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THE LAUGHTER SOURCE OF THE RENAISSANCE LITERATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BASIC THEORIES OF THE COMIC

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Abstract

The article analyzes the main theories of the comic substantiated in the trans-historical field of the philosophical-literary reflection focusing on the laughter stream; the study reveals the possibilities of applying these definitions to the literary forms arisen in the period of late traditionalism; the author comes to the conclusion that the elaboration of the appropriate approaches to studying the comic mode of the late-traditionalist literature presumes the research of ways of transforming the traditionalist artistic consciousness in the cultural space of the Renaissance.

Keywords: Comic, Humor, Superiority, Incongruity, Relief.

The manifestation of the laughter source of the culture in the Renaissance literature determined its innovations along with the “serious” narratives incarnating in the series of the individualized genre forms and species of the individual styles deconstructing the genre-style hierarchy of traditionalism and establishing the transitive indicator of the authorship. But the genetic-functional status of the comic achieved by this literary mode on the transition from the reflective-traditionalist to the post-traditionalist artistic consciousness remains uncertainized because of the gap between the holistic character of the awakening the laughter stream in the late-traditionalist literature and the appeal of the theoretical reflection focusing on it to the “low” literary forms not reactualized in the Renaissance-humanist creative activity. To bridge

this gap the study should be aimed at substantiating the valid criteria of defining the significance of the laughter source for the creative experiments performed at the edge of traditionalism in the course of analysis the basic traditionalist and posttraditionalist theories of the comic.

In contrast to the tragic mode, the comic mode requires no Aristotelian definition to determine which productions belong within its category, as the evocation of laughter provides an infallible criterion. But there exists a marked disparity between the ease of identifying the genre and the problems involved in determining how it functions, in defining how that strange phenomenon laughter is evoked. One especial difficulty derives from the extraordinary range of its forms which, as Harold Nicolson has noted, include: «the ludicrous, the ridiculous, the quaint, the droll, the jocular, the facetious, the waggish, the bantering, the farcical. We have wit, irony, satire, sarcasm, fancy, mockery, joke, quirk, pun, tomfoolery, clowning, glee, the burlesque, the mock-heroic ...» [1, p.4].

The critical investigation of that theme has, in fact, reached a deadlock. Robin Haig, after examining over 100 theories of the comic, concludes that not one has proved satisfactory; John Morreall opens his study with the categorical statement, ... we are still without an adequate general theory of laughter», while psychologists have extended that negative view by declaring that so complex a mode can never be defined, since it consists of «a whole composite of different behaviours rather than a single one» [2, p.9]. Those definitions that have been posited, even by the most respected theorists, have been accorded either outright opposition or only limited approval. This present study makes no claim to deal with the manifold forms of the comic listed above – it focuses exclusively upon the literary versions, upon emanations of comedy in drama, poetry and prose.

The theories of the Comic may be grouped conveniently into three main categories, based upon elements of Superiority, Incongruity and Relief.

Leading the first is Hobbes' widely quoted designation that laughter arises «... from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others ...» [3], that we are amused by a patronizing sense of an advantage we possess over the person ridiculed. Some instances do indeed include that response: we laugh with condescension at Mrs Malaprop's inept reference in Sheridan's *The Rivals* to «allegories on the banks of the Nile»; but, as Francis Hutcheson noted when challenging Hobbes' theory in 1750, a sudden recognition of superiority does not in itself produce humour [4]. A wealthy man meeting a starving beggar would, he pointed out, indeed experience a sudden patronizing sense of personal eminency, but there would be nothing amusing in the meeting without some additional component; and it is clearly that unmentioned ingredient that creates the laughter – a factor that we shall need to identify. There is, moreover, a disturbing aspect to the theory,

since Hobbes added an element of cruelty to his definition, claiming (as have so many other theorists) that it involves «... the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison where of they suddenly applaud themselves» – a definition that includes laughing at a blind man or ridiculing the mentally retarded. That view had been widely approved in the Elizabethan era, Thomas Wilson's *Art of Rhetorique* (1553) maintaining: «The occasion of laughter and the mean that maketh us merry ... is the fondness [i.e. foolishness], the filthiness, the deformity and all such evil behaviour as we see to be in other ... Sometimes we laugh at a man's body, that is not well proportioned, and laugh at his countenance if it be not either comely by nature, or else he through folly cannot well see it» [5, p. 135 - 136].

Hobbes recognized the deplorable aspect of such laughter, defining it as a despicable ingredient of human behaviour «... incident to most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men» [6], adding that laughter at the defects of others is a sign of pusillanimity. But he does include such cruelty as a major element in all instances of the comic. That is, to my mind, a remarkably sour conception of the genre. As Congreve rightly commented: «Sure the Poet must both be very Ill-natur'd himself, and think his Audience so, when he proposes by shewing Man Deform'd, or Deaf, or Blind, to give them an agreeable Entertainment; and hopes to raise their Mirth, by what is truly an object of Compassion» [7]. How far Hobbes' argument can be taken is evidenced by John J. O'Connor's extraordinary claim that Richard III's hunchback in Shakespeare's play renders that character «... almost inevitably comic', when there is not a hint of humour in Shakespeare's sinister portrayal of him, nor in the attitude of other characters towards him» [8, p.60].

In line with the Superiority theory, Henri Bergson saw laughter as a social corrective, a means of preventing non-conforming individuals from separating themselves from society by their idiosyncrasies. The normal person, he argued, animated by a creative *élan vital*, deplores any individual whose actions attract attention to the physical elements of human behaviour by wearing grotesque clothes or walking peculiarly, so that, as he puts it, humour is aroused when «something mechanical is encrusted on the living». But he too adds to that definition an essentially malicious impulse, claiming that in such laughter, «we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate» [9].

That view of the comic as has been amply summarized in the article devoted to the topic in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, an article regarded as so authoritative that it has been reprinted in a succession of editions up to and including the most recent. It claims that cruelty is an essential ingredient in all forms of humour: «There is a bewildering variety of moods involved in different forms of humour, including mixed or contradictory feelings; but

whatever the mixture, it must contain a basic ingredient that is indispensable: an impulse, however faint, of aggression or apprehension. It may appear in the guise of malice, contempt, the veiled cruelty of condescension, or merely an absence of sympathy with the victim of the joke» [10].

Where in such an approach are we to place those cheerful quips that make life pleasant and that seem entirely free of a desire to humiliate? Frequently, we recount amusing stories against ourselves, recalling a moment of forgetfulness or misunderstanding, and I can see no malice or any desire to mortify in that type. Yet both Hobbes and Bergson remain among the main sources for current theories of the comic, with their insistence that all instances are motivated by cruel impulses, Maurice Charney, closer to our own time, typifying that view by defining comedy as «by its very nature destructive and anarchic» [11, p. 171].

The second category, the Incongruous, has as its major proponents Kant and Schopenhauer, who assume that an element of mismatching or incompatibility is to be found «... in everything that is to excite a lively laugh» [12]. As the word «everything» indicates, the definition claims to be all-inclusive. The sight of a tall man walking with someone short of stature may elicit a smile from some viewers (by no means from all), but there are too many instances of incongruity that fail to arouse mirth, and that therefore contradict the attribution of humour to that factor. Salvador Dali's painting *The Persistence of Memory*, depicting a clock draped meltingly over a tree branch, is as incongruous an image as can be imagined, but only an incompetent would regard it as humorous. As a depiction of the flexibility of subjective time, its incongruity is profoundly serious, a factor that again suggests that incongruity is not in itself the cause of laughter, that it must be accompanied by some other element for it to amuse. Yet the theory of Incongruity has retained a major position among subsequent critics, such as Michael Clark, M. W. Martin, John Morreall and, more recently, Elliot Oring, each suggesting certain emendations yet accepting that element as being the common denominator for all instances of the comic.

There is indeed one aspect of Kant's theory that is effective, at least in part: that laughter results from disappointed expectation. «The understanding, missing what it expected, suddenly lets go its hold, with the result that the effect of this slackening is felt in the body by the oscillation of the organs» [13]. There is, it is true, always an element of suddenness or unexpectedness in humour. Even wit, which may take a moment or two before its effect is felt, relies upon the abruptness of the eventual perception; but again we must apply the acid test, namely, are there instances in which sudden, frustrated expectation does not arouse humour, in which case that cannot be in itself the source of the laughter. We are not amused on opening the mail to discover that an urgently awaited letter has failed to arrive, nor when a flight is suddenly cancelled or a budding

relationship is ended abruptly. The final major category is that of Relief, the idea that laughter serves as a safety valve, offering a release of excessive or suppressed energy.

Herbert Spencer, on the basis of his 'hydraulic' theory whereby excitement and mental agitation produce energy that must expend itself, argued that all laughter provides a needed discharge of pent-up forces [14]. Muscular activity, he maintained, is normally purposeful, but since the contraction of the facial muscles and the expenditure of air from the lungs in the process of laughing have no practical objective, those quasi-convulsive contractions must represent a release of superfluous energy, the need to expend a repressed force that has found no other outlet. That theory too has met with considerable opposition since, if the humour arises from some suppressed energy on the part of the narrator of the humour, it would not account for the response of a listener who has not experienced that repression. Spencer's theory was later developed with considerable sophistication by Freud, who shifted the focus from suppressed physical energy to psychological repressions, but I would like to leave his view aside for the moment. The above is intended only as the very briefest summary of the weaknesses in the theories offered so far. But those studies, it should be noted, have raised a number of broader questions that have remained unanswered. The first problem is the restriction of laughter to humans, a fact that Bergson notes but for which he offers no reason [15]. The laugh of the hyena is, of course, no more than a resemblance in sound, not a response to an amusing situation, and there is no confirmed evidence of any creature other than humans experiencing laughter. Robert Provine, a behavioural neuroscientist, has argued that a form of panting among apes may be considered a form of laughter, but even that dubious identification occurs, he admits, only in response to physical stimulus, to their being tickled, and not to a humorous notion or situation [16]. Any theory offered would therefore need to involve some element specific to the human condition. Then there is the difficulty that a baby gurgles with laughter in response to a game of peek-a-boo long before it has developed the intelligence requisite for appreciation of humour. That fact too must be included or in some way answered in any effective explanation of the phenomenon of laughter. Furthermore, as many have noted, if laughter is so essential an ingredient of human behaviour, how are we to explain that the Bible, a literary collection that seems to cover so many aspects of the human condition, contains not a single instance of the comic and, indeed, appears deliberately to exclude it? Where the term «laughter» does occur, it is only in the sense of scorn, never of response to humour, as in Sarah's bitter incredulity at learning she is to give birth at an advanced age (a lack of faith preserved in the naming of her son, Isaac) [17] or in such contemptuous disparagements of the foe as, «He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have his enemies in derision» (Ps. 2.4).

There have indeed been attempts to read humour into the Bible, attempts such as those by William Whedbee and Conrad Hyers, but they are far-fetched and unconvincing [18]. Whedbee, for example, has argued that, since Dante employed the word comedy to indicate an event that ends happily irrespective of whether it provokes laughter, the biblical account of Creation is 'comic'. If that is the criterion, it has nothing to do with humour. The book of Jonah, with its solemn warning that even prophets designated to rebuke sinners must learn mercy, Whedbee defines as «a huge theological and practical joke» [18, p. 217] because of the story of the fish, which is in fact related there with undisturbed gravity. He admits that many will dismiss as 'downright crazy' his terming the book of Job a comedy, but he proceeds to do so on the grounds that 'comedy can be profoundly serious' [18, p. 224], once again employing a criterion that has no connection with the evocation of laughter, the theme of this present book. Not one of the many instances adduced by him to argue for the existence of comedy in the Bible proves convincing to me, especially as such vague terms as «ironic twist» and «comic rhythm» are used repeatedly to veil the absence of any real humour.

At all events, these three problems – the restriction of laughter to humans, a baby's ability to laugh before attaining to the perceptive discrimination demanded by humour, and its total absence from the Bible – will need to be confronted in any definition proposed.

Restricting the field of view of the comic to its literary forms we should recognize that there can be discerned a common denominator, an underlying unity to which two past theorists have pointed, if only in very general terms. Henry Fielding, in the preface to *Joseph Andrews*, declared that «the only source of the true Ridiculous (as it appears to me) is affectation». It was a statement never developed theoretically, although it was to serve as a major element in his own comic writings [19]. That view reappears in George Meredith's long, rambling essay on that theme, although there it is merely one of many suggested factors. The Comic Spirit, he maintained, is aroused whenever human beings «... wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly ...» [20].

The most significant item in that lengthy list is the trait to which Fielding pointed, when the person serving as the object of laughter is filled with a sense of self-importance or vanity, when he or she is pretentious.

The analyzed theories of the comic prove that the definition of the literary forms of its expression in the period of late traditionalism presumes the study of ways of transforming the traditionalist artistic consciousness in the cultural space of the Renaissance.

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