lacking content [*Gehalt*] of greater value than profound ones. Innocuous play on words without any content, I suggest, will present us with the problem of jokes in its purest form, because in these instances we escape the danger of being confused by the tendency a joke may have, or of being deceived in our judgement by its good sense. Using material of this kind, it is possible to take a new step forward in our knowledge.

I shall choose the most innocuous example of a verbal joke I can find:

A visitor is announced to a girl still at her toilette, who complains: 'Oh what a pity, just when one is *at one's most anziehend* [pun: both 'attractive' and 'getting dressed'], one can't make an appearance.'⁶

But as I begin to doubt whether I am right in claiming that this is an un-tendentious joke, I shall replace it with another, blessedly simple-minded, which is perhaps not open to such objections.

In a house where I am invited as a guest, at the end of the meal

the pudding called a *roulade* is served, which requires some skill in the cook to prepare. So one of the guests inquires 'Home-made?', and our host replies: 'Certainly, it's a *Home-roulade* (Home-Rule!).'

This time we shall not examine the joke's technique, but propose to turn our attention to another factor, indeed, the most important one. Listening to this improvised joke gave those present much amusement – I recall it clearly – and made us laugh. In this case, as in countless others, the listeners' feeling of pleasure cannot derive from the joke's tendency or from its thought-content [*Gedankeninhalt*]; all that is left is for us to relate this feeling of pleasure to its technique. So the technical resources we have already described – condensation, displacement, indirect representation, etc. – have the power to arouse a feeling of pleasure in the listener, then, even though as yet we cannot see how they have come by this power. In this easy way we have arrived at our second proposition towards an explanation of jokes; the first (p. 12) was that the jokiness of a joke depended on its form of expression. Let us call to mind that the second proposition does not really tell us anything new. It only picks out what was already contained in an observation we made earlier. We recall – do we not? – that when we succeeded in reducing a joke, that is, in replacing its [form of] expression by another one while carefully preserving its sense, this eliminated not only its character as a joke, but also the effect of laughter, that is, our enjoyment of the joke.

We cannot go any further at this point without first getting to grips with our philosophical authorities.

The philosophers, who include the joke under the category of the comic and treat the comic itself within aesthetics, characterize the way our imagination works aesthetically [*das ästhetische Vorstellen*] by the condition that then we demand nothing of things, nor wish to do anything with them; we do not need them for the satisfaction of our great vital needs, but are content with contemplating them and enjoying the imagined idea. 'This enjoyment, this mode of imagining, is the purely aesthetic mode, which rests only in itself, has its end only in itself and fulfils none of the other ends of life' (Kuno Fischer, p. 68).

We shall scarcely be taking a position that contradicts these words of Fischer's – perhaps only translating his thoughts into our way of expressing them – when we stress that the activity of joking cannot be said to have no aim or purpose, for it has set itself the unmistakable aim of arousing pleasure in the listener. I doubt whether we are capable of undertaking anything that does not take some intention into account. If we are not actually using our psychological apparatus to realize one of our indispensable satisfactions, we let it work towards pleasure, we try to obtain pleasure from its own activity. I would surmise that this is really *the* prerequisite for the aesthetic working of the imagination in general [*alles ästhetische Vorstellen*], but I understand too little of aesthetics to be inclined to pursue this proposition; but of joking I can say on the basis of the two insights just gained that it is an activity whose aim it is to obtain pleasure from psychological processes – intellectual or otherwise. There are certainly other activities that have the same goal. Perhaps what distinguishes them is the field of psychological activity they seek to draw pleasure from, perhaps the method they employ in doing so. At present this is something we cannot decide; but we do maintain firmly that the joke-technique and the tendency towards economy which partly governs it (pp. 34–5) have now been brought into connection for the production of pleasure.

But before we set about solving the puzzle of how the technical resources of the joke-work are able to produce pleasure in the listener, let us remind ourselves that for the sake of simplification and greater transparency we have pushed tendentious jokes entirely to one side. Still, we must attempt to throw light on what the intentions and tendencies of [this kind of] joke are, and how it serves these tendencies.

One observation above all warns us not to leave tendentious jokes to one side when we are investigating the source of the pleasure we take in jokes. The pleasurable effect of an innocuous joke is mostly a moderate one; a distinctly agreeable feeling, a slight smile, is usually all it is able to provoke in the listener, and part of this effect can probably be put down to thought-content, as we have seen in appropriate examples (pp. 90–91). An un-tentious joke scarcely

ever achieves those sudden outbursts of laughter that make tendentious jokes so irresistible. As the technique can be the same in both, we may find the suspicion stirring that a tendentious joke has sources of pleasure at its disposal – by virtue of its tendency – to which innocuous jokes have no access.

It is now easy to give an overview of the tendencies present in jokes. Where a joke is not an end in itself, i.e., innocuous, it puts itself at the service of two tendencies only, which can themselves be merged into a single viewpoint; it is either a *hostile* joke (used for aggression, satire, defence) or it is an *obscene* joke (used to strip someone naked [*Entblößung*]). Again, we should note from the start that the technical variety⁸ [Art] of the joke – whether it is a verbal or an intellectual joke – bears no relation to these two tendencies.

But it will take us longer to lay out the way in which jokes serve these tendencies. In this investigation I would like to begin not with hostile jokes but with obscene jokes. It is true, the latter have been deemed worthy of study far less often, as if a revulsion from their subject-matter had carried over to the object. However, let us not be thrown off course by this, for straight away we are about to come upon a borderline kind of joke which promises to throw light on more than one dark point.

We know what is understood by 'bawdry': deliberately emphasizing sexual facts and relations by talking about them. However, this definition is no more conclusive than any other. A lecture on the anatomy of the sexual organs or on the physiology of reproduction, despite this definition, need not have a single point of contact in common with bawdry. It is also characteristic of bawdy talk that it is directed at a particular person by whom the speaker is sexually aroused, and is meant to make them aware of this arousal by listening to the bawdy and so becoming sexually aroused themselves. 'Instead of being aroused, the person might also be made to feel shame or embarrassment, which only implies a reaction against their arousal and, in this roundabout way, an admission of it. Bawdy talk, then, is in origin directed at women and is to be regarded as the equivalent of an attempt at seduction. So if a man in male company enjoys

telling or listening to bawdy stories, the original situation – which cannot be realized on account of social impediments – is also imagined as well. Anyone who laughs at the bawdy talk they have heard, is laughing like a spectator at an act of sexual aggression.

The sexual subject-matter that forms the content of bawdry includes more than what is specific to either sex; over and above this, it includes what the two sexes have in common to which the feeling of shame extends, that is, excremental subject-matter in all its range. But this is the range that sexual subject-matter has in childhood; in the imagination at this stage there exists a latrine, as it were, where what is sexual and what is excremental are distinguished badly or not at all.⁹ Everywhere in the field of thinking investigated by the psychology of neuroses the sexual still includes the excremental, and is understood in the old, infantile, sense.

Bawdry is like an act of unclothing the person of different sex at whom it is directed. By voicing the obscene words it forces the person attacked to imagine the particular part of the body or the act involved and shows them that the aggressor himself is imagining it. There is no doubt that the pleasure in gazing on what is sexual revealed in its nakedness is the original motive of bawdy talk.

It can only help to clarify matters if at this point we go back to fundamentals. The inclination to gaze on what is specific to each sex in its nakedness is one of the original components of our libido. Perhaps it is already a substitute itself, deriving from the pleasure, posited as being primary, of touching what is sexual. As so often, gazing has replaced touching here too.¹⁰ The libido for looking and touching is of two kinds in everyone, active and passive, masculine and feminine, and develops in the one or the other direction according to which sexual character is predominant. In young children it is easy to observe the inclination to show themselves naked. Where the germ of this inclination does not meet the usual fate of eclipse and suppression, it develops in adult men into the perversion known as exhibitionism. In women, the passive inclination to exhibitionism is almost invariably eclipsed by the magnificent reactive feat of sexual modesty – but not without saving a little escape hatch for it in their clothes. I need only hint at how versatile and variable

according to convention and circumstance is the measure of exhibitionism that women are permitted to retain.

In men a high degree of this urge persists as a component of the libido and serves to introduce the sex act. If this urge asserts itself on the first approach to the woman, it has to make use of speech for two reasons. First, to lay claim to the woman, and second, because by summoning up the idea the words spoken may kindle the corresponding state of arousal in the woman herself and waken her inclination to passive exhibitionism. These words of solicitation do not go as far as bawdry, but can pass over into it. For in a situation where the woman soon becomes willing, the obscene speech is short-lived, it promptly gives way to a sexual action. It is different if the woman's willingness cannot be counted on, and a defensive reaction on her part makes its appearance instead. Then the sexually arousing speech becomes – in the form of bawdry – an end in itself; as the sexual aggression is checked in its advance towards the act, it fingers on the evocation of arousal and derives pleasure from signs of it in the woman. In doing so, the aggression probably also changes character, in the same way as every movement in the libido does when it meets an obstacle; it becomes plain hostile, cruel, that is, it calls on the sadistic components of the sexual drive for help against the obstacle.

The woman's intransigence, then, is the most immediate prerequisite for bawdry to develop, though one which merely seems to imply postponement, offering the prospect that further efforts might not be in vain. The ideal case of this kind of resistance on the woman's part occurs if another man, a third party, is present at the same time, for then any immediate acquiescence from the woman is as good as out of the question. This third party soon becomes very important for the development of the bawdry; but above all we should not disregard the presence of the woman. Among country people or in lower-class taverns one can observe that it is only when the barmaid or the landlady comes on the scene that the bawdry gets going; the opposite occurs only when we reach a higher social level, and the presence of a female person puts an end to the bawdry; the men save this kind of conversation – which originally presupposed the

presence of a woman made ashamed – until they are 'among themselves'. And so gradually, instead of the woman, it is the spectator or in this case the listener who becomes the target audience for the bawdry, and this transformation already makes the bawdry approach the character of a joke.

From this point on, there are two factors that will claim our attention: the part played by the third person, the listener, and the conditions governing the content of the bawdy joke itself.

In general, a tendentious joke requires three persons: apart from the one who is telling the joke, it needs a second person who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggression, and a third in whom the joke's intention of producing pleasure is fulfilled. We shall have to look for the deeper grounds for these relations later, but for the moment let us keep to the fact they signal: the person who tells the joke is not the one who also laughs at it and so enjoys the pleasure it produces, but the inactive listener. In the case of bawdry, the three persons have the same relations. The course of its development can be described thus: as the first person finds his satisfaction inhibited by the woman, his libidinal impulse develops a hostile tendency towards this second person and calls on the third, originally the intruder, to be his ally. The first person's bawdy talk strips the woman naked before the third, who is now, as listener, bribed – by the effortless satisfaction of his own libido.

It is curious how very popular bawdy exchanges of this kind are among the common people and how they never fail to rouse a mood of cheerful humour. But it is also worth noticing that in this complicated process, which has so many of the characteristics of the tendentious joke, none of the formal requirements that are the sign of a joke are expected of bawdry. To talk dirty without disguising it gives pleasure to the first person and makes the second laugh.

Only when we rise into more cultivated society do we find the addition of the formal requirements for jokes. The bawdry becomes witty, and is tolerated only if it is witty. The technical device it uses most is allusion, i.e., replacement by something small, something remotely related that the listener can reconstruct in his imagination into a full and plain obscenity. The greater the disproportion

between what is given directly in the joke and what it has necessarily aroused in the listener, the subtler the joke, and the higher it may dare enter into good society. Apart from allusion, coarse or subtle, the bawdy joke has all the other devices of verbal and intellectual jokes at its disposal, as can easily be shown in examples.

Here at last we can understand what a joke can do for its tendency. It makes the satisfaction of a drive possible (be it lustful or hostile) in face of an obstacle in its way; it circumvents this obstacle and in doing so draws pleasure from a source that the obstacle had made inaccessible. The obstacle in the way is actually nothing other than woman's increased inability, in conformity with a higher cultural and social level, to tolerate sexual matters undisguised. The woman thought of as being present in the original situation is simply kept on as if she were there, or, even in her absence, her influence continues to have the effect of making the men abashed. One may observe how men of a higher social level are prompted by the presence of girls of a lower class to let their bawdy jokes revert to simple bawdy talk.

The power that makes it difficult or impossible for women, and to a lesser extent men too, to enjoy undisguised obscenity we call 'repression', and we recognize in it the same psychological process which in cases of serious [psychological] illness keeps entire complexes of impulses as well as their issue far from consciousness, and which has turned out to be one of the main causal factors in what are called the psycho-neuroses. We grant that higher culture and education have a great influence on the development of repression, and we assume that under these conditions a change in psychological organization comes about, which could also be contributed by an inherited disposition, with the result that what was once felt to be agreeable now appears unacceptable and is rejected with all the force of the psyche. Through our culture's work of repression, primary possibilities of enjoyment, now spurned by the censorship within us, are lost. But all renunciation is very difficult for the human psyche, and so we find that tendentious jokes provide a means of reversing [the process of] renunciation and of regaining what was lost. When we laugh at an indecent joke that is subtle, we are laughing at the same

thing that causes the bumpkin to laugh in a coarse obscenity; in both cases the pleasure is drawn from the same source; but we would not be capable of laughing at the coarse obscenity, we would be ashamed, or it would appear disgusting to us; we can only laugh when the joke has come to our help.

What we surmised at the outset, then, seems to be confirmed: that the tendentious joke has other sources of pleasure at its disposal than the innocuous kind, where all the pleasure is somehow linked to technique. We can also emphasize afresh that in tendentious jokes we are not capable of distinguishing by our feeling which share of our pleasure has its source in technique, and which in tendency. So we do not in the strict sense know what we are laughing at. In the case of all obscene jokes, we are subject to gross illusions of judgement as to how 'good' the joke is, in so far as this depends on formal requirements; the technique of these jokes is often pretty feeble, the laughter they provoke tremendous.

[C]

Let us now examine whether the part played by jokes is the same when they serve a hostile tendency.

From the start we come upon the same conditions here. Our hostile impulses towards our fellows – ever since our childhood as individuals as well as since the childhood of human culture – have been subject to the same restrictions, the same progressive repressions, as our sexual urges. We have not advanced so far that we are able to love our enemies, nor, being smitten on the right cheek, turn the left also;¹¹ and today, even, all the moral precepts restraining us from putting our hate into action still carry the clearest indications that they were originally meant to apply to the small community of our fellow-tribesmen. As well as legitimately feeling that we belong to one people, we also permit ourselves to disregard most of these restraints in our attitude towards an alien people. All the same, within our own circle we have made some progress in mastering our hostile impulses; as Lichtenberg puts it so sharply:

'Where we now say "Excuse me", we once used to give them a cuff over the ear.' Violent hostility, forbidden by law, has given way to verbal invective, while better knowledge of how human impulses are interconnected, together with the 'tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner' which follows logically from it, robs us more and more of the ability to get angry with the fellow-creature¹² who has got in our way. As children still endowed with powerful dispositions towards enmity, we later learn in the course of our more highly developed personal culture that it is unworthy to call people names; and even where a fight is actually permitted, the number of things that may not be employed as a means of carrying it on have increased markedly. Ever since we have had to give up expressing hostility by our actions - deterred from doing so by the unimpassioned third person, for it is in their interest that the safety of their persons should be preserved - we have developed a new technique of insult, just as we did in the case of sexual aggression, which aims to draw this third person into becoming an ally against our enemy. By making our enemy small, mean, contemptible, comical, we take a roundabout route to getting for ourselves the enjoyment of vanquishing him, which the third person - who has gone to no effort - endorses with his laughter.

We are now prepared for the part played in hostile aggression by the joke. The joke will allow us to turn to good account those ridiculous features in our enemy that the presence of opposing obstacles would not let us utter aloud or consciously; again, that is, it will *get around restrictions and open up sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible*. It will, further, bribe the listener with his own gain in pleasure into taking our side without probing very far, just as on other occasions we ourselves, bribed by an innocuous joke, usually overestimate the content of a statement if it is wittily expressed. Our language has a saying, 'to have the laugh on one's side', which hits the mark exactly.

Let us look, for example, at the witticisms made by Herr N. which were scattered over the previous pages. They are all of them insults. It is as if Herr N. wanted to shout out loud: 'But the Minister of Agriculture is an ass himself!' [pp. 20-21] 'Don't talk to me about

***; he's bursting with vanity!' [p. 19] 'I've never read anything more boring than this historian's essays on Napoleon in Austria!' [p. 17]. But his high degree of personal cultivation makes it impossible for him to give vent to these judgements of his in this form. That is why they have recourse to jokes, for jokes will ensure them a reception with the listener which, despite the truth they might well contain, they would never have found in an unjoking form. One of these jokes - the 'roter Fadian' [p. 17] - is particularly instructive, perhaps the most convincing of them all. What is there about it that compels us to laugh and diverts our interest so completely away from asking whether it is doing the poor writer an injustice or not? Certainly the joking form, the joke, that is; but what are we laughing at when we do? Without doubt at the person himself who is presented to us as the 'roter Fadian', and at his red hair in particular. The cultivated person has got out of the habit of laughing at physical disabilities, nor in his eyes does having red hair count as one of the physical disadvantages worth laughing at either. But it certainly still does to schoolboys and the common people, and even at the cultural level of certain Municipal Councillors and Members of Parliament. And now this joke of Herr N.'s has in the cleverest way made it possible for us, delicate-minded adults that we are, to laugh like schoolboys at the historian's red hair. This was certainly not Herr N.'s intention; but it is very doubtful whether anyone who gives his jokes free rein is bound to be aware of their precise intention.

While in these cases the obstacle to the aggression that the joke helped to get round was internal - an aesthetic objection to the insult - in other cases it may be purely external. As in the case where His Majesty is struck by the stranger's striking resemblance to his own person and asks him: 'Was your mother once in service at the palace?' and the stranger's quick-witted reply is: 'No, but my father was' [p. 58]. He would surely like to knock the insolent questioner down for daring to cast aspersions on the memory of his beloved mother with such an insinuation; but this insolent questioner is His Majesty, and one may not knock him down or even insult him if one does not wish to pay for this revenge with one's whole existence. The thing to do, then, would be to swallow the insult in silence; but

fortunately the joke shows the way to repaying the insult unscathed – by picking up the allusion in the technical device of unification and turning it against the assailant. Our impression that this is a joke is so strongly determined here by its tendency, that in view of the joking riposte we are inclined to forget that the assailant's question, in its use of allusion, is a joke itself.

The prevention of an insult or an abusive reply by external circumstances happens so often that the tendentious joke is a particular favourite for use in enabling criticism or aggression towards persons in high places who claim authority [to be voiced]. The joke then represents a rebellion against such authority, a liberation from the oppression it imposes. This is the factor, of course, that also makes caricature so attractive to us – we laugh at it even when it is badly done, merely because we consider rebellion against authority to be a creditable thing.

If we bear in mind that the tendentious joke is so well suited to attacking the great, the dignified and the mighty – powers protected from direct disparagement by internal inhibitions or external circumstances – then we are forced into a particular view of certain groups of jokes which seemingly have to do with inferior and powerless figures. I mean the marriage-broker stories, some of which we met when we were examining the various techniques employed in the intellectual joke. In some of them, e.g., in the examples 'And she's deaf as well' [p. 55] and 'Who would lend these people anything?' [p. 55], the marriage-broker was laughed at for being an indiscreet and thoughtless figure who became comical because he let out the truth automatically, as it were. But does what we have learned about the nature of the tendentious joke on the one hand and the great amusement we have from these stories on the other chime with the wretchedness of the figures the joke seems to be laughing at? Are they worthy adversaries for the joke? Is it not rather the case that the joke is only pushing the brokers into the foreground in order to hit a more important target, or, as the saying is, 'striking the sack, and intending the ass'? This view really cannot be dismissed.

This interpretation of the marriage-broker stories can be taken further. It is true that I do not need to go into them closely; I

can be content with regarding these stories as *Schwänke* [comic folk-tales], and deny that they have the character of a joke. So what is taken to be a joke, then, also depends on subjective factors of this kind; this is something we have now noticed and shall have to examine later on. It means that only what I say is a proper joke is a joke. What is a joke to me can be just a comic story to someone else. But if a joke admits of this doubt, it can only be because it has one side for show, a façade – in our instances a comical façade – which will satisfy the eyes of one viewer, while another may try to look behind it. The suspicion may begin to stir that this façade is meant to dazzle the probing eye, that stories of this kind have something to hide.

In any case, if our marriage-broker stories are jokes, they are all the better as jokes because their façade has put them in a position to hide not only what they have to say, but also that they have something – forbidden – to say. But if we take the interpretation further and reveal what is hidden, unmasking these stories with their comical façade as tendentious jokes, it would run as follows: anyone who lets the truth slip like this in an unguarded moment is actually glad to be free of the pretence. That is a true psychological insight of deep penetration. Without some assent of this kind, no one would allow themselves to be overcome by the automatism that brings the truth to light in these stories.¹³ But this now transforms the ridiculous figure of the *Schadchen* into a sympathetic and pitiable one. How happy the man must be that at last he can throw off the burden of pretence, if he promptly takes the first opportunity to cry aloud the final scrap of truth! As soon as he sees that the cause is lost, that the bride does not charm the young man, he will gladly reveal that she has yet another hidden flaw that the suitor has not noticed, or he will take advantage of the occasion when he has to come up with an argument settling a detail to express his contempt for the people he is working for: I ask you, who would lend those people anything! The entire ridicule now falls on the parents, only touched on in the story, for approving of such a swindle just to get their daughters a husband, on the pitiful situation of girls who let themselves be married under such arrangements, and on the shamefulness of

marriages contracted after such introductions. The broker is the right man to express such criticism, for he more than anyone knows of these abuses, but he may not broadcast them aloud, as he is a poor man who can make a living only by exploiting them. But a similar conflict also marks the popular mind that created these and similar stories; for it knows that the sanctity of marriages already contracted will fare ill if attention is drawn to the procedures that go on in contracting them.

Let us recall what we observed in examining the technique of jokes: that absurdity in a joke frequently substitutes for mockery and criticism in the thought behind the joke – and in this respect the joke-work is doing the same as the dream-work; here we find this state of affairs freshly confirmed. That the mockery and criticism is not directed at the person of the broker, who makes his appearance in the previous examples just as the whipping-boy, can be demonstrated by a number of other jokes in which the broker, quite to the contrary, is described as the figure who comes out on top, with an argument to deal with every difficulty. These are the stories with a logical façade, instead of a comical one, sophisticated intellectual jokes. In one of these (pp. 53–4), the broker has the art of arguing away the flaw of the bride's limp. It is at least 'ready-made'; by contrast, another wife whose limbs were straight would be in constant danger of falling down and breaking a leg, and then there would be the illness, the pain, the doctor's bills, which the husband would save if his wife had a limp already. Or in another story he knows how to refute any number of the suitor's objections to the bride, with a good argument for each one, answering him then at the last, unwhitewashable, one: 'So? She's not to have one single fault?' [p. 52], as if some remnant were not necessarily left over from the earlier causes for demur. It is not difficult to point out the weak point in the argumentation in both examples; we already did so when we examined their technique. But now something else interests us. If the broker's words are given such a strong appearance of logic, which reveals itself on careful scrutiny to be [just that] – appearance – then the truth behind it is that the joke declares the broker is in the right; the thought is not bold enough to say he is in the right

seriously, and replaces this serious truth with the appearance presented by the joke. But here as so frequently the jest betrays the serious truth. We will not go astray if we assume that all these stories with a logical façade really mean what they say with their intentionally faulty reasoning. It is only its use of sophistry for the hidden representation of the truth that makes it a joke in character, one, that is, mainly dependent on its tendency. For in both stories what is meant to be suggested is that the suitor is really making himself ridiculous when he goes looking so carefully for the bride's separate good points, which all turn out to be handicaps, forgetting as he does so that he has to be prepared to take for his wife a human being with unavoidable frailties, while on the other hand the only quality that would make marriage with the more or less imperfect personality of the wife tolerable would be fondness on both sides and readiness for loving adaptation – which is not once mentioned in the entire transaction.

The mockery of the suitor in these examples – where the broker now most appropriately plays the part of the figure who comes out on top – is expressed far more clearly in other anecdotes. The more transparent these stories are, the less joke-technique they contain; they are, as it were, only borderline cases of jokes, rather sharing with their technique only the formation of a façade. But as they have the same tendency and also hide it behind a façade, it is appropriate that they should have the full effect of a joke. In addition, their poverty in technical resources explains why so many jokes of this kind cannot do without the comical element of argot – which has a similar effect to a joke – without losing a great deal.

The following is a story of this kind; for all its power as a tendentious joke, it no longer shows any trace of joke-technique: 'The broker asks: "What do you want of your bride?" – Answer: "She must be beautiful, she must be rich, and educated." – "Fine," says the broker, "but I make that three wives."' Here the rebuke is delivered to the husband directly, no longer in the disguise of a joke.

In the examples so far the veiled aggression was still directed against people, in the marriage-broker stories against all the parties taking part in the marriage transaction: bride, bridegroom and their

parents. But the joke's objects of attack could just as well be institutions, persons in so far as they are representative of the institutions, moral or religious precepts, philosophies of life enjoying such great respect that any criticism of them can only make an appearance masked as a joke, that is, as a joke hidden by its façade. However few the topics this tendentious joke has for a target, its forms and disguises are extremely various. I think we are right to give this group of tendentious jokes a distinctive name. Which name is the appropriate one will emerge after we have interpreted some examples.

I recall the two stories – the one of the impoverished gourmet who was caught out eating 'salmon with mayonnaise' [pp. 41–2], and the other of the alcoholic tutor [p. 44] – which we got to know as sophistical displacement jokes. I shall take their interpretation further. We have since heard that if a story's façade has the appearance of logic attached to it, the thought would probably like to say seriously: 'the man is right' – but on account of some opposition countering it, it is not bold enough to say so except by making the one point where it is easy to show that he is wrong. The 'point' chosen is the precise point of compromise between where he is right and where he is wrong – which is certainly not a decision, but corresponds, I suggest, to the conflict in ourselves. The two stories are simply epicurean. They are saying: 'Yes, the man is right; there is nothing greater than enjoyment, and it doesn't really matter how you get it.' That sounds terribly immoral, and it probably is not much better than the 'carpe diem [seize the day]'¹⁴ of the poet, who appeals to the insecurity of life and the barrenness of virtuous self-denial; fundamentally, that is what it is. If the idea that the man in the 'salmon with mayonnaise' joke is supposed to be right puts us off so much, this does not come about because it is illustrating a truth with an indulgence of the lowest sort which, it seems to us, we can well do without. In reality, every one of us has had hours and times when he has given this philosophy of life its due and upbraided morality for only being able to make demands without any compensations. Ever since we no longer believe the directive [to think on] the Beyond, where all self-denial shall be rewarded with gratification –

there are, by the way, very few of the godly if we make self-denial the distinguishing mark of faith – ever since then, 'carpe diem' has become a serious reminder. I would gladly postpone my gratification, but do I know if I'll still be there tomorrow?

'Di doman' non c'è certezza [There is no certainty about tomorrow].'¹⁵

I would gladly do without all the avenues to gratification that society disapproves of, but am I certain that society will reward my self-denial – even though with some postponement – by opening to me one of the permitted avenues? It is possible to say out loud what these jokes whisper: that the wishes and desires of human beings have a right to make themselves heard as much as demanding and ruthless morality, and in our times it has been said in forceful and stirring sentences¹⁶ that this morality is only the selfish ordinance of the rich and powerful few who are able to satisfy their wishes without postponement at any time. As long as the art of healing has not gone further in making our life more certain, and as long as social arrangements do not do more to make it more agreeable, the voice in us that rebels against the demands of morality will not be stifled. In the end every honest person will make this admission, at least to themselves. This conflict can only be decided by a roundabout route via a fresh insight. We must link our lives to that of others in such a way, we must be able to identify with others so closely, that we are able to overcome the curtailment of our own lifetime; and we may not fulfil the demands of our own needs illegitimately, but must leave them unfulfilled, because only the continued existence of so many unfulfilled demands is able to develop the power to change the social order. But not all personal needs can be postponed and transferred to others in this way, and a universal and ultimate solution to the conflict does not exist.

Now we know what we should call jokes like the last [two] we have interpreted: they are *cynical* jokes, and what they conceal are *cynicisms*.

Among all the institutions the cynical joke habitually attacks, there is none more important, more powerfully protected by moral precepts, nor more inviting of attack than the institution of marriage,

which is, accordingly, also the target for the majority of cynical jokes. No claim is more personal than that for sexual freedom, and nowhere has culture attempted to exercise greater suppression than in the field of sexuality. For our purposes one single example will suffice, from the 'Entry in the Joke Book of Prince Carnival' mentioned on p. 67:

'A wife is like an umbrella. After all, before long one takes a cab.'

We have already discussed the complicated technique in this example: a baffling, apparently impossible, comparison, but one which, as we now see, is not in itself a joke; in addition, an allusion (cab = public vehicle), and, as its most powerful technical device, an omission which increases its unintelligibility. The comparison could be analysed in the following way: one marries to be safe from the onslaughts of sensuality, and then all the same it turns out that marriage does not allow the satisfaction of rather stronger needs, just as one takes an umbrella for protection against the rain and then still gets wet in the rain. In both cases one has to look around for stronger protection, in the one a public vehicle, in the other women available for money. The joke is now almost entirely replaced by cynicism. That marriage is not an institution that satisfies the husband's sexuality is something one is not bold enough to say out loud and in public, unless perhaps one is driven to it by the love of truth and reforming zeal of a Christian von Ehrenfels.¹⁷ For the strength of this joke lies in the fact that it has, after all, by all manner of roundabout routes, said it.

A situation particularly favourable to the tendentious joke is set up when the intended criticism of protest is directed against one's self, or, put more circumspcctly, against a person in whom that self has a share, a collective person, that is, one's own people, for example. This determinant of self-criticism may explain to us how it is that a number of the most telling jokes – of which we have given plenty of examples – have grown from the soil of Jewish popular life. They are stories invented by Jews and aimed at Jewish characteristics. The jokes made about Jews by outsiders [*Fremden*] are mostly brutal comic anecdotes, in which [the effort of making] a proper joke is saved by the fact that to the outsider the Jew counts as a

comical figure. The Jewish jokes originating with Jews admit this too, but they know their real faults and how they are related to their good points; and the share the raconteur's own person has in what is being criticized creates the subjective conditions for the joke-work that are otherwise difficult to set up. By the way, I do not know whether it often happens in other instances that a people should make fun of its own nature to such an extent.

As an example of this I can draw attention to the story mentioned on p. 69 of the Jew on the train who promptly abandoned all decent manners the moment he recognized that the new arrival in the carriage was of the same religion. We met this joke as an instance of illustration by a detail, of representation by means of something very small; it is meant to illustrate the democratic style of thinking among Jews, which does not acknowledge any difference between master and man, but unfortunately also upsets discipline and co-operation. Another, particularly interesting, group of jokes portrays the relations of poor and rich Jews to one another; their heroes are the *Schnorrer* and the charitable householder or the Baron. The *Schnorrer*, who is admitted as a guest to the same house every Sunday, appears one day accompanied by an unfamiliar young man who looks set to sit down and join everyone at table. 'Who's he?' asks the master of the house, and receives the reply: 'He's my son-in-law as of last week; I've promised him his board for the first year.' The tendency in these stories is always the same. It will come to the fore most clearly in the following one: the *Schnorrer* begs the Baron for money to make a sea journey to Ostend; the doctor has recommended sea-bathing for his complaints. In the Baron's opinion, Ostend is a particularly expensive place to stay; somewhere cheaper would also do. But the *Schnorrer* rejects this suggestion with the words: 'Herr Baron, for my health, nothing is too expensive.' This is a splendid displacement joke, which we could take as the model of its genre. The Baron clearly wants to save his money, but the *Schnorrer* answers as if the Baron's money were his own, which he may then of course regard as less important than his health. We are invited to laugh here at the effrontery of the claim, but it is exceptional for these jokes not to be provided with a façade to

mislead our understanding. The truth behind this one is that the *Schnorrer* who in his thoughts treats the rich man's money as his own, has, according to the sacred ordinances of the Jews, in reality almost a right to make this mix-up. The protest that created this joke is of course directed against the Law that presses heavily upon even the pious.

Another story tells of how on the steps of a rich man's house a *Schnorrer* encounters a fellow in his trade who advises him not to continue his way. 'Don't go on up today, the Baron's in a bad mood, he's not giving anyone more than one florin.' – 'I will go up all the same,' says the first *Schnorrer*. 'Why should I give him the one florin. Is he giving *me* anything?'

This joke makes use of the technique of absurdity by having the *Schnorrer* assert that the Baron is giving him nothing at the very moment he is getting ready to beg for the gift. But the absurdity is only apparent: it is almost true that the rich man is giving him nothing, for he is obliged by the Law to make the beggar a gift of alms, and, strictly speaking, should be grateful to him for giving him the opportunity to do good. The common, middle-class view of charity is in conflict here with the religious one. It is in open revolt against the religious view in the story of the Baron who is moved so deeply by the *Schnorrer's* tale of suffering that he rings for his servants: 'Throw him out – he's breaking my heart!' This open declaration of its tendency again produces a borderline joke. The only difference between the complaint (for it is no longer a joke): 'It is really no advantage to be a rich man among Jews. Other people's misery doesn't give you the chance to enjoy your own good fortune' and these last stories, is that the stories illustrate it in a single situation.

Other stories that again are technically borderline jokes testify to a deeply pessimistic cynicism – such as the following: A man who is hard of hearing consults the doctor, who makes the correct diagnosis: the patient probably drinks too much brandy and that's why he is deaf. He advises the deaf man against drinking, and the deaf man promises to take the advice to heart. After a while the doctor meets him in the street and asks him in a loud voice how he is feeling.

'Thank you,' comes the reply, 'you don't have to shout, doctor, I've given up drinking and I can hear again very well.' A while later they encounter each other once more. The doctor asks in his ordinary voice how his patient is feeling, but notices that he is not being understood. 'What's that?' – 'It seems to me that you're back to drinking brandy,' the doctor shouts in his ear, 'and that's why you can't hear anything again!' 'You may be right,' replies the man who is hard of hearing. 'I'm back to drinking brandy, but I'll tell you why. As long as I wasn't drinking, I could hear; but nothing I heard was as good as the brandy.' Technically, this joke is simply an illustration; argot and skill in storytelling are needed to help in raising a laugh, but behind the anecdote there lurks the unhappy question: 'Wasn't the man right in his choice?'

What these pessimistic stories are alluding to is the manifold and hopeless misery of the Jews, and it is on account of this wider connection that I have to include them among the tendentious jokes.

Other similarly cynical jokes, not only Jewish anecdotes, attack religious dogmas and even belief in God. The story of the Rabbi's [miraculous] 'gaze' [p. 54], where the technique consisted of the flaw in thinking that equated fantasy and reality (it would also be tenable to interpret it as displacement), is a cynical or critical joke of this kind directed at the miracle-worker and certainly against belief in miracles too. As a dying man, Heine is supposed to have made a joke that in his situation was positively blasphemous. When the priest in his kindness reminded him of God's mercy and gave him hope that in God he would find forgiveness for his sins, he is said to have replied: 'Bien sûr qu'il me pardonnera; *c'est son métier*.' That is a degrading comparison, technically more or less with the value of an allusion, for a *métier*, a job or a calling, is something a tradesman has, maybe, or a physician, that is, he has only one *métier*. But the power of the joke lies in its tendency. What it intends to say is simply and solely: of course he will forgive me – after all, that's what he is there for; I haven't taken him on for any other purpose (as one retains a physician or a lawyer). And so in the dying man, lying there powerless, there stirs the consciousness that he has created God and endowed him with power so that he can make use

of him when required. Shortly before its annihilation the supposed creature God still declares itself to be the creator.

[D]

To the genres of tendentious jokes we have dealt with so far, jokes that strip naked, or obscene jokes, aggressive (hostile) jokes,

cynical (critical, blasphemous) jokes,

I should like to add a new one as the fourth and least common, whose characteristics can be illustrated by a good example.

Two Jews meet in a railway carriage at a station in Galicia. 'Where are you travelling?' asks the one. 'To Cracow,' comes the answer. 'Look what a liar you are!' the other protests. 'When you say you're going to Cracow, you want me to believe that you're going to Lemberg. But I know that you're really going to Cracow. So why are you lying?'

This delicious story, with its impression of extravagant logic-chopping, clearly works by means of the technique of absurdity. The second Jew is to take being upbraided for his lies because he says he is travelling to Cracow – which is in fact his destination! But here, this powerful technical device – absurdity – is coupled with another technique, representation by the opposite, for according to the unspoken assertion of the first Jew, the other is lying when he is telling the truth, and telling the truth with a lie. But the more serious content of this joke is the question of what determines truth. Again, the joke is pointing to a problem and exploiting the uncertainty of one of our most common concepts. Is it truth when we describe things as they are, without bothering about how our listener will understand what we have said? Or is this only a jesuitical truth, and does not genuine truthfulness rather consist in taking the listener into account and conveying to him a true likeness of our own knowledge? I regard jokes of this kind as being sufficiently distinct from the others to be allotted a special position. What they are attacking is not a person or an institution, but the very certainty of

our knowledge itself, one of our speculative goods. The name of 'sceptical' jokes, then, would be the appropriate one for them.

[E]

In the course of discussing the tendencies and intentions of the joke we have perhaps been able to cast light on many aspects, and we have certainly found ample incentive for further investigations. But the results we have reached in this section combine with those in the previous one to produce a difficult problem. If it is true that the pleasure given by a joke is attached on the one hand to its technique and on the other to its tendency and intention, what is the common aspect under which these two sources of pleasure in the joke – so different from each other – can be united?

Notes

1. [Freud seems to have been stung by such games with his own name, which means 'joy'. See *The Interpretation of Dreams*, V.B.]
2. [The literal rendering, of course, has no relevance to the playful interchange of consonants.]
3. [A telling metaphor, which indicates the degree to which Freud is prepared to separate content and form despite his insistence on how the effectiveness of a joke depends on its form (which he always refers to as its 'expression'), and despite his elaborate taxonomy of forms following from this. His 'reductions', of course, assume this separability from the start, and his suggestion that the (still indispensable) form of the joke ultimately functions only as fore-pleasure builds on it. Freud is on the edge here of a larger literary theory, one that runs counter to the classical aesthetics he found in Kuno Fischer. The metaphor itself is an ancient religious trope for the relation of body to soul.]
4. [Freud uses this word rarely, elsewhere preferring *Inhalt*, to which he reverts in the last paragraph of this section. *Gehalt* is a word in which literary and chemical usages conflict. In chemistry, it indicates quantitative content; in aesthetics – as distinguished by Goethe in his *Noten und Abhandlungen*

zum West-östlichen Divan (East-west Divan) (1819) – it indicates the meaning intrinsic to the form. Freud's use appears to be closer to the former sense, and he uses the word interchangeably with his preferred *Inhalt*, i.e., 'content as contained' – like the clock in the case, or the thought in the joke. I have rendered both words by 'content', but indicated locally where *Gehalt* is used.]

5. Cf. my *Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens* [Psychopathology of Everyday Life], Berlin: S. Karger, 1904, 4th ed. 1912 [X].

6. R. Kleinpaul, *Die Rätsel der Sprache*, 1890.

7. [Home Rule for Ireland was a recurring question in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Freud is probably referring here to the debates before and after Gladstone's Second Home Rule Bill of 1893, which, like its predecessor, was defeated in the House of Lords.]

8. [I have used 'variety' here and elsewhere for the German *Art*. A flatter way of rendering it would be by the all-purpose 'kind', but the specialized nature of Freud's discourse requires something more distinctive. One would expect him here to use the specific literary term *Gattung* [genre], but in fact, that is a word he rarely uses, preferring *Art*, the term used in the natural sciences for 'species' or 'variety'. Cumulative use of 'species' as a category term would tend to over-scientize the text, so I have settled largely for the word that is at home in the natural sciences, but not exclusively so.]

9. See my *Drei Abhandlungen über die Sexualtheorie* [Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality], 1905, appearing at the same time as this study, 2nd ed. 1910.

10. Moll's contrectation drive (*Untersuchungen über die Libido sexualis*, 1898).

11. [Variant of Matthew 5:39.]

12. [Echo of Matthew 5:22.]

13. It is the same mechanism that governs 'slips of the tongue' and other self-betraying phenomena.

14. [Horace, *Odes*, I.xi.8.]

15. Lorenzo de' Medici. [From *Il Trionfo di Bacco e di Arianna*.]

16. [Possibly Nietzsche's?]

17. See his essays in the *Politisch-anthropologische Revue* II, 1903.

B Synthetic Part

IV The Mechanism of Pleasure and the Psychological Origins of the Joke

[A]

Our knowledge of where the peculiar pleasure afforded us by joke has its sources is something we can now take as our starting-point regarding it as established. We know that we may succumb to the illusion of confusing our enjoyment of a statement's thought-content with our actual pleasure from it as a joke, but that the latter has itself essentially two sources: in its technique and in its intention or tendency. What we would now like to find out is *how* this pleasure arises from these sources, the mechanism of this pleasurable effect.

It seems that the explanation we are looking for will be found much more easily in tendentious jokes than in the innocuous sort. So we shall begin with the former.

Our pleasure in a tendentious joke arises from the satisfaction of an intention or tendency which – the satisfaction – would no otherwise have taken place. That such satisfaction is a source of pleasure needs no further explanation. But the way in which a joke will bring about this satisfaction is linked to particular conditions from which further information may perhaps be gained. Two cases are to be distinguished here. The simpler case is when satisfying the intention is barred by some external obstacle which the joke is able to get round. This is what we found, for example, in the answer His Royal Highness received when he asked whether the mother of the man he was addressing had ever lived in the palace [p. 58], or in the connoisseur's when the two rich rogues exhibited their portraits: