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Laura Ciochină-Carasevici, *Psychological Mechanisms of Humour in the Novels of P. G. Wodehouse*

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## PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS OF HUMOUR IN THE NOVELS OF P. G. WODEHOUSE

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the two types of humour described by Apter and Deselles (2012), namely disclosure humour vs. distortion humour.

In Chapter 2 we present comparatively some of the most representative linguistic theories on humour, assessing at the same time the validity of their conceptual tools when applied to the analysis of humorous texts. We will thus review two main contributions to the linguistic comprehension of humour: Raskin's (1985) groundbreaking *Semantic Script Theory of Humour* (SSTH) and the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (GTVH) developed by Raskin and Attardo (1991).

In Chapter 3 our goal is to make use of the methodological framework provided by the philosophical, psychological and linguistic theories discussed in the first two chapters, with a view to exploring, verifying and validating the mechanisms underlying Wodehouse's humour in the two novels that are the subject of this investigation, namely *Thank You, Jeeves* and *Right Ho, Jeeves*.

Chapter 4 is devoted to the analysis of the Romanian translation of several instances of Wodehousian humour extracted from the novels *Thank You, Jeeves* and *Right Ho, Jeeves*. The main goal of this analysis is to reveal the humour mechanisms that may lead to the untranslatability of humour and to its being lost or destroyed during the translation process. However, we also point out that this apparent untranslatability is not insurmountable, and humour can actually travel safely around the world.

Chapter I

## Philosophical and Psychological Theories on Humour

### 1. Introduction

No one seems to be able to lead a plenary life without humour, but at the same time no one seems to know exactly what humour is. In this chapter we try to not let ourselves discouraged by Saul Steinberg's camouflaged warning regarding the impossibility of defining humour ("Trying to define humor is one of the definitions of humor" – quoted in Ermida, 1968: 1) and give an overview of the most representative philosophical and psychological theories on humour.

Thus, this chapter is organized around two sections. In Section 2 we explore a series of relevant philosophical approaches to humour belonging to ancient and modern philosophers: Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant and Henri Bergson. The analysis of these theories will allow us to assess their influence on the most important psychological theories that we present in Section 3 which focuses on Freud's psychoanalytic theory of humour, on the incongruity theories of humour and on the reversal theory of humour.

## 2. Philosophical Theories on Humour

*He who approaches laughter upon science bent will find it no laughing matter.*

H. C. McComas (1923: 45)

If we admit that the ultimate goal of literary criticism is to enhance the aesthetic and intellectual pleasure derived from reading fiction by providing the reader with specific conceptual tools meant to guide his or her reading, then we also have to admit that such a positive effect does not arise when the object of criticism is humour. As soon as one tries to gain insight into the functioning mechanisms of a humorous situation or retort or gesture or attitude, humour is smothered and eventually dies. One would definitely not laugh harder if he or she were aware of the fact that, for example, a general rule related to verbal humour and formulated by Henri Bergson (*“On obtiendra un mot comique en insérant une idée absurde dans un moule de phrase consacré”*) (1924: 51) was applied in the following retort given by Bertie Wooster at the end of his conversation with Sir Roderick Glossop, “a high-priced loony-doctor” (Wodehouse, 2008f: 13) who is complaining about Bertie’s playing his banjolele too loud in Wodehouse’s novel *Thank You, Jeeves*:

‘You’re a public menace. For weeks, it appears, you have been making life a hell for all your neighbours with some hideous musical instrument. I see you have it with you now. (...) Are you aware of the fact that the occupant of the flat below, Mrs Tinkler-Moulke, is one of my patients, a woman in a highly nervous condition? I have had to give her a sedative.’  
I raised a hand.

‘Spare me the gossip from the loony-bin,’ I said distantly. ‘Might I inquire, on my side, if you are aware that Mrs Tinkler-Moulke owns a Pomeranian?’

‘Don’t drivell.’

‘I am not drivelling. This animal yaps all day and not infrequently far into the night. So Mrs Tinkler-Moulke has had the nerve to complain of my banjolele, has she? Ha! Let her first pluck out the Pom which is in her own eye,’ I said, becoming a bit scriptural. (Wodehouse, 2008f: 16).

In the same way, one would certainly not laugh more heartily if he or she knew that it was distortion humour (Apter & Desselles, 2012: 417) what John Kennedy Toole (2011) achieved in his novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* when capturing Ignatius Reilly’s inadaptability to the labour market:

‘Employers sense in me a denial of their values.’ He rolled over onto his back. ‘They fear me. I suspect that they can see that I am forced to function in a century which I loathe. That was true even when I worked for the New Orleans Public Library.’

‘All you did was paste them little slips in the books.’

‘Yes, but I had my own esthetic about pasting those slips. On some days I could only paste in three or four slips and at the same time feel satisfied with the quality of my work. The library authorities resented my integrity about the whole thing. They only wanted another animal who could slop glue on their best sellers.’ (John Kennedy Toole, 2011: 51).

Following the same line of thought, we could unreservedly state that the reader would not enjoy more the following humorous effect obtained by the Spanish humorist Enrique Jardiel Poncela in his novel *Amor se escribe sin hache* (1993) if

he or she knew that the effect at stake was called disclosure humour (Apter & Desselles, 2012: 417): “A semejanza de otras diversas criaturas / Me eduqué en el temor del Dios de las Alturas / pero perdí el temor – o la fé – que es lo mismo / cuando, en años después, practiqué el alpinismo” (Poncela, 1993: 75).

Nor would the reader laugh more vivaciously if he or she remembered Immanuel Kant’s theory of laughter (“Laughter is an affect arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing. This very reduction, at which certainly understanding cannot rejoice, is still indirectly a source of very lively enjoyment for a moment”) (Kant, 2007: 161) while reading the following dialogue between soldier Švejk and senior lieutenant Lukáš:

The lieutenant wanted to say something sharp, but observing the innocent expression on Švejk’s face said nothing more than ‘The chaplain recommended you as a frightful idiot and I think he was not wrong.’

‘Humbly report, sir, he certainly was not wrong.’ (Hašek, 2005: 168).

Indeed, humour is an alternative to real life, a game whose gist is perceived mentally since it contradicts the logic of our previous cognitive schemata by which we lead our lives. The sublime essence of this game resides in the fact that one has very little time to grasp its beauty. If one succeeds in grasping it on time he or she bursts into peals of laughter. If one fails in doing so, he or she remains puzzled. This is the unwritten law of humour and that is why the reception of humour taking place in the framework of a social interaction or being mediated by different forms of artistic expression cannot benefit, as shown above, from studies which aim to decipher the mechanisms of

humour. The player of the game has no time for paying attention to anything else except his or her unstoppable need to laugh.

Undoubtedly, people’s need to understand the phenomena which surround them is enormous and cannot be denied, but what is enjoyable should not be analysed and explained because it loses its charm. And even if the explanations obtained may be indispensable to the advancement of human knowledge in a certain field, the intellectual pleasure derived from such an epistemological approach will never fuse with the pleasure derived from experiencing directly what gladdens the mind and the soul. Regarding this, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, when comparing theatre and criticism, pointed out that “Theatergenuß und Theaterkritik sind nicht dasselbe, ebensowenig wie die Bewunderung eines Regenbogens und die Physik, welche die Entstehung des Regenbogens erklärt”<sup>1</sup> (1972: 77). However, such is the mystery of laughter and humour that scholars from Antiquity until modern times have tried to shed light into the darkest recesses of this complex phenomenon. In their challenging book *Plato and a Platypus Walk Into a Bar... Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes*, Harvard philosophy majors Tom Cathcart and Dan Klein (2007) aim to show how cardinal philosophical concepts can be explained via jokes and how myriads of jokes comprise enchanting philosophical wisdom. In their attempt to build a bridge between philosophy and jokes, the two authors notice that:

<sup>1</sup> The enjoyment derived from theatre and the one derived from theatre criticism are not the same thing, as are not the same the admiration aroused by a rainbow and the physics that explains it (our translation).

The construction and payoff of jokes and the construction and payoff of philosophical concepts are made out of the same stuff. They tease the mind in similar ways. That's because philosophy and jokes proceed from the same impulse: to confound our sense of the way things are, to flip our worlds upside down, and to ferret out hidden, often uncomfortable, truths about life. What the philosopher calls an insight, the gagster calls a zinger. (Cathcart & Dan Klein 2007: 2).

If we agree with Cathcart and Klein that humour and philosophy share this capacity for challenging human mind, then we can understand why this phenomenon preoccupied philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. However, even if, as Teodor Bacovsky (1996: 76) points out, the laughter of the ancient Greeks evolved from the Homeric laughter, which expressed the victory over the enemy, to the laughter which accompanied the intellectual criticism of an unacceptable opinion, their laughter remained, to a great extent, acrimonious, aggressive and derisive. This is the reason why during this period laughter was conceived entirely in negative terms. "No distinction was made between «laughing with» and «laughing at», since all laughter was thought to rise from making fun of someone" (Rod, 2007: 21).

Thus, for the author of the *Dialogues* laughter is the pleasure derived from seeing the risible object unaware of his or her flaws. However, this pleasure is amended by a moral clause, since Plato considers that laughter needs to be accompanied by disapproval, therefore one must only laugh at an object that is indeed blameworthy (quoted in Arieșan, 1999: 29). Therefore, in Plato's view, laughter should function as a moralizing social agent.

A somehow similar stand was adopted by Aristotle who considered that comedy imitates people of an inferior moral

quality, in which case the ridiculous becomes a part of the ugly. At the same time, in order for this imitation to be achieved, any pain or harm associated with the ugly must be ruled out (Aristotle, 1998: 70). Thus, the Stagirite makes a step forward in the understanding of humour which, apart from being loaded with satirical content, a type of humour which Panaitescu calls "small humour" (Panaitescu, 2003: 11), acquires now a certain dose of benevolence toward the person who is ridiculed, thus foreshadowing the "great humour" (Panaitescu, 2003: 11) that is characteristic of the modern humorist.

As to the Roman Antiquity, anticipating Kant's theory of the comic contrast, Cicero writes in *De Oratore*: "what excites laughter is disappointing expectations" (1942: 419). We can easily notice that Cicero's perspective resembles the ideas formulated by Jauss (1983: 300) when referring to the aesthetic experience of humour and to the satisfaction produced by the comic hero who is not comic by himself or herself, but only in relation to an existing horizon of expectations which are denied. However, in Cicero's view, humour also has an aggressive basis being used so as to ridicule and disparage anyone who appears inferior: "what excites laughter is (...) ridiculing other people's characters and imitating a baser person and dissembling and saying things that are rather silly and criticizing points that are foolish" (Cicero, 1942: 419).

At the same time, Cicero refers to the personality of the individual endowed with a sense of humour, vaguely touching upon what would much later become known in psychology as personality approaches to the sense of humour: "...a person who wants to speak humorously must be equipped with a disposition and character that is suited to artifices of this kind, so that even his expression of countenance may be adapted to each kind of

variety of the ridiculous” (Cicero, 1942: 419). There is another observation Cicero makes in relation to humour – “...the sterner and gloomier a man's expression is (...), the more humorous as a rule his remarks are considered” (Cicero, 1942: 419) – that bears a resemblance to Falstaff's vision on laughter in *Henry IV*: “O, it is much that (...) a jest with a sad brow will do with a fellow that never had the ache in his shoulders! O, you shall see him laugh till his face be like a wet cloak ill laid up!” (Shakespeare, 2005: 122). This “jest with a sad brown” or, in Cicero's view, with a “stern and gloom expression” represents an incongruity meant to elicit laughter.

At the dawn of the modern era, Thomas Hobbes defined humour in terms similar to those used by Plato and Aristotle for whom, as shown above, laughter marked the identification of specific flaws of the ludicrous object. Thus, Hobbes associated laughter with a feeling of superiority derived “from the disparagement of another person or of one's own past blunders or foolishness” (Rod, 2007: 44). In his work *Leviathan* the seventeenth-century English philosopher saw laughter as the expression of a “sudden glory”, a triumph over another person:

Sudden glory is the passion which maketh those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident 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. (Hobbes, 1929: 41).

Indeed, during the eighteenth century the word *ridicule* was used instead of *humour* and had a negative and aggressive

connotation. The hard nucleus of the social representation of laughter in those times included elements such as malice, contempt and scorn. At the same time, outwitting and humiliating one's interlocutors by making them laughable to others were considered desirable social behaviours.

By the early nineteenth century the idea of laughter originating in superiority, hostility, aggression and disdain was replaced by a more intellectual and humanitarian perspective on laughter. Having a flexible mind and being able to establish new connections between ideas so as to achieve intellectual surprise were now important aspects associated with laughter. Thus, by the early nineteenth century Hobbes's theory of superiority was being replaced by theories that highlighted incongruity as an essential element of laughter.

Actually, when referring to the *comic contrast*, Immanuel Kant had anticipated such theories already at the end of the eighteenth century. The German philosopher explains humour as being an emotional state which arises from the sudden transformation of a tense intellectual expectation into *nothing*. Although this *nothing* does not satisfy one's intellect, it causes pleasure through its very absurd essence:

Something absurd (something in which, therefore, the understanding can of itself find no delight) must be present in whatever is to raise a hearty convulsive laugh. *Laughter is an affect arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing*. This very reduction, at which certainly understanding cannot rejoice, is still indirectly a source of very lively enjoyment for a moment. (Kant, 2007: 161).

A century later, Henri Bergson also referred to laughter as being caused by the perception of an absurd relation between