Conclusion: The Return of Laughter

The Dutch sense of humour had an international reputation in the Golden Age. Comic genres like the jestbook were more popular than ever. There was an equally strong comic element in painting. We can sometimes catch a glimpse of everyday humour in diaries. We can also do so from the collections of jokes that have survived in manuscript form. The largest of these is the *Anecdotes* by Aernout van Overbeke, with its huge number of more than 2,000 jokes and anecdotes.

The character of Dutch humour changed in the course of the seventeenth century. This is reflected in changes in terminology. Many of Van Overbeke's jokes are examples of the *mop*, a relatively recent word in the Dutch language for 'joke', a modern genre characterised by the short dialogue which rapidly moves towards the punch line. Medieval humour was characterised by periodic outbursts of cheerfulness. Laughter was associated with major festivities that were often associated with the religious calendar, such as Shrove Tuesday, Advent and St Nicholas. This was slowly replaced by a more personal humour appropriate for civilised conversation at dinner or some other social gathering. A distinction that can be seen in Van Overbeke's time emerged between popular and élite humour. Jestbooks, however, were originally appreciated by every stratum of society; it was only much later that they were reprinted as popular reading matter.

The restrictions on laughter changed with the times too. Theologians, particularly Calvinists, rejected immoderate laughter. The etiquette manuals urged increasing reticence. Humour at the

expense of others, derision, was particularly condemned. That was aggressive humour, which served only to inflate one's own position. A distinction was made between honourable and dishonourable humour. Dishonourable humour was lacking in moderation and touched on themes that were taboo, such as religion or high-ranking personalities. Professional performers were regarded as practitioners of a dishonourable profession who ought to be shunned by civilised people, and certainly not copied by them.

Several diaries show that in practice the prescribed rules were rarely followed in the middle of the seventeenth century. This can also be seen in Van Overbeke's *Anecdotes*, for example in his self-mockery, since he appears on more than one occasion in his own jokes. The same goes for Jan Steen, who regularly portrayed himself as a comic figure in his own paintings. This was condemned in the etiquette manuals. The unsuccessful lawyer Van Overbeke had a great reputation as a joker and he liked to present himself as a sort of bohemian. The seventeenth-century Dutch Republic already had alternative circles in which bourgeois values were rejected and scorned. Humour flourished in this milieu. The *Anecdotes* are both a reflection of the humour that circulated by word of mouth and a continuation of written traditions that go back to the Middle Ages or even to classical antiquity. They are a striking combination of old and new. Nevertheless, originality was increasingly appreciated in Van Overbeke's day, as can be seen from the introductions to the printed jestbooks.

Medieval humour was often aggressive, but in the Dutch Republic it acquired a more modern social function of facilitating social intercourse and easing tensions. Humour among members of the legal profession in particular, of which there are many examples in the *Anecdotes*, can be seen in this way. Its members had a strong group awareness and their humour was a part of their identity. Their joking relationships reinforced their mutual relations and created a distance from the outside world. Moreover, humour in the Dutch Republic was increasingly seen as something individual. Jakob Burckhardt linked the flourishing of humour in the Italian Renaissance with the emergence of a sense of individuality. That trend continued in the seventeenth-century Netherlands. Medieval humour was tied to fixed times and places, was bound to rituals and was often compulsory – no one could escape it. Later on, as the

Anecdotes show, different kinds of humour emerged. Some people distinguished themselves by a great sense of humour, such as Van Overbeke and some of his friends, like Jan Spronssen.

Van Overbeke often plays with hierarchies that are stood on their head, the topsy-turvy world of the carnival. That is a traditional mechanism of humour. His jokes deal with themes like the relations between the sexes, parents and children, doctors and patients, Dutchmen and foreigners. The popular duos from the stage farces – master and servant, town-dweller and rustic peasant – are also common in Van Overbeke. The oppositions between honourable and dishonourable, and between pure and impure, are also recurrent.

People whose status was ambiguous lent themselves to misunderstandings and comic situations precisely because they did not fit into the existing hierarchies. The doctor is a good example, and was often portrayed by comic painters like Jan Steen too. There has been a lot of discussion about whether humour is by nature subversive or whether it reinforces the status quo, but the question misses the point. A lot of humour – and that goes for the *Anecdotes* too – is an exploration of boundaries and taboos. It depends on the context whether the joke in question has a subversive character or not. What is certain is that the parameters of the oral circuit, from which a part of the *Anecdotes* derives, were different from those of printed jestbooks.

This is particularly striking in the case of the large number of jokes about ministers and religious subjects. There are long-standing connections between humour and religion, although in Christianity there is little left of them apart from the carnival that marks the beginning of Lent and the celebration of some saints' days. In a certain sense humour had the same function as religion: to dispel fear, especially fear of death. That is why jokes about physicians and gravediggers were so popular and why even jokes about the plague provoked laughter. Laughter was in itself also regarded as a remedy for melancholy.

In the seventeenth century, however, laughter was increasingly seen as evil. Devils and witches were sometimes portrayed laughing. Laughter was often a sign of disapproval, and mockery was a sign of holding someone in low esteem. Those in high positions made jokes at the expense of those lower in the social order. The reverse – at least in etiquette manuals – was sharply rejected. However, the

picture that emerges from the *Anecdotes* is more nuanced, and the use of *double entendres* or even more layers of meaning meant that many jokes could be interpreted in a variety of ways. Sometimes it is not clear whether one was supposed to laugh at the servant who gets the better of his master, or at the servant who is too clever for his own good.

Many jokes have an overt scatological component. Everything connected with bodily excrement was increasingly hushed up. The changing norms led to tension, which found expression and relief in laughter. The same goes for the theme of sex, which plays a central role in even more jokes. Here too standards were changing, which led, among other things, to bowdlerised versions of stage farces. Incidentally, it is precisely the same changes in standards that make this humour so dated. When the frame of reference changes, a joke becomes meaningless. That is why we find the scatological and sexual jokes of Van Overbeke less amusing than some of the others which are in response to situations or refer to norms which we can still recognise. Certain themes recur in the *Anecdotes* that must have provoked laughter at the time.

However, some themes are strikingly absent, such as mother-in-law jokes, which are a product of the nineteenth century. The mother-in-law was less important in Van Overbeke's day, compared to the lower-middle-class milieu of the twentieth century, in which this type of joke reached its prime. On the other hand, the humour of reversal that is so frequently applied by Van Overbeke was less popular in a society in which formal hierarchy was declining in importance. Men and women acquired equal rights, children were taken more seriously, and servants and maids disappeared from the household. A good deal of the humorous potential of these jokes disappeared along with the context. In fact, there are several jokes in Van Overbeke which we will never grasp.

Van Overbeke's humour found a good seed-bed in the open society of the Dutch Republic. A tolerant climate favours the flourishing of humour. According to some historians, humour is an important weapon of resistance under dictatorships because it explores the limits of what is politically permissible. That role, however, should not be overestimated, because countries under totalitarian regimes are not generally noted for their exuberant humour. At the most, it is reduced to an undercurrent of protest.

The prosperity of the Dutch Republic nourished a blossoming culture of humour. The spread of humorous themes and types is directly connected with the spread of culture, which in turn is related to economic dominance. This explains why Italian humour was dominant in the sixteenth century, Dutch humour was relatively popular in the seventeenth, French humour in the eighteenth, English humour since the nineteenth, and American humour in the twentieth. The Netherlands was not the only country to witness a loss of its sense of humour along with its prosperity. The clearest parallel is Spain, where comedy flourished in the sixteenth century, but where the population had already acquired a reputation for stiffness and seriousness by Van Overbeke's time.

Characteristic of Van Overbeke's circles, and remarkable in the seventeenth century, is the participation of women in conversation and even in jesting. That too may have contributed to the relative modernity of Dutch humour. Women were excluded from traditional cultures of humour, like the one that still prevails in southern Spain.

Van Overbeke may have intended some of his *Anecdotes* for publication. He could certainly have used the money that jestbooks could bring in. However, it never got that far, and his manuscripts remained unread for centuries. His printed works passed into oblivion as well. This is typical of the cultural revolution that took place at the time. Aernout's contemporary, the well-known comedy actor Van Fornenbergh, was converted to the Reformed faith shortly before his death and renounced acting on stage. In his last self-portrait Jan Steen painted over his own smile. The Netherlands lost its reputation as a cheerful nation. The steady offensive of preachers and writers of etiquette manuals was successful in the long term. Dutch humour lost its exuberance. In the nineteenth century the new model was English humour, and an ironical tone gained favour. Of course, the Dutch continued to laugh and make jokes, but that hardly scratched the surface of their image. The Netherlands acquired the reputation of a straight-faced country.

However, this has recently begun to change. It is difficult to tell exactly whether there is more laughter than 50 years ago, but there are encouraging signs. An examination of portrait photographs reveals that people smile more often. Series of school photographs are a good source: the watershed lies somewhere in the 1950s. Of

course, there are also counterforces. When a portrait of the Dutch queen was hung up in courts with a faint smile playing around her lips, it met with opposition: it was as though the queen were making fun of the legal system or mocking the accused. But the portraits are still there, and the complaints have died down. A sense of humour is now appreciated more than ever. Dutch writers are selling their jokes abroad again, just as they did in the Golden Age. New traditions are emerging, such as the celebration of New Year's Eve by everyone watching a stand-up comedian on television. So the time is ripe for a reappraisal of the lost humour of the Golden Age, for both edification and amusement.