

## THE FRENCH COMIC AND THE UNIVERSAL COMIC

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**Abstract:** According to a stereotype that has been accepted until recently, antiquity ignored the comic, or even more than that, they considered it inappropriate<sup>1</sup>. 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals considered that the absence of humour from the literary productions of Antiquity indicated the fact that it was seen as reprehensible and insipid, in other words, unworthy due to its sterility to capture the public attention.

**Keywords:** Antiquity, humour, intellectuals

Ignoring stereotypes related by the presence of humour in early literature, Harald Höffding notes that Antiquity was exclusively oriented to satire and irony. In exchange, A. Oltramare, in *Les origines de la diatribe romaine* signals 2 main sources of antic and modern humour: paradox and a mix of genres<sup>2</sup>.

Humour represents a natural human gift, regardless of time and culture. It can be found in spiritual men, with high education, or it can be found in sayings, stories or folk culture – even Grobian. In both cases, we understand that humour can be found everywhere<sup>3</sup>.

Even if humour represents a trait of the Christian mentality, we cannot ignore the comic treasures contained by Greek and Latin texts, as we cannot ignore Racine's or Pascal's irony, substantially different from Socrates' or Plato's irony<sup>4</sup>. It is certain that, beyond scientific classifications and generalizations, the „stake” when it comes to humour cannot be separated from the „auctorial” personality<sup>5</sup>. As man is defined by its unicity, authentic humour is unique, cannot be repeated or imitated and, thus, it cannot be mistaken for something else.

As far as the history of the concept of humour is concerned, we have to be against the general idea that this term does not come from French but from its enemy language, English. In fact, English people have built around this term and this concept, which has Latin roots, has

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1 Arieșan, C.T., *Geneza comicului în cultura română*, Ed. Excelsior Art, 2010, p. 203.

2 Idem.

3 Idem, p. 204.

4 Idem, pp. 204-205.

5 Idem, pp. 205-206.

provided French with the word „humeur” – initially used in the medical theory of humours (which has remained valid until recently and which was repudiated with the birth of modern medicine). The roots of this term are, in fact, much older and go deeper into Antiquity to Arabs and Greeks.

Starting from these elements and taking into account the relation between the two meanings of humour, there is a distinction which is usually ignored, that is humour cannot be identified with the comic, even if the two terms are mostly related nowadays.

Fernand Baldensperger considered that it was a good idea to use, at least in the intellectual environments, the plural *humours*, avoiding the singular term „humour”.

Jean Paul underlined the fact that the English and the German people are endowed with figurative spirit, whereas the French are remarked due to their reflexive spirit, useful in their social life which preoccupies them so intensely<sup>6</sup>.

On the same idea, Louis Cazamian, in his study entitled *Le mécanisme de l'humour*, underlined that humour is a rather German matter than Latin. However, he gives arguments for the presence of humour in French literature, such as a quick nervous reaction, a vivid temperament and a fragile self-control<sup>7</sup>.

Real humour is characteristic to an author who seems grave and serious, but portrays things in such a manner that he provokes laughter and joy. Thus, there is the indirect problem of esthetics that Diderot wrote about when he debated the actor's paradox. He claimed that efficient humour is a deliberate construction, a composition offered to the public by a conscientious artist and not a modality to feel and see things, induced by a comedy actor.

Humour can be intrinsic, a special gift of some persons (passive humor) and intentional, when a clear goal is set by a person (active humour). This can be put in one expression: **not all intelligent people are comic, but all comics are intelligent people.** (QSJ? P. 41<sup>8</sup>)

The word *humour* enters the French language only in 1725, and Littré admits it in the dictionary with the same name even if the French Academy does not accept this term. Another French encyclopedic – Diderot – in 1762, in his work *Le neveu de Rameau* made the portrait of the humorist in Morris's style. Thus, even if he did not mention the proper word in his texts, Diderot proved *avant la lettre* a clear and modern understanding of the concept. In 1880, the term became usual,

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6 Idem, 206.

7 Idem, p. 208.

8 Escarpit, R., *L'humour*, Que Sais-je ? PUF, n° 877, 1991.

but only in 1932, the Academia includes it in his dictionary, significantly reducing the semantic universe.

After that, humour is often used in France especially in its satire version due to caricatures (drawn or sung) For example, the idea of madness, absurd (the equivalent of the English non-sense) sees a significant progress due to Pierre Dac and Francis Blanche (or Coluche Desproges, more recently). We must highlight the fact that, at present, humour does not have a single form, but it manifests in its diversity, including in the so-called „social labelling” (the feeling of belonging to a group that shares the same values usually produces the ridicule).

On the other hand, humour is defined nowadays in the francophone space as:

- a form of the spirit which consists of identifying pleasant and unusual aspects of reality with a certain detachment (cf. Petit Robert);
- a form of spirit that dissimulates behind a serious aspect a cruel irony, an absurd situation or a comic situation (cf. Larousse, where the English origin of the word is signaled).

Voltaire is one of the first French people who speak about humour:

„They, [the British] have a term that designs this joke, this real comic, this joy, this urban thing; they call this idea humour, which they pronounce *yumor* and consider that they are the only ones who have this state of mind and that other nations do not have a term to express this idea; at the same time this is also an old word in our language, used in this sense in many of Corneille’s comedies.”

A century later, Hippolyte Taine writes against this possibility to have humour in the francophone space. He says that humour is sort of a talent which can entertain Germans, Nordic people and which is appropriate to their spirit, as beer and spirits are. However, for people of a different nation it is unpleasant: „our nerves think it is too tough, too bitter”<sup>9</sup>.

Voltaire seems to Taine as a quintessence of pleasant joy yet he has a different attitude towards Swift, as he hopes he would not make jokes on his account<sup>10</sup>.

Cazamian underlines its unconscious character, claiming that the writer, the orator, no matter how ignorant he is, is aware of the

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9 Taine, H., Histoire de la littérature anglaise, V, IV, II.

10 Arieşan, C.T., op. cit., p. 207.

transposition he makes, and thus humour is realized; or he is not aware and in this case, humour does not exist<sup>11</sup>.

Bergson seems to consider humour as a transposing mechanism and he thoroughly describes the phenomenon<sup>12</sup>. Breton sees it rather as an existential posture, humour appears as a modality of saying beyond „the absolute rebellion of teenagers and the internal rebellion of mature age”, a superior rebellion of the mind<sup>13</sup>.

It seems that there are not two identical opinions on humor. Moreover, opinions are also contradictory. It is certain that regardless of the approach, humour is positively marked: everybody loves humor; generally it is considered an ameliorated form of the comic, it is finer, nobler. These qualities of humour, identified at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, are not a problem. Nevertheless, it is remarkable due to the unanimity it creates especially among debaters interested in the relationship between humour and irony. Most of the analysts appreciate humour due to this dichotomy as being the most important (Jankélévitch considers humour as the perfect form of irony). The only one who seems to grant both notions with the same value is Bergson.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, René Doumic concluded in *Nos humoristes* that humour has always been regarded as a rather exotic phenomenon, alien to the French spirit, with ethnic dispositions that do not recommend it to practice humor, unlike other people<sup>14</sup>.

It is certain that the political and economic factor is a strong catalyzer in establishing a hierarchy for the most humorous nations, such as: England, France, Germany, Spain, the United States of America, the other cultures being in a sort of shadow<sup>15</sup>. In total opposition to this concept is James Sully, who claimed that humour does not belong to a certain class, race or community, being mostly individual, purely intellectual and the fruit of an imaginative reflection<sup>16</sup>. The same conception was shared by the Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello, who believed that „there is no national humour, only accidental identities of mental structures highlighted by individual creations of humorists of the same literature”<sup>17</sup>.

Humour bears complex information and contradictory feelings, being that print that certifies uniqueness. We can either speak about the

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11 Cazamian, L., «Pourquoi nous ne pouvons pas définir l'humour?», in Revue germanique, 1906.

12 Bergson, H., *Le Rire*, in *Œuvres*, P.U.F., p. 447.

13 Breton, A., Anthologie de l'humour noir, «Préface», Livre de poche / Biblio, p. 12.

14 Arieșan, C.T., op. cit., p. 207.

15 Idem, p. 210.

16 Idem, 211.

17 Idem.

famous *esprit gaulois*, or generally about cult humoristic French literature, French humour deserves its reputation, without having to continuously compare it to the English humour. Well known humorists, such as Alphonse Allais, G. Courteline, Raymond Queneau and others, or humanists such as Pascal, Montesquieu, Anatole France or Jean Anouilh have often appealed to humour to send their message<sup>18</sup>.

We can speak about genuine laughter or the “built” laughter in the Rabellais or Voltaire style or about „contemporaneous laughter” of the post-modern disabused generation; in all cases French literature has proven to be worthy to carry humor due to its flexibility and to the depth that characterize it.

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18 Idem.