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THE FIGURE OF 'EVERYCLOWN' IN JACK RICHARDSON'S
GALLOWS HUMOUR

I suspect that this transition from one form to another might take place by means of an intermediate stage in which they were deprived of all form but were not altogether deprived of existence.

—*St. Augustine*—

Besides Edward Albee, Arthur Kopit, Jack Gelber and Sam Shepard, Jack Richardson was said to be one of the most promising playwrights of the 1960s, and he proved so. His second Off-Broadway play, *Gallows Humour* (1961) is an outstanding experiment to merge the various influences of the European predecessors with a peculiarly American voice and subject in a uniquely personal way. In the following paper I intend to point out some distinctive features of the dramatic technique, personality and the characteristics of the Rebellious Absurd Play through the example of a modern Parable Play. This newly emerging genre has similarities with both the Absurd Drama and Black Humor fiction of the same period, the final result is a powerful cohesion of all.

1. 'Everyclown's' Perspective of a Changing World

1.1. Introduction

Jack Richardson is usually interpreted as a prominent representative of the process of the Americanization of the European dramatic heritage and the creation of a distinctively American mood in drama. As for the subject, form and technique of his play, he takes elements from outstanding European predecessors, such as skepticism concerning human relations, especially sexual ones, and the tragic treatment of the hopelessness of communication in the Strindbergian Theater; Dürrenmatt's parodical social parables and dark grotesque and burlesque elements; G. B. Shaw's deep social concern and Stanislavsky's "room-sized destiny" technique (see Szilassy 32); Jean Genet's preoccupation with escapism in visions of the senseless existence; Jean Anouilh's pessimistic existentialism and witty, humorous dialogues as well as the alienation and estrangement theme and the interest in the opposites in Samuel Beckett's plays. However, in Beckett's truly Absurd Theater the apocalyptic atmosphere, the shock-catharsis technique, the empty spaces show features of the so-called 'intermedia category' (Szilassy 56). Applying Zoltán Szilassy's classification of the plays of the 1960s, I feel that Richardson's *Gallows Humour* is closer to the category of the Rebellious Theater than to the Intermedia, since it carries the elements of pseudorevolutions, suffocating interior setting and claustrophobia; as for the plot and characters the play contains everyday family and office relations with the death of tragedy at the end of the two parts as a catharsis; and finally, the transparent "rites of passage do not occur before the audience—they are monologized upon" (Szilassy 56).

Trying to situate Richardson's *Gallows Humour* in the mainstream of American Drama we have to go back to Eugene O'Neill and see that this heritage marks two major tendencies: one is the psychological trend followed by Tennessee Williams, the other is the analytical social criticism and determinism marked especially by Arthur Miller and his followers. The two trends gain a new power together in the dramas of Albee and other Off-Broadway playwrights. I would rather call the latter's works absurdist for they carry Absurd elements such as the setting, the ending, the *Rite de Passage* motifs (here: death and the dilemma of divorce—detailed below),

and for the major concern of late 20th century American Drama: the loss of the American Dream and the universal problems of alienation and estrangement. According to Szilassy, this kind of drama offers two alternatives: violence and/or conformism (25). These concerns and their presentation in Richardson's play are to be examined later on in this paper.

Some postmodernist features can also be observed, that make the voice of *Gallows Humour* so peculiar. The playwright wrote a Prologue to explain his ideas about the role of the theater and the genre of tragicomedy. He returns to the tradition of the Middle Ages, the golden days when the theater—just like society and the individual—had a clearly definable role, as his 'Everyclown' figure claims: "I was a popular hero" (*Gallows Humour* 70). Everyone knew in the theater who were behind the masks and what values they stood for. Nevertheless, in the chaos of our age, everything has changed. One cannot make a difference between the hangman and the hanged, the absurdity and uncertainty of our existence become the uncertainty of the mechanical characters as well as their creators and the whole creative process. His awareness of this uncertainty factor in writing results in the connection of the artist-artifact-audience similar to the metafiction of the 1960s. The term 'metaplay' probably could fit this drama. Richardson's interest in the parable of the fate of the theater versus the fate of the hangman and the hanged would reflect something like that.

1.2. Conformism, Alienation and the Claustrophobic Theater—Attempts to Transform the Misfit

*... And the moment
would catch up with him at the moment of death,
all the copies of the universe he'd invented
not fantastical enough, and he'd die the way
he lived, expectedly.*
(Di Cicco: The Patsy of the Many Worlds Theory)

Alienation is a keyword of contemporary life with its universal appeal, while conformism—also in a causal relationship with the former one—is another keyword frequently used to describe and explain trends in present-day American society and literature. Critics, for example C. W. T. Bigsby, John Gassner, George Lukács and Péter Egri have emphasized the significance of alienation and conformism with different stresses on either the psychological or the social consequences presented in various artifacts. Again, the two major trends in American Drama stand for this double-determinedness of the conflict between the polarities of reality and illusions, man's essence and existence. The lack of free will, the seclusion in an empty and indifferent world, the frustration, loneliness, vegetation and growing callous in everyday automatism is a major theme since Beckett and it has different dramatical presentations as far as conflict, characterization, composition and style is concerned.

As Szilassy has pointed out, Richardson's play is built upon the conflict between the opposites of life and death, individuality and conformism, illusion and reality, order and disorder (38). This duality is presented in the two parts and the two small correlative set of characters in *Gallows Humour*. (The question of how they represent these oppositional ideas will be discussed later on.)

Conformism and its impact on the American national character is often presented in literature through its effects on the individual; according to Walter Kerr it is popular to attack it and even the artist's attempt to criticize this social phenomenon shows a degree of intelligence on the writer's side. However, he also expresses his doubts about the alternatives—if there are any at all—offered by the writers of the 1960s (see Kerr 50). It is difficult to agree with Kerr's statements about the pointless ironizing in this literary trend. One could take the example of Peter in Albee's *Zoo Story*, where he is pushed out of his neat little world organized by the principles of conformism. In the case of *Gallows Humour*, for instance, we will see that the different techniques of humor can show a skeptical authorial opinion but in an indirect way: we are told how *not* to live.

The character of the MISFIT is powerfully presented with all his relationships, reasons and causes in a psychologically and socially well-

described way. The attempt he makes to ESCAPE ‘the neat world’, the enclosure in a philosophical sense with no choice, chance or free will of the individual, remains unsuccessful; the possibilities are actually reduced to a final one which is always destructive for the individual in its effect. O’Neill’s expressionistic plays (e.g. *The Hairy Ape*) did not do away but re-interpreted the original theatrical idea of Stanislavsky: the ‘room-sized destiny for small pimple’ topic appear in American Theater. The images of CAGE and PRISON also come up in Richardson’s choice of setting in the two parts: the cell in the first and the “early morning confusion of a suburban kitchen-dining room” (GH 97) proves for us Richardson’s artistic consciousness here again, since the first one is a universal symbol for the lack of freedom and possibilities, while the suburban kitchen with all of its described details, such as the peppermill (‘grinder of life’), symbolize the American way of life, the dull uniformity of the lives of millions who accepted the Dream as their civil religion, their leading principle of life. The DOOR of the kitchen, the WALL of the prison are BOUNDARIES, limiting forces. They are also symbolized, and as such, they are perfectly utilized in a technical sense by the author. Those who guard and defend the existing ORDER (i.e. latent order covering chaos in the outside world) do not let the MISFIT cross the limitations, for they have the support of institutions and ideologies. That is why Walter and Philip, two faces of the same figure (usually played by the same actor) are unable to break out.

The ORDER-DISORDER relation is manifold in the play. Walter insists on keeping the order of his cell by all means, since the order of objects around him provides the only possibility of security. Walter complains about the loss of order in the outside world, loss of predictability based on the laws of life and a rise of a new order, a negative one where predictability means the loss of chance for individual action. The fear of lost order is symbolized also in Walter’s agonies about losing his number patch—something that brings the memories of the protagonist’s struggle in the opposite direction in Orwell’s *1984* into my mind. Later on, Lucy forces Walter to realize that his effort is pointless, because the order of the outside world represented by the institutions of law, the prison and the whole procedure of the last hours before being hung—all control their actions. In

the second part the order, the false values and the effect of conformism are presented in the institution of MARRIAGE. Here Richardson follows the Strindbergian tradition similarly to Albee's method in his *American Dream* (1961.), *The Sandbox* (1961.) or in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* (1962.). The romantic traditions have become clichés; for many people marriage means common social status, a shared place of living, money and conventions only. In these dramas the relationship between the—in most cases childless—spouses is based on male inferiority and surrender to the conformist values represented by the female partner. There is hypocrisy and aggression on one side and infantilism and opportunism on the other (or both). Albee's expression: MOMISM is a proper one to describe the situation. Similar gender-orientedness can be found in the symbolic objects and utterances of the play, for instance: "Lucy: You're too happy curled up in your little womb [i.e. the cell—K.J.] to want a company" (GH 90).

1.3. Characters and Masks

Walter [rigid with eyes closed]: People are forgetting who, what or where they've been. All getting into new skins, expressions, and troubles. But wanting to laugh through it all. (GH 82)

In *Gallows Humour* a carefully planned set of characters has been created. I feel the figures (Walter-Philip, the Warden and Lucy-Martha) are not 'real' characters but rather faces, aspects and masks for the embodiment of the dual nature of man (i.e. Everyman). As a matter of fact, they are usually played by the same actors and actresses. From the beginning the male-female opposition is transparent and it is also emphasized with the reoccurring 'war of sexes' motif through the two parts.

Talking to Lucy, the prostitute in the prison setting, Walter reveals his own uncertainties concerning his life, existence and the world around him. Sticking to the order first he is shown to be conscious and determined. The role of the female is first "to take a man's mind off your gallows, when he's got less than two hours to go" (GH 74), then to undermine his conviction, to

lead him astray according to the ancient model; and finally, as Lucy concludes: "I'm going to bring that world back to you. After all, it is the only one there is" (GH 94). She has had experience in this process, so knows that sooner or later Walter will give in/up and enjoy the last joy before dying. He is also forced to quit the order of his minimalized universe: his cell.

In the second part the whole process is similar though the female character seems to be even more self-conscious and arrogant. Seeing Martha one cannot help comparing her here to Albee's famous Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* and his other Momist characters. They always 'follow the suit', represent all the retarding forces (conventions, clichés in speech and action), the senselessness of the everyday in present society, the so-called welfare state, where the whole system tends to kill the distinctiveness of the individual for the sake of labels like the Dream, Democracy, Happiness of the Majority, Order and Comforts of Life.

Walter, in contrast to Philip, was able to revolt in his own way by killing his wife—an ability absolutely missing from the male figure of the second part. Philip's revolt "against the rest of you" (GH 107) remains on the level of words. That is why he is ridiculous in his actions of step-by-step retreat. I think the quality of humor is different in the two parts, since there is a difference in three important stances: the level of consciousness, the tragic aspect of actions and the reader's involvement in the plot. In the first case a tragic story is narrated, then the kernel-story is finished, whereas in the second case the ground gradually slips from under Philip's legs and we cannot see a clear positive or negative ending to the dialogue between him and Martha. The tragedy lies in the neverending clichés that once—unconsciously—accepted he has to follow for good and all. Here the stress is on the narrow-mindedness of will, choice and action in a philosophical as well as dramaturgical sense. Not only the claustrophobic setting drives Walter and Philip to frustration, uncertainty and incapacity for action, but also the bondages of relations with the other characters. The Warden is present in both parts of the play: a real 'jelly man' behind the symbolic mask of the institutionalized process of depletion and dehumanization. He is the one who cherishes typical middle-class dreams like working to save for the

college education of the kids; he is the one whose wife “never stops riding streetcars” (GH 104)—what a nice resemblance to Williams’ Streetcar!—; who thinks Philip can be bribed with not getting his pension, because pension is something very important in life(...) and also the Warden is the subject of Martha’s adultery, which in the context of the play becomes the parody of love and courtship. Since they are “cut from the same timber” (GH 102), i.e. represent the same values or the lack of them, perhaps they could have a meaningful relationship, but they are unable to find a date to date—a grotesque element again—, to meet at the supermarket, a central symbol of commercial society and its values.

The other duality in man’s nature presented in the play is the hangman-hanged, warden-prisoner and wife-prostitute oppositions. As Richardson directly informs us in the Preface and indirectly shows in the whole plot and text of the drama, the major uncertainty factor in our age is the question of who is the hangman, the hanged and the victim; in what sense and who is responsible for the individual and common fate.

The mask-technique helps the playwright to express himself in the complexity of the postmodern age with the clearness of the old Morality Plays. However, here the Deadly Sins and Vickers are not personified but included in the essence of the characters. The figure of Death, who summons Everyman (‘Everyclown’), introduces two *rites de passage*: a journey to death and a lack of decision whether to divorce or not. There are direct and indirect references to the mask-nature of the play. The *Oxford Dictionary* describes the notion of mask as a part of covering to hide the face (i.e. reality, for instance in Lucy’s case); a replica (denoting the copy-faces of people and also can mean the actors’ masks in theater); a disguise not to show one’s intentions and true character or a death mask... It also means a protection from poisonous things (here: Philip would protect his individuality from the rest of the people).

The first direct appearance of mask allusions is Lucy herself. All the artificial and transformed parts of her body together with the accessories she is wearing are essential; without them her figure would fall apart. Perhaps there is nobody behind the mask at all?! Mihály Hoppál calls the attention to the relevance of female masks in his book on symbols (152—3).

As he claims, female masks often stand for illusion, falsehood, cunning and deception. An even more interesting mask is Philip's black hood, the Black Hood of the hangman in the Middle Ages, but here the mask-motif is not so simple and serves a different function, too.

Warden: But think of what it would do to your reputation! Instead of being a finely edged instrument in a clinical, detached operation, you become a villain, a strangler—a black knight. (GH 98)

Philip would keep that hood on for it would enable him to keep eye-contact with the victim of his action, i.e. the hanged. There would be at least some sort of human contact and feeling involved in the act of killing; even if it is fear, it is "healthy fear" (GH 110) instead of endless hypocrisy. Here the real mask is transferred into something metaphysical in the sense that those people 'wear' it who will kill the misfits by pushing a button without their personal presence and keep their hands sterile from responsibility the way Pilate did when washing his hands. As opposed to the latter, Philip's preference of 'healthy fear' found an echo in recent and contemporary literature; one of its most powerful ways of presentation is the various branches of humor examined in the following.

2. Generic Questions and Comic Qualities in *Gallows Humour*

2.1. Between Absurd and Black Comedy

According to the title of the play it is about tragic and comic elements in life. Similarly to Dante's *Divina Commedia* we cannot really talk about comedy or humor in their clear terms, we cannot find the entertaining function fulfilled with easy laughter either. Tragic elements mix with comedy and seem to overwhelm the effect of the play. Still it would be an oversimplification to categorize *Gallows Humour* as a tragicomedy—with or without the hyphen that Richardson mentions in his *Preface*. Comic qualities such as satire, Black Humor, Black Comedy, clownery, the grotesque, paradox, sarcasm and tragicomedy are blended in this play with difference in their presentation, appearance and emphasis.

That *Gallows Humour*—as Richardson claims—follows the tradition of tragicomedy seems to be proved by the features of mordant wit, vaudeville and macabre elements, too. On the other hand, I reckon that comic elements do not overwhelm the general tone of the play, so one could assume it contains tragicomic elements rather than being a tragicomedy as such. As I mentioned, humor has a different function here in the Bergsonian sense with the liberating elevation and cathartic power of laughter. As Matthew Winston says: “The violent combination of opposing extremes unsettles us so that we do not become confused; this in turn disturbs our certainty of moral and social values and challenges our sense of a secure norm” (273). The clownery calls for a direct universal moral appeal; its sources are similar to satire, however—like in the Black Humor of Postmodernism—we cannot feel superior to the characters of the play since we are in the same grasp of our present existence. The whole effect-mechanism is thoroughly explained in Winston’s essay on *Humor Noir*, so here I would rather examine its definite presence in *Gallows Humour*.

As far as the distinction of grotesque and absurd Black Humor presented in the play is concerned, the first seems to be overwhelming. Perhaps it is characteristic to the distinction observed by Szilassy between the two groups of the 1960s’ dramas; namely the Rebellious versus the Intermedia dramas (56—7). The second group works more with absurd elements, while the first one utilizes the power of different veins of humor instead.

Bearing the definition of Black Comedy in mind, one can find *Gallows Humour* to be very close to the influence of Kafka’s philosophy, existentialism, the ‘irremediable exile’ atmosphere of Camus, life originally presented as a ‘tragic farce’ by Ionesco and Beckett’s tragicomic characters; but its application to Richardson’s drama is questionable, since I doubt that he would agree with the impossibility of action. If not Black Comedy, then what is the genre-definition we could relate to this play?

Szilassy’s suggestion is that it is a Parable Play (37). It can be supported with the Sea-voyage allegory the Warden invokes as an apologia on conformism and outlaws. The parable also exists on the level of the plot since the ‘stages’ of the two parts are short, simple and have a moral point,

like original parables did. One can find some more indications to this direction in the play, for example Walter's story of the Gogarty Case.

I found a parallel between this story and Chekhov's famous grotesque short story entitled *The Death of the Chinovnik* (1883). Everything went fine with Walter, the lawyer, defender of law and truth until the point when, at a trial, the person he defends with due right started to hiccup. This natural action turns out to be nonsensical, the whole courtroom fills with uncontrollable laughter and it changes the minds of the jury for worse. The ironical undercutting serves as a safety valve releasing the tension, and also shows the absurd nature of things in a time when law has turned into a 'fooling game' because of the "over-the-shoulder" (GH 84) attitude of society. One can associate the whole 'Gogarty phenomenon' with the changes in the world around us. Direct indications prove its truth, for example the change in Walter's personality and fate (he becomes a number patch and nearly loses his identity). It was law, the organizing and justifying power in society, that he represented. Originally it was "untouched by human beings" (GH 84), but "it is the nature of law that has been abused" (GH 84) in our age when the absurdity can happen that even airconditioning in the courtroom can change the verdict on people's lives. The legal case at this point turns into a social paranoia, a parable of the existing status quo.

The comparison with Chekhov's work lies in the correspondence of the plots. Cherviakov's sneezing seals his destiny—the unretainable biological action stresses the role of accidentality just in the same way it happens in *Gallows Humour*. The grotesque is present in both works of art as a dramatical element (hiccups and sneezing) and also as a quality of life where pain finally gains over the laughter of the outsider.

Like the grotesque, paradox is also a trait of humor which is based on the duality of elements in life emphasized throughout the play. The dialogue of Martha and Philip is especially rich in paradoxical features, since Philip's illusory speech and the down-to-earth opportunist actions are its sources, just taking an example:

Philip [retrieving the bowl]: And, Martha, there might be mirages. Can you imagine, scenes floating about purely for your own amusement. Do you know, I think I've wanted to see a mirage for the last ten years.

Martha: You're getting water on your trousers, Philip. [She opens a cupboard and takes out an apron.] Here, put this on.

Philip [getting into the apron]: I used to force a mirage on myself. ...

Martha [handing Philip the last dish]: All you want, then, is to see mirages?

Philip: I want my pores to open and let out of me all the bubbling perspiration that's been stopped up by the civil service code. Think of it, Martha! Me, in the middle of a jungle, where everything's raw and fresh, where only the hungry and alive do the executing, where...

Martha: I think some grounds are still in the coffee-pot.

Philip [giving the pot another rinse]: And then, Martha, once I've filled my lungs with that wild air—well, then I'll be ready to—to...

Martha: to what, Philip?

Philip [modestly, with some embarrassment]: Oh, grow a beard perhaps.

Martha: All this trouble just to avoid shaving? (GH 111—2)

Paradoxical language sometimes turns into a mortal sarcasm on Martha's side expressing deep scorn, for instance:

Philip:[...] I'm giving up knowing where and what I'll be a week, a day, or even an hour ahead. I'm going to be...

Martha [again sharp and bitter]: A man-eating jungle plant - I know. Well, you'll have to wait until after my sister's dinner to start blooming. And by that time, there'll be other things popping up to detain you.

(GH 114—5)

or:

Martha: Then don't make jokes about doing me in. You're not on your gallows now; no twenty-five forms have been filled out in triplicate

authorizing you to slap my neck. [Shouting] You're my husband! And that makes you the most harmless person in the world as far as I'm concerned! (GH 117)

These utterances lead us through the violent debates of marriage in the Strindbergian sense to the question of chance for a meaningful male-female relationship at the end of the twentieth century. Since Richardson's treatment of the topic is identical with Albee's and of many representatives of postmodern literature, one can observe the common characteristics through the spouses' 'Walpurgisnacht' game in the second part of the play. The first and most conspicuous similarity is Martha's: her name, personality, behavior and utterances to Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?*. Both Philip and George have to confess that they had underestimated their wives as far as aggression and surprising actions are concerned. Both Marthas reject the honesty of their husbands. Although Albee's Martha shares a secret with George, which provides the driving force of their marriage, in Richardson's play this Martha is unable and unwilling to have any idea common with Philip except for the word 'and' as a tie between them (i.e. "man *and* wife" [GH 115]). As Martha says: "I've grown used to lies, Philip. They make up a comfortable husband I know" (GH 114). Since marriage has become the finest institution of conformism in practice, wives as such with their 'breakfast faces', with their preference of clubs, communities and joint bank accounts became guards of the properly set system and values. Or is it just the simple urge of survival in women and an aptness to accommodate to the existing circumstances that transform them into 'Momist Dragons'?

Richardson calls the attention to the efforts and experimenting with the possibilities of the revolt of male characters. The process of retreat in Walter's and Philip's case is interesting and nicely presented with its psychological implications. The dynamism of their conscious efforts in the direction of revolt along with their unconscious taming down and surrender gives the rhythm of the whole play. As far as I feel, this dynamism is the main achievement here.

Emotions are expressed in a similarly dynamic language. A significant example for this is the rise and fall technique of the Martha-Philip dialogue, where the latter's ideas fly away in the air, while Martha kills these ideas with the 'law of gravity' drawing Philip back to earth like: "Put the cup *face down*, Philip" (GH 111—italics mine J.K.).

While Philip gradually loses his force, Martha grows into a Big Nurse-like character, who commands the husband, treats him as a child and makes little allowances. She is the one who has future—at least all the circumstances and her conviction point in this direction. Mentioning Ken Kesey's Big Nurse figure (in *One Who Flies over the Cuckoo's Nest*), one can also find a correlation of the hospital there and the prison here in the first part of Richardson's play. Both serve the function of creating cooperative members of the community out of the misfits with or without much sense. The description of the Warden given to Lucy about Walter seems to prove this and some lines later his idea of turning maniacs back to useful men (GH 75). Without noticing we get deeper and deeper into the examination of Black Humor elements in the play. The male-female relations together with the man-society relation detailed above are frequent topics of other literary pieces containing Black Humor elements, too. For the sake of mentioning some more let the followings stand here:

The 'lost number patch-lost identity and order' relation; the "machinery inside me" (i.e. Lucy GH 81) motif; the mordant wit of situations like spending two happy hours before being hung, or the "Please stop breathing" (GH 118) way of killing someone; the claim that the Press and Media should be satisfied on the account of personal lies and losses; the insect comparison (GH 76) and the cliché-like empty mechanical actions that tend to the direction of false order and entropy. The Black Humor elements mentioned above are to indicate the presence and successful exploitation of postmodernist features in the play.

Richardson's drama is a colorful, witty piece of literature that utilizes the achievements of the theatrical traditions of tragicomedy but through unfiltering (post)modern literary methods that are efficient both in fiction and drama, he broadens the notion of the Rebellious Drama of the 1960s in a peculiar way with his *Gallows Humour*.

2.2. Conclusion

The mechanism of Richardson's drama-technique, his peculiar clownery is much the same as Winston describes Breton's *humor noir*: "...He attempts to bring his audience into the same position he occupies by threatening and horrifying it and then undercutting its fear by some witty or comic turn" (270). However, in Richardson's play we are not released in this sense; the ending is a happy one only for Martha. Through the example of Everyclown (the Pierrot-like sad clown in all of us) our attention is called to the individual's effort and opportunity, the responsibility of missing the chance to change for better. Though skeptical in its final conclusion of the play, the authorial intention and the effect is revolting for humanistic reasons. We are tossed into the need of seeing clearer and making a choice as a playwright claims at the end of the Prologue:

*That one-time basic distinction between the quick and
the dead has become far too abstract today for one with
my earthbound mind, and this fundamental confusion was,
I fear, showing up in my performances. For even on the
stage, in a play darkened by the shadow of gallows, I,
so perfectly at home in such a setting, now find it
difficult, with my ancient eyes, to tell the hangman
from the hanged. I hope, for my future and peace of
mind, that you, the author's contemporaries, do not.
(GH 71)*

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