HUMOUR AND PATHOS
IN LITERATURE AND THE ARTS
(I)

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CONTENTS

"A jest with a sad brow": Shakespeare's ambivalent insults

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Humour and Pathos in Literature and the Arts (I)

Abstract: Shakespeare's insults are ambivalent creatures that oscillate between humour and pathos. That is what this article aims to show. It focuses on the part insults play in the articulation of humour and pathos in Shakespeare's plays, Falstaff and his reference to "a jest with a sad brow" appearing as a case in point. Through examples taken from *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *King Henry IV*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the article explores how insults and moments of insult convey the complex and fragile balance between humour and pathos. It shows that Shakespeare's theatre of insult is based on the tension between laughter and tears, between the ludic and the serious modes or humours of insult, at a time when the word 'humour' was mainly conceived in the plural and still referred to fluid(s) rather than wit. This article first analyses how Shakespeare's plays reveal a breach between humour and pathos by dramatizing, on the one hand, what is called "skirmish[es] of wit" in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and, on the other hand, what is called "heart-struck injuries" in *King Lear*. After dissociating comic and tragic insults, the article then shows how Shakespeare cultivates moments of insult when the spectators do not know whether they should laugh or cry, moments when insults waver between humour and pathos, between mirth-making and grief-making, moments in which insults hurt even when they are supposed to be humorous. This ambivalence is related to the ambivalence that is at the heart of the way the tongue is represented in Shakespeare's world which points to its essential volatility, unpredictability and instability.
Keywords: humour; pathos; Shakespeare; jesting; insult; Falstaff; abuse.

"[A] jest with a sad brow": I had never paid attention to this oxymoronic expression uttered by Falstaff in *King Henry IV Part 2* (5.1.81), Falstaff, a character who is central when it comes to speaking about what Louis Cazamian termed "Shakespeare's humour" (*L'humour de Shakespeare* 110-2

9). I had never noticed the expression before reading a short book on humour, just entitled *L'humour*, written by a French critic, Robert Escarpit, in 1960. In this book, the author drew attention to the phrase (74-75) to illustrate what he called the "dialectics of humour" (*la dialectique de l'humour*), notably based, according to him, on the discrepancy between the content of a speech and the tone in which it is delivered (Escarpit, 73-92). A lot of theoreticians of humour have insisted on the part played by "incongruity" (Eagleton 67-93; Larkin-Galiñanes 12-15) in the mechanisms of humour. The discrepancy between the jest and the sad face has to do with this in-congruity. The editor of the Arden 3 edition of *King Henry IV Part 2* notes that "with a sad brow" means with a "straight face" (*2H4* 392), that is to say a face that shows no emotion, especially no amusement. Yet beyond what could be a potential and inevitably partial characterization of humour, this phrase seems to epitomize the tension and the complex articulation between humour (jest)[1] and pathos (sad brow), a complex articulation that one finds, as we will show, not only in *King Henry IV* but also, more broadly, in Shakespeare's plays.

The purpose of this study is to focus on the part insults play in this articulation of humour and pathos in Shakespeare's corpus. I will strive, through a few examples, to show how insults and moments of insult convey the complex and fragile balance between humour and pathos. What I have called elsewhere "Shakespeare's theatre of insult" (Vienne-Guerrin 241-248) is based on the tension between laughter and tears, between the ludic and the serious modes, moods or humours of insult, at a time when the word 'humour' was mainly conceived in the plural and still referred to fluid(s) rather than wit. Robert Escarpit notes that the first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, published in 1771, displayed the difficulty in/impossibility of defining humour, a difficulty that Cazamian had identified in an article published in 1906 and entitled "Why humour cannot be defined" ("*Pourquoi nous ne pouvons définir l'humour*"). The *Encyclopedia Britannica* (801), Escarpit notes, offers two definitions or lacks of definition: "Humour, in a general sense denotes much the same with liquid or fluid. See Fluid" and "Humour: See Wit" (6). Fluid and wit: here are two key-words that characterize Falstaff who defines himself as being "out of all compass" in *King Henry IV Part 1* (3.3.20).

This study will first show how Shakespearean insults display a breach or gap between humour and pathos by dramatizing, on the one hand, what is called "skirmish[es] of wit" in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1.1.59), and, by showing, on

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[1] On jesting, see Holcomb.

the other hand, the emotional damage that can be caused by what is identified as "heart-struck injuries" in *King Lear* (3.1.17). After a brief exploration that will dissociate comic and tragic insults, I will analyse how Shakespeare also cultivates moments of insult when the spectators do not know whether they should laugh or cry, moments when insults waver between humour and pathos, between mirth-making and grief-making, moments in which insults hurt even when they are supposed to be humorous. We will relate this ambivalence to the ambivalence that is at the heart of the way the tongue is represented in Shakespeare's world which points to its essential volatility, unpredictability and instability. Thus, we aim to show that Shakespeare's insults are ambivalent creatures that oscillate between humour and pathos.

"Skirmish[es] of wit" vs. "heart-struck injuries": humour vs. pathos

Insults are often considered as entertaining and humoristic words that one can use out of context, mostly for fun. The many anthologies and goodies that use the cultural capital of Shakespearean insults (Vienne-Guerrin 241-2) are usually marketed under the category of 'humour' and they evidence the pleasure that Shakespearean insults can generate.

The title of one of the books of Shakespearean insults is emblematic of the link that is drawn between insults and wit: Wayne F. Hill and Cynthia J. Öttchen's best-selling anthology is entitled *Shakespeare's Insults, Educating Your Wit* [1991]. *The Little Book of Shakespeare's Insults* is subtitled *The Bard's Best Barbs*. It is advertised on Amazon in the category of "The Little Books of Humour & Gift, 4". The description that one finds for this *Little Book of Shakespeare's Insults* on Amazon.com starts with a quote from *King Henry IV Part 2*: "Away, you scullion, you rampallion, you fustilarian!" (2.1.58-59), which is used as a slogan or attractive subtitle. The presentation of the book goes on with the following teaser:

> Along with penning some of the most sublime passages in all of English Literature, Shakespeare was a master when it came to casting a wicked comeback or hurling a barbed insult. Whether it's Prospero calling Caliban a "freckled whelp, hag-born" in *The Tempest* or King Lear railing against his daughter Goneril with the damning words, "Thou art a boil, a plague sore, an embossed carbuncle in my corrupted blood", Shakespeare didn't hold back when it came to getting creative with his slights. Packed full of eloquent stings and poisonous putdowns, this is the perfect resource for anyone looking to scorn an enemy – without resorting to swearing! (Amazon.com website)

Taken out of their specific contexts these strings of abuse become emblematic of Shakespearean humour.

Shakespeare's insults are also present in the form of colouring books, such as *100 Shakespeare insulting phrases & Words,* advertised on the Amazon.com website as "a funny colouring book for teens and adults who love literature and have a wicked sense of humor." This follows on a previous colouring book entitled *Thou Lump of Foul Deformity! Shakespeare Insults Coloring Book For Adults* described as "A Shakespearean Swear Words Coloring Experience" (Amazon.com website). The book entitled *Shakespeare Insult Generator: Mix and Match More Than 150,000 Insults in the Bard's Own Words* is advertised, still on Amazon, as follows:

> Put dullards and miscreants in their place with more than 150,000 handy mix-and-match insults in the bard's own words. This entertaining insult generator and flip book collects hundreds of words from Shakespeare's most pointed barbs and allows readers to combine them in creative and hilariously stinging ways. From "apish bald-pated abomination" to "cuckoldly dull-brained blockhead" to "obscene rump-fed hornbeast", each insult can be chosen at random or customized to fit any situation that calls for a literary smackdown. . . this delightful book will sharpen the tongue of Shakespeare fans and insult aficionados without much further ado. (Amazon.com website)

Thus, Shakespeare's insults are regularly used as a stock or mine of words in which one can tap to sharpen one's sense of humour and to avoid using an uninventive and repetitive offensive language.

One can feel this humorous, festive and ludic dimension in many plays and especially in the battles of wit that they dramatize. The expression "skirmish of wit" is used at the beginning of *Much Ado About Nothing* (1.1.59) to characterize the verbal exchanges between the two main protagonists, Beatrice and Benedick. Leonato gives the spectators on and off stage a reading grid to decipher the dialogues that we are going to attend between the two "wit-crackers" (5.4.99-100), Benedick and Beatrice:

> LEONATO. You must not, sir, mistake my niece; there is a kind of merry war betwixt Signor Benedick and her. They never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them. (1.1.57-60).

Leonato contextualizes the exchanges between Beatrice and Benedick to give the spectators the key to understand the *flyting*, that is to say the ritual exchange of abuse, that characterizes the duet. In *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy,* C. L. Barber related these *flyting* matches to festive roots, mentioning the "abuse" as being part of "the customary license to flout and fleer at what on other days commanded respect." (6-7)

Insult is a source of mirth, merriment, entertainment and a sign of good humour; it constitutes the "holiday *humour*" of which Orlando speaks in *As You*

Like It (4.1.63). Most of the festive mood of *Much Ado About Nothing* resides in Beatrice's wit or humour that is so "forcible" (5.2.53) that she "turns . . . everyone the wrong side out" (3.1.68) or "fright[s] the word out of his right sense" (5.2.52-3), even turning compliments into insults.

Thus, the expression "skirmish of wit" tells us that the insults that we hear are delivered *in jest,* that they convey a world of humour and should not be taken seriously. They do not hurt.

The exchanges between Hal and Falstaff in *King Henry IV Part 1* are emblematic of this festive *flyting* that is based on complicity rather than hostility. That is why in this play, probably more than in any other, the frontier disappears between abuse and praise. According to Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*, this blurred tone of words is characteristic of the festive verbal world. *King Henry IV Part 1* is pregnant with what Bakhtin calls the ambivalent abuse or the combination or fusion of praise and abuse. For Bakhtin, the festive abuses characterize "carnival familiarity" and "while humiliating and mortifying, they are at the same time revived and renewed" (16). In *King Henry IV Part 1*, many humorous expressions, be they addressed to Falstaff, Hostess Quickly or Bardolph, waver between insults and endearments: "My old Lad of the castle" (1.2.40), "the latter spring" (1.2.150), "All-hallown summer" (1.2.150), "my sweet creature of bombast" (2.4.318), "good pint-pot", "good tickle-brain" (2.4.387), "Thou art the Knight of the Burning Lamp" (3.3.26-7), "Dame Partlet the hen" (3.3.51), "my sweet beef" (3.3.176). These words both feed and reflect a whole community's sense of humour. If insults and endearments overlap, it is because insult goes hand in hand with friendship in this play. If Hal and Falstaff hurl so many insults at each other, it is because they do not hurt. So, insults very often display and convey good humour.

Yet, on the other hand, Shakespeare's plays constantly show that words can kill, and that, far from being benign humoristic traits, they can hurt and lead to suffering. The Shakespearean text, while dramatizing the vanity of the word, also suggests that words are weapons. This idea appears in Benedick's tirade about Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*:

> O, she misused me past the endurance of a block! An oak but with one green leaf on it would have answered her; my very visor began to assume life and scold with her. She told me, not thinking I had been myself, that I was the prince's jester, that I was duller than a great thaw, huddling jest upon jest with such impossible conveyance upon me that I stood like a man at a mark, with a whole army shooting at me. She speaks poniards, and every word stabs: . . . (2.1.119-27)

Even if it is in a comic context, the speech conveys the damaging potential of humour. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, many metaphors describe tongues as sharp weapons, as razors (5.2.257) and instruments that wound, as when Berowne offers himself to Rosaline's scorn:

> Here stand I, lady; dart thy skill at me.
> Bruise me with scorn, confound me with a flout;
> Thrust thy sharp wit quite through my ignorance;
> Cut me to pieces with thy keen conceit; . . . (5.2.396-9)

Insults may indeed be a source of pain, passion and pathos. Insults can hurt. In the comedies, the hurting word may remain a metaphor; in the tragedies, it becomes a reality.

That is the case, for example, in *King Lear*, where Cordelia's "Nothing" (1.1.87) will have resonances throughout the play, initiating all the tears later shed by Lear. The role of the Fool's humour is twofold when it comes to apprehending the pathetic outrages suffered by Lear: his humour both reveals and attenuates them. By teaching differences "between a bitter fool and a sweet one" (1.4.134-5), the Fool reminds Lear of his former splendour, thus emphasising his decline. But if he emphasizes insults through his comments, the Fool is also a soothing presence who welcomes Lear into his world of Fools. On the heath, only the Fool's humour remains to alleviate the King's suffering: "None but the fool, who labours to outjest / His heart-struck injuries" (3.1.16-17). Humour here appears as a counterpoint to pathos. So that when the "poor fool" disappears (5.3.304), all sources of consolation disappear with him. When humour is no longer here, pathos reigns supreme (Vienne-Guerrin 227-39).

In *Othello* the spectator attends the emotional shock that Desdemona suffers as a victim when Othello violently insults her. The shock is all the more striking, for the character and the audience, since the playwright presents Desdemona as "a child to chiding" (4.2.116). After publicly striking and insulting her in 4.1, Othello goes on abusing her in private, symbolically writing "whore" upon her (4.2.73), calling her "thou public commoner" (4.2.74), "Impudent strumpet" (4.2.82), before ironically questioning these labels: "Are not you a strumpet?" (4.2.83); "What, not a whore?" (4.2.88) and scathingly concluding:

> I cry you mercy then,
> I took you for that cunning whore of Venice
> That married with Othello. (*Oth*. 4.2.93)

The insult is here all the sharper since it takes the form of an ironical, darkly humorous comment, which constitutes a verbal trap as the answer to it can only be wrong: Desdemona can neither confirm it nor deny it. She can neither answer "yes, I am", nor "no, I'm not" and so cannot but remain speechless. Expressed in this indirect manner, the accusation cuts both ways. Desdemona's state of shock strikingly appears when Emilia comes back on stage and asks her: "How do you, madam? How do you, my good lady?" and Desdemona answers: "Faith, half asleep" (4.2.98-9). She is in a hypnotic state that signals a traumatic effect, insults becoming a source of pathos in the play (Vienne-Guerrin 179-86).

If one can clearly identify and distinguish merry moments of humorous insult contrasting with cruel moments of verbal abuse, Shakespeare's plays also often dramatize moments that oscillate between the two humours, between insult as a lively intellectual game and insult as source of pathos.

Wavering between humour and pathos

Some episodes in Shakespeare's plays interrogate the playful dimension of insults, the spectators on and off stage no longer knowing whether the words are delivered in jest or not.

Much Ado About Nothing offers a few of these ambivalent moments. In the scene of the aborted wedding, the playwright dramatizes the telescoping of the playful and serious modes:

> FRIAR. You come hither, my lord, to marry this lady?
> CLAUDIO. No.
> LEONATO. To be married to her, Friar; you come to marry her. (4.1.4-7)

This church scene is based on a major insult when Claudio answers the Friar's ritual question with a "No" that probably constitutes the most spectacular moment in the play. During this scene, the playwright represents the passage from the witty word to the word that kills, the switch from humour to pathos. The spectators on and off stage have become accustomed to the humorous, playful mode of the witty exchanges and to the amorous Agon between the protagonists. Leonato's reaction shows that one needs time to adapt to the change of register. Leonato contradicts the Friar by re-dressing Claudio's "No" into a witty answer. Humour through a play on words is here a shield against the violence of Claudio's rejection of Hero. We witness the transition between two modes of insult. Leonato appears as an absorber of shock that hides the insult behind a play on words, offering a verbal shield (Allan and Burridge) provisionally euphemizing the violence of the "No".

Benedick's reaction signals the change of mood: "How now? Interjections? Why then, some be of laughing, as ah, ha, he" (4.1.19-20). Speaking of "interjections", he reveals the shift from a spiritual to an emotional mode of insult, from humour to pathos. Yet the parodic reference to William Lyly's *Short Introduction of Latin Grammar* (Civ^v)[2] preserves the witty mode for a moment. Both Leonato and Benedick use verbal shields to maintain the ludic mode; but these shields will not last long and Claudio and Don Pedro's insulting accusations will cause Hero's swooning in the middle of the ceremony, hence her symbolic death.

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[2] See *Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. McEachern, 257.

The sequence in which Benedick challenges Claudio is also based on the overlapping of the two moods of insult. While Claudio and Don Pedro both playfully practise insult, Benedick uses it as a prelude to the act. When he "warns" Claudio that he is not joking ("You are a villain, I jest not", 5.1.143), Benedick underlines and counters the possible gap between the emission and the reception of the insult. In a world where words seemed to be, like Beatrice, "all mirth and no matter" (2.1.304), the characters find it difficult to reinvest them with meaning. Insult is food for interpretation. From the outset Leonato presented it as such by saying to the messenger "You must not, sir, mistake my niece" (1.1.57).

Humour can be pathetically toxic. That is what appears in *Hamlet* when Ophelia says to Hamlet: "You are keen my lord, you are keen." (3.2.241), which summarizes the destructive effect that Hamlet's bawdy humour has on her. Hamlet's toxic mockeries certainly do not "sleep" (4.2.21) in her ear even if they are full of innuendoes and indirections. Ophelia is one of the victims of the verbal "Mousetrap" Hamlet has prepared, in a context that Johannes Birringer has identified as the "trapicality" of *Hamlet*. Whatever she says, she is trapped and enmeshed in the web of Hamlet's acerbic humour. The nunnery scene (esp. 3.1.119-26) has a highly insulting effect (Larguèche) on her. "Get thee to a nunnery": when Hamlet utters this sentence, we witness an enterprise of destruction, a displacement of revenge on Ophelia who may later be seen as dying from the poisonous words Hamlet utters which, beyond the rejection they imply, also may mean "go to a brothel" through a pun on the word "nunnery". The toxicity of the words will lead Ophelia to a place of mental perdition which will be haunted by obscene images. In Ophelia's madness and death, one may find an illustration of the traumatic experience words may constitute (Vienne-Guerrin 173-205), which leads to pathos. Hamlet's melancholy 'humour' proves cruel and destructive.

In a *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Love's Labour's Lost*, the words delivered by mockers are also pregnant with a pathetic potential. In both plays the mockers target the amateur actors for their poor performances of Pyramus and Thisbe, on the one hand, and of the Pageant of the Nine Worthies on the other hand.

In *Galateo*, a book on good manners, Giovanni Della Casa denounces the practice of what he called "scorne":

> Doe not allow, that a man should scorne or scoffe at any man, what so ever he be: no not his very enimy, what displeasure so ever he beare him: for, it is a greater sign of contempt and disdaine, to scorne a man, then to do him an open wrong. . . And the Nature and effect of a scorne, is properly to take a contentation and pleasure to do another man shame and villany: thoughe it do our selves no good in the world. (62-3)

Then the text formulates a distinction between "a scorne" and "a mock":

> There is no difference betweene a scorne and a mocke: but the purpose alone and intent a man hath, in the meaning the one the other. For a man mockes and laughes otherwhile, in a sport and a pastime: but his scorn is ever in a rage and disdain. (64)

According to Della Casa, what differentiates mockery from scorn is the intention of the enunciator. While mockery can be pleasant and entertaining, scorn may cause harm. If mockery is essentially playful, scorn is serious. After drawing this distinction, Della Casa notes how difficult it is nevertheless to know the intention of the speaker:

> It many times chanceth, in boording and jesting, one tackes in sporte, the other strykes againe in earnest: and thus from playing, they come to fraying. (65)

When it comes to mocking, therefore, one should be careful, because a joke can easily turn into an insult, and humour may tumble into pathos. The confusion of joking mockery and insult is at the centre of the play-within-the-play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and explains the discomfort the embedded show, in 5.1, can cause in the spectator. The courtiers, by their mocking comments, produce a courtly noise that is as unpleasant as it is pleasant. The scene can be read as a moment of courteous insult. If, in the forest, the courtiers practised direct insult, at court the insult takes the form of mockery that is pregnant with irony.

It is the same at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost*, where the noble audience mocks the characters who impersonate the Nine Worthies, whose worth is systematically debunked by the audience. So much so that the end of the play may be full of pathos. Holofernes who plays the part of Judas has to endure the mockery of an audience that plays on the presence of the word "ass" in the name "Jud-as(s)" (5.2.620-2). The Pedant/Judas comments on the verbal abuse he suffers on stage by saying: "This is not generous, not gentle, not humble" (5.2.623). Even if, in the theatre, this scene with the Nine Worthies may be a great source of comedy, one cannot erase the unease produced by what can be understood as an episode of harassment, a verbal stoning: "how he has been baited", concludes the Princess (5.2.625-6). Some productions throw into relief the pathos that can be found in this scene by suggesting that the actors are shattered by these biting words.

In *King Henry IV*, Parts 1 and 2, Shakespeare stages the shift from benign to lethal insults, from the ludic mode to the serious mode. One can measure this shift at the end of *King Henry IV Part 2,* when the new King scathingly tells Falstaff "I know thee not old man" (5.5.46), a rejection that has a mostly pathetic effect on stage as it contrasts with the past merry humour shared by the two characters. The pathetic anticlimactic effect is all the stronger since Falstaff, a few scenes before, had imagined how he would make Hal laugh at the expense of Master Shallow:

> I will devise matter enough out of this Shallow to keep Prince Harry in continual laughter the wearing out of six fashions, which is four terms, or two actions, and 'a shall laugh without intervallums. O, it is much that a lie with a slight oath and 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! (5.1.76-84)

Falstaff provides a recipe to trigger Hal's laughter. But in fact, Falstaff's tragic fate is that he will never make Hal laugh anymore. By becoming the King, Henry loses his sense of humour and turns into an agelast. This transformation, which is the source of pathos at the end of *King Henry IV Part 2*, was prepared by the "No abuse?" sequence a few scenes before (Vienne-Guerrin 1-4). Questioning the impact of words, the "No abuse?" question asked by Poins (2.4.321) reveals the unpredictability and variability of the effect words can have on an addressee. Both humour and pathos gain in being apprehended from a 'pragmatic' perspective, that is to say as effects emerging from or produced by the scripts of the plays and then made more or less palpable and more or less visible, more or less conspicuous from one performance to another. Like insults, what humour and pathos have in common is that they rest both not only on the emission of words but also on their reception. A word may be conceived or emitted as humorous, and be received otherwise, while the humour of a situation may arise beyond any intention to be humorous. In the same way, pathos may unexpectedly be felt, whether it was originally meant or not. The question of sensitivity is key to apprehend one or the other.

The question "No abuse?" suggests that the art of insult that characterizes the festive world of the first part of *Henry IV* is put into question in the second part but it also expresses the ambivalence of the tongue that delivers words whose effects can be unexpected. "Quò tendis?" (Paradin [1557] 109-10), "Whether goest thou?" (Paradin [1591] 137-8) 'No Heart can thinke, to what strange ends, / The Tongues unruly Motion tends" (Wither 1.42): the mottoes accompanying Claude Paradin's and George Wither's emblems of the tongue seem to find their reflection in Poins's comic incredulous interrogation: "No abuse?" could be subtitled "Humour? Pathos?" The question reveals that the same words of abuse can point in different directions and reach different aims. They can be ludic and serious, benevolent and malevolent, benign and lethal, and they can find their place in comic as well as tragic agendas and often both at the same time.

The pathetic shift at the end of *Henry IV Part 2* could already be felt in the *flyting* scenes in *King Henry IV Part 1*, and especially in the tavern scene in which Hal played the part of his father:

> HAL. Why dost thou converse with that trunk of humours, that bolting-hutch of beastliness, that swollen parcel of dropsies, that huge bombard of sack, that stuffed cloak-bag of guts, that roasted Manningtree ox with the pudding in his belly, that

reverend Vice, that grey Iniquity, that father Ruffian, that Vanity in years? (2.4.436-42)

One can feel in the comic string of abuse the ominous presence of Falstaff's repudiation and mortality: grey Iniquity, father Ruffian, Vanity in years. Falstaff's death is not far, it is even inscribed in the fall one finds in his very name (fall-staff).

If humour is a weapon, it can also be a shield. Keith Allan and Kate Burridge's *Euphemism and Dysphemism, Language used as Shield and Weapon* show that when language hurts too much, avoidance strategies are put in place. In the final scene of *King Henry IV Part 2*, Falstaff tries to use the playful shield against Henry's destructive words, but the shield only protects him for a short time against the king's insults and pathos prevails over humour. "This that *you* heard was but a colour" (5.5.84-5-): Falstaff, by an instinct of survival, plugs his ears, refuses to hear, euphemises the king's murderous words and strives to stay in the game at the moment Henry officially leaves it. But the wound will come out again at the beginning of *Henry V*. All productions of *King Henry IV Part 2* show that Falstaff's final jest, his shield against insult, is indeed delivered "with a sad brow".

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Humour without Pathos of Internet Memes in the Context of Online Visual Communication

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Abstract: In this article we focus on internet memes that have become an important genre of online communication, as internet users have created a new visual language: not only in form, but also in meaning (often very satiric). Internet memes relate to the Web 2.0 phenomenon, where users can access hundreds of meme templates, images, or short videos, and can assign them a specific meaning. The aim of this article is to theoretically define the "memetic visual language" with specific background, forms, and rules for creating and decoding it. In the empirical part of paper, we present a selection of examples put forward by the Slovak project *ZOMRI*, meant to demonstrate without pathos, but with humour, the power of internet memes to depict the personality of Slovak president Zuzana Caputova.
Keywords: *internet meme; visual communication; online communication; visual language; virtual space; Zomri.*

Birth, Death, and Rebirth: (Re)Generation as Text (I)

Introduction

In everyday life, there is a continuous interpersonal communication. By communication, we mean passing on, conveying items of information (but also values, attitudes, and feelings), as well as connecting them and creating context. Communication is a transmission of information through the decoding of signals, using character systems. In communication, it is not enough to send signals, messages, or characters, it is equally important to receive and decode them, while at the same time providing feedback. When we consider the humour-oriented communication, the recipient and sender of a message can face obstacles in the comprehension of its meaning. The meaning is oftentimes influenced by the current situation and the cultural background.

Communication is mainly associated with speech or language – this is a communication through words. However, people can communicate in different ways. Nowadays, communication through visual images is becoming increasingly predominant. Images have the advantage that people usually understand them, even if they do not speak the same language. In the age of mass media, and, consequently, of mass communication, this type of communication is preferred. According to specialized research, up to 80% of the information from the environment is perceived by the eye. The information that the brain captures through the eyes is also best remembered (Supsakova 7). Communication that is focused on sight and, thus, disseminates information through visual means, is called visual communication.

Visual communication can evoke many feelings, such as laughter, but also anger. That is why in our article we will reflect on political satire which is not offensive, but is aimed at the highest constitutional tier in a democratic system: the president. It evinces humour, with no pathos, begging the question of whether the interpretation of it requires higher meme literacy. The aim of the article is to define the "memetic visual language" with focus on theory, forms, and rules for creating and decoding it. And in a brief case study, we focus on an example of political satire from the Slovak environment, targeted at the Slovak and female president of the republic.

On visual communication

Visual communication presents information through images that include characters, symbols, typography, colours, illustrations, graphics, drawings. The visualization of the idea through images is essential, so that the recipient should understand the idea alluded to in this way. (Williams–Newton 159) In visual communication, meaning is represented (illustrated) by a system of similar signs

and can be analysed through methods of semiotics (see Sturken, Cartwright and Doubravova).

Images or symbols are included among signs. For a proper communication of signs, their meaning must be known. When representing images, the fact that one image does not need to have only one meaning must be considered. According to Doubravova, the correct interpretation of images depends on how many meanings an image can be associated with and how one can recognize these meanings. The ability to understand and use images while thinking, learning, and expressing oneself through images is called visual literacy. In this regard, Barnard argues that people are increasingly under the influence of visual materials and are increasingly dependent on them.

It is the twenty-first century that has brought about dominance of the world of images that has never been seen before in history, and it forms the beginning of a new, visually based civilization. Western culture has been dominated by the visual media, instead of spoken and written information and knowledge. We live in a culture that is increasingly permeated by images with different goals and intended effects. After the oral and verbal era comes the visual age, in which the image is a disseminator of messages, and experiences, along with emotions and artistic-aesthetic values. The recipient can capture the image, decrypt it, and then interpret it.

As a result of rapid technological progress, and spread of mass media and globalization, new demands are emerging and people should acquire four key literacies: information, communication, multicultural and visual. Visual literacy as a concept originated in the middle of the twentieth century. According to Supsakova, visual literacy is a learned ability to interpret visual messages and create such messages, and is similar to reading and writing printed texts.

A person who is visually literate can receive and create visual information because they control the process of broadcasting and processing content in the form of images. An image (or a visual in general) communicates with people, and the content is, in many cases, more important than its form. Many are also convinced that images depict a certain fact. However, this human observation is also subjective: what people see in the pictures depends on what they expect to see in them. Although there are universal symbols or visuals that have an international character (e.g. pictograms, traffic signs), visual literacy also has cultural specificities. These differences affect the effectiveness of an individual's visual perception and sometimes the visual information may be misread and misunderstood.

We would like to point out that visual thinking is also important in visual literacy. This is a much more specific process, which, according to Aiello and Parry, takes place in three stages: perception (the images we see), imagination

(the images we imagine, connect, and/or internally transform in our minds independent of immediate perception), representation (the images that we mediate externally – images that we sketch, draw, paint or shape). Visual thinking supports the search for patterns, motifs and their interconnection, visual reasoning (analogies and visual induction), visual synthesis and visual language.

Visual language often follows the universal structure of representation, and, thus, 'anger' will be expressed by sharp, expressive, and vigorous lines, symbols. On the contrary, 'joy' is represented by delicate, round, and thin lines, symbols, colours. If the images are represented by a semiotically intelligible visual language, it is likely that not only members of the same culture will understand the language of the images, but members of other cultures will, too.

Internet memes as a genre of visual communication

As an academic concept, the meme first appeared in 1976, in the work of Richard Dawkins, where it was defined as "a unit of cultural transmission," in connection with Darwin's theory of cultural evolution. Memes were defined as "small units of culture that are spread from person to person by copying or imitation" (Shifman 9). In addition to the acceleration of communication, technology has also brought about the development of internet memes, which, in line with the original meaning, have created a new layer in the cultural evolution of mankind. For the purposes of this article, we will use the term *meme* from now on, while maintaining the meaning of this word in its narrow definition of *internet meme* – a phenomenon characteristic for Web 2.0.

Shifman states that memes diffuse from person to person, but shape and reflect general social mindsets. They are often based on pieces of pop culture which are intertextually linked to other parts of culture and the mass media. However, authors are not just professionals; memes blur boundaries because they can be created by anyone and can also be easily disseminated through various communication channels in socio-cultural environments. We agree with Denisova that internet memes have become (post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as photoshopped images or urban legends.

Memes did not originate with the internet, which is why, even nowadays, we can see the so-called old memes, which have a pre-internet character: often, it was only the local meme with limited manifestations (e. g. the "Kilroy was here" meme). An internet meme is based on a visual side that, for example, resembles a photography. It looks as if it captures an event, emotion, or a scene on the spot. It is about attracting attention, but also about conveying content. According to Shifman, "the internet meme is defined as a group of digital items

sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via internet by many users" (*Memes in Digital Culture* 41).

Six characteristics are important for memes: positivity (and humour), provocation of high-arousal emotions, participation, packaging, prestige, and positioning. Memes can focus on local topics when they use and illustrate topics that are currently relevant in society, but many memes have become "agents of globalization" when, thanks to the use of a universal language of signs and text in English as lingua franca, they have become understandable globally. They are often based on humorous content that becomes "a sphere of shared cultural knowledge that allows us to convey complex ideas within a short phrase or image" (Shifman 173).

In the process of decoding or understanding the way internet memes are used as a means of communication, two aspects have to be taken into consideration: the significance of Web 2.0 and its users, and the semiotics of internet memes.

The phenomenon of Web 2.0 has emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as technological progress and globalization made internet connection more generally available, and the need of communication allowed mass social media to spread. This shift in global communication and technology culture represented an important shift in understanding the potential of internet usage. The environment of what was later labelled as Web 1.0, typically designed and used to transfer information in one direction – from the information producer to the internet user/recipient – has changed to an online environment based on same-level content creators sharing information publicly among each other: the so-called Web 2.0.

> [It] is a collection of open-source, interactive and user-controlled online applications expanding the experiences, knowledge, and market power of the users as participants in business and social processes. Web 2.0 applications support the creation of informal users' networks facilitating the flow of ideas and knowledge by allowing the efficient generation, dissemination, sharing and editing/refining of informational content (Constantinides-Fountain 232).

This virtual space, in which every piece of media and data became shareable, adjustable, and spreadable, has put strong emphasis on visual communication, and, thus, allowed the development and spread of memetic content. This practice has become a part of what Jenkins described as participatory culture, in which cultural texts are perceived and interpreted actively: meanings of these texts are selected, extracted, or re-created on the basis of perceiver's personal preference. Under these terms, internet memes can be understood as "remixed and iterated messages which are rapidly spread by members of participatory digital culture" (Wiggins 51). Or, when the whole mode

of communication is taken into consideration, Milner suggests that "memetic media are a lingua franca for digitally mediated participation, a common tongue allowing geographically dispersed participants to connect and share" (*The World Made Meme* 5).

According to the above-mentioned statements, the process of creation and distribution of memes can be understood as a visual language – thus, as a specific semantic code conveying information. Milner described image macros as "a staple memetic image subgenre, mostly crafting their point by overlaying a quip on a single still image. […] Many image macros facilitate expression by reappropriating a collectively "predetermined" visual subject" (*The World Made Meme* 8).

Image macros can be understood as carriers of two separate messages – the graphic execution and the written text – which create a new, usually humorous meaning when combined. It is necessary to consider the specific way these two signifiers are used: the visual segment of a meme is usually the one that remains unchanged in its various reiterations. It is the "predetermined" element, the carrier of such a meaning that has been assigned to it, preserved, and is used in a specific communicative situation on the basis of the mutual consent of the members of a memetic digital culture.

The textual element of the meme, when attached, adjusts the message of the visual (and, thus, of the meme) to a specific situation or life experience. Memes do not usually aim to convey a factual information, but as noted by Shifman, they are more closely tied to certain emotions, social mindsets, urban (or modern) myths such as the sense of social victory or failure (e. g. the "Success kid" meme template), stereotypical human behaviour (the "Scumbag Steve"), collective everyday experience (the "Wheels on a Shopping Cart be like") and others. Hence, as memes reflect on general aspects of human existence, and are usually not culture-specific, they are able to transgress cultural differences and spread globally, creating a language of popular commentaries on shared life experience.

In case of stock character macros, the "predetermined" element is represented by a specific person, animal or an object which is attributed with a specific characteristic, personality trait or behavioural mode. For example, the "Scumbag Steve" macro would always carry a narrative about a person behaving unfairly and only minding their own profit. The "Socially Awkward Penguin" would be used to describe one's social behaviour which differs from standard norms or evokes the feeling of shame or cringe for not being able to react to social stimuli appropriately.

In connection to these "genres" of online communication, Milner defines two elementary modes connected with memetic communication: low-context readability and high-context readability.

Memes with low-context readability show two essential characteristics. First, they do not require creators and recipients with high "meme literacy", which means that meme users are allowed to read a given meme as a single cultural unit, in which the communicated information is more important than the manner in which it is coded. Second, memes with low-context readability tend to show a lower digital "life span" and remix potential.

Memes with high-context readability, on the other hand, rely heavily upon the reader's ability to decode memes – profound knowledge of meme "grammar and vocabulary" is required from creators, and expected from meme recipients. Furthermore, the meaning of this type of memes consists of several layers of meanings – including references to previous memes, origins of a meme template or expansions of intertextual relationship between the visual and the textual element.

As implied above, in opposition to the global functionality of meme communication, there also appears to be a local aspect to popular memetic communication, which we aim to examine further, in the analysis of the Slovak satirical meme project *Zomri*.

Slovak project ZOMRI as a phenomenon of glocal meme communication

The Slovak project ZOMRI can be considered a prototypical representative of participative digital culture. This satirical meme project was created in June 2016 and nowadays has its own Facebook and Instagram pages as well as a web domain. It is operated by several anonymous administrators who create original content for social media, and publish content sent to them by *Zomri* fans.

The majority of its content is made up of memes of various genres, predominantly image macros, with a heavy emphasis on satire, irony, mockery of prominent public figures, celebrities or public events, and trolling. "However, after a gradual shift to political and social affairs, the page has become prominent in public and political discourse, a development that itself is widely discussed in the public sphere" (Vicenova-Trottier 151).

As Vicenova and Trottier imply, *Zomri* has gradually turned from an exclusively entertainment-oriented project to one that transgresses the boundaries of popular culture and participates in civic issues; that includes several occasions when it supplemented the role of an informative news medium. An example was mentioned by Stuharik, a journalist focusing on local and world media, after *Zomri* was the first medium to provide information about football hooligans from rival teams fighting each other in the streets of Bratislava on 10 July 2019.

Struharik quotes one of the *Zomri* administrators who claimed that they basically turned the public into a relatively functional newsroom. Due to the emotional investment and active participation of internet users who sent photos

and videos to administrators, *Zomri* was able to create twenty posts with exclusive visual material documenting the incident, and was later referenced in news flashes published by other media.

As the aforementioned shows, the social and medial status of *Zomri*, currently with more than 340 000 followers on either of its social media accounts, has gradually changed from an entertainment page to one that, through its content (memes or otherwise) provides socio-political and cultural commentary on actual events.

In the following section, we analyse several internet memes created or shared by *Zomri* in the period from 2018-2022. Analysed memes were chosen to illustrate *Zomri*'s approach towards public figure and politician, Slovak president Zuzana Caputova, in various modes of memetic communication.

Memes including a political figure

It can be argued that the majority of political memes made by *Zomri* can be safely defined as political satire – they are designed in a humorous way and pass judgement on the presented issue – with focus on the personality and the weaknesses of individual politicians. It is, therefore, noteworthy, that the current Slovak president, Zuzana Caputova, has not been exposed to this approach yet. On the contrary, several memes created by *Zomri*, while still eliciting laughter, tend to depict her in a manner that fortifies her positive image in public.

In Fig. 1, Caputova's face is photoshopped into an image of Xena, the main character from the American television series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Tapert, 1995-2001), who lived in a fictional ancient-medieval world inhabited by beings from various classical mythologies.

This is an example of an image macro with a low-context readability. Caputova is here compared to a popular fictional character, the focus of the meme being more person-oriented than event- or occasion-oriented, and can be thus interpreted both in the narrow context of this specific cultural unit, and in the wider sense of pop cultural reading.

The narrower interpretation does not require higher meme literacy (here, knowledge of the source material the meme refers to), and is based on direct comparison of Caputova to an easily distinguishable strong female character of noble descent, which highlights Caputova's socio-political status of an empowered woman and a leader of the nation.

Figure 1. Slovak president Zuzana Caputova as Xena, the warrior princess[1]

The interpretation within a wider intertextual field, on the other hand, allows readers with higher meme literacy to decode socio-cultural meanings based on a pop cultural reading of the content of the TV show. This manner of reading then reveals: the similarity of facial features between Caputova and Lucy Lawless, the actress who portrayed Xena; the status of Xena, who travelled the world and fought stronger opponents many times alone, creating a metaphor for Caputova's rise to popularity during election debates, when she had to face more favoured male opponents; the reinforcement of Caputova's positive public image as a protector or, even, a saviour of the country, through textual elements of the meme stating: "bore a she-hero", which is an excerpt from the Czech translation of the show's narrated intro. The original English version goes as follows: "In a time of ancient gods, warlords, and king // A land in turmoil cried out for a hero // She was Xena, a mighty princess forged in the heat of battle // The power, the passion, the danger // Her courage will change the world."

While the first analysed iteration of the Slovak president focuses more on her as a public person and refers to her political development, attitudes, and beliefs, the second one (Fig. 2) references a specific event and Caputova's appearance.

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[1] Source: Zomri, 8 December 2020, shared from the meme page *Chskym chscim*, https://sk-sk.facebook.com/zomriofficial/posts/2842350782710833/, accessed 7 June 2023.

Figure 2. Caputova as Lara Croft, the main character of the *Tomb Raider*
video game series[2]

This meme requires a higher meme literacy. The more direct, situational interpretation may fail in this case, if the recipient of the meme is not familiar with Caputova's professional past and the *Tomb Raider* video game series (1996–2018), which are centred around the fictional character of young treasure hunter Lara Croft. Each of the adventure games focuses on Lara's search for a legendary treasure or artifact all around the world, but most notably in exotic environments such as the jungle, the tundra, where Lara, usually in utility attire with camouflage elements, is forced to overcome various environmental and logical obstacles to reach her goal.

The *Zomri* meme, as staged in this case, mixes two distinct visual elements: an edited photograph of Caputova in camouflage clothes, which was taken during her official meeting with commanders of Slovakia's armed forces on 27 August 2019, and the text written in the official font from the *Tomb Raider* franchise with the addition "and the Pezinok dump" below it.

[2] Source: Zomri, 28 August 2019.
https://www.facebook.com/zomriofficial/photos/a.1831445523801369/2421442801468302/?type=3,
accessed 7 June 2023.

In this case, a high-literate recipient is required to decode various layers of the meme: the socio-cultural context (Caputova's meeting), the pop cultural context (the video game franchise) and the knowledge of Caputova's professional past – that she had worked as a lawyer and her most famous case was her proving the illegality of a dump in the Slovak town of Pezinok, which lead to the accused entrepreneur being ordered to remove it. Hence, three layers of unrelated meanings are combined into one meme, which is both event-specific and refers to a wider context.

In case of both memes, the global-to-local approach can be detected. Their creators used pop cultural texts known globally to convey information and invoke emotion based on local life experience. So, although foreign recipients of these memes may not be aware of the exact meaning, the memes have the potential to hint at the general tone of the coded information (here: highlighting the image of a strong, independent, yet protective woman).

Conclusions

Even though visual communication has always been an inseparable part of human culture, the recent advent of modern technologies, of technological and cultural concepts have significantly changed our visual perception and the ability to interpret graphic materials. And, despite the rapid development of this digital culture, internet memes have further, and not less significantly, changed our ability to communicate through visual signs.

We can confirm that internet memes, as a genre of online communication, have allowed internet users to create a new visual language: one that is concise in its form, but multi-layered in meaning. Internet users, as participants in both the creation and maintenance of the Web 2.0 phenomenon, are able to access global databases including hundreds of meme templates, stock images, photoshopped images or short videos, pick one to their liking, and assign a specific meaning to it, connected to their life experience.

This visualised experience can be further spread, shared and reiterated in two ways – globally or locally – and in two modes: low-contextual and high-contextual. In each case, the memetic visual language behaves as a regular manner of communication. It has its 'grammar' (specific rules for creating and decoding each meme template and genre) that can be used in its unchanged form or adjusted to the needs of locally oriented expression; it can be adequately used to communicate skills of both the meme producer and the meme recipient (as a plainer, narrowly coded low-contextual meme, or as a multi-meaning, high-contextual meme with a wider field of intertextual connections).

In all cases, however, the aim of the memetic communication remains to convey specific information, mainly emotion-coded, in such a way that elicits laughter or amusement in general. And memes do this extremely well.

Disclosure statement

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Motifs of Disguise/ Imitation in European Literary Tradition (From Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century): Comic Effect vs. Tragic Pathos

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Abstract: The article defines and examines the connection between the disguise/imitation motifs and the categories of comic and tragic within European literary tradition (from Antiquity to the Eighteenth century). The authors of this research explain the factors that make these motifs popular means of creating comic effect or tragic pathos and highlight the trends in their functioning. Disguise/imitation motifs are shown to be mostly related to situations that violate the usual norms of conformity, hierarchical relations, behavioural canons, and for this precise reason, they have a powerful affective potential, i.e. become capable of evoking strong emotions. The disguise/imitation motifs are appropriate for comic effect due to their archaic genetic links with ritual-laughter culture and their conformity to the very nature of the comic, which is based on contradictions. Tragic pathos arises as a result of tragic consequences of one's identity loss within disguise/imitation situations, it prompts awareness of the injustice of society and the "cruelty" of fate, which are the cause of the forced rejection of one's self. The article indicates the prospects of researching disguise/imitation motifs in modern art, where they are often employed in adventurous narratives to increase the plot's dynamism, heighten dramatic tension, and intensify intrigue.
Keywords: *motifs of disguise/ imitation; the comic; humour; pathos; the tragic; tradition.*

Introduction

The dissonance between the visible and the real is a theme of art that attracts writers from different eras and countries. Motifs (typical situations) related to disguise/imitation, on which numerous plots of European literature are built, deserve special attention.

All these motifs are united by the fact that they have a powerful emotional potential: after all, everything that contradicts the established rules, and destroys the canons always makes a person excited, and worried, and stirs their feelings. Even temporary and purely formal refusal of one's identity, of a position determined and fixed by social norms with the help of disguise and imitation, is perceived as something unusual, out of the ordinary, something that incites strong feelings in the recipient. Therefore, it is not by accident that the corresponding motifs are attached to definite genres, turning into clichés, which gives reason to perceive them as traditional ones.

In this context, even if the aim of using disguise/imitation motifs can be different, the following can still be distinguished among their leading functions: to produce comic effect, i.e. to make a recipient laugh; to create tragic pathos, i.e. to make the addressee sympathize with someone else's suffering, to feel the tragedy of life.

This article aims to define and examine the connection between disguise/imitation motifs and the comic and tragic categories in the European literary tradition (from Antiquity to the Eighteenth century).

As there is an abundance of information on the topic, the authors of this research do not aim at its holistic disclosure, but rather strive to prove its significance and the prospects of research in the designated direction. Secondly, the idea here is to find out what exactly makes these motifs popular artistic means of creating a comic effect or tragic pathos. Finally, it is considered necessary to single out the most important trends in the functioning of these motifs, as well as to explain why, by the end of the eighteenth century they had turned into "formulas", which were significant for the formation of specific genres: in any case, it was the nineteenth century that marked the completion of the processes of formation of many genre canons and the beginning of their significant transformations with orientation towards destruction of traditions. The "rebellion" of the Romantics against established laws launched a powerful trend in European culture that was to determine its further development up to the twenty-first century. It refers to eliminating the "laws of the genre" and the "sacredness" of the aesthetic guidelines established by the "great predecessors", the approval of the cult of the Creative Personality, absolutely free from any rules and genre schemes.

The topicality of the present study is determined by different factors. First of all, by a necessity to consider the topic "humour and pathos" from the

standpoint of modern literary studies in general and to refer to the question of artistic means of their creation in various genres in particular. Secondly, by lack of a comprehensive study dedicated to the specifics of the creative representation of the "eternal" discrepancy between the true and the visible, its emotional potential, and cultural-historical determinants.

Theoretical and methodological basis of the study

The theoretical foundation of the present study mainly rests on scholarly works that highlight the question of the nature and genesis of the comic. The results of relevant academic research allow us to understand the reasons for the extreme popularity of the disguise/imitation motifs as an artistic means of creating the comic in European culture since ancient times until the present days. A lot of theorists of the comic, philosophers, and psychologists, directly or indirectly indicate the organic correspondence of dissonances between the visible and the real, of the deformation of the natural to the very essence of the comic, based on contradictions.

Aristotle in *Poetics* claims that: "[t]he Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask, for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain" (Aristotle 46). J. Beattie draws special attention to the fact that human laughter "seems to arise from the view of things incongruous united in the same assemblage" (Beattie 318): we find it funny when "two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them" (Beattie 320). A. Schopenhauer states: "The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity" (Schopenhauer 95). Henri Bergson directly points to the comical nature of the disguise motif in its broadest sense, as of any simulation in general: "A man in disguise is comic. A man we regard as disguised is also comic. So, by analogy, any disguise is seen to become comic, not only that of a man, but that of society also, and even the disguise of nature" (Bergson 15b).

In addition to the above mentioned, one should also take into account yet another possible explanation for the dissemination of disguise/imitation motifs as artistic means that create a humorous effect, i.e. M. Bakhtin's and O. Freidenberg's theories of archaic genetic links of such motifs with the comic element. For example, M. Bakhtin pays attention to the instances of disguise and mystifications in the context of ancient carnival, the culture of popular laughter (Bakhtin 527), while O. Freidenberg interprets situations involving substitutions

and pretence within the framework of ritual and parody discourse (Freidenberg 387-394).

Secondly, the authors of this article refer to the academic research devoted to the issues of the essence of tragic pathos, as well as to a comparative analysis of the tragic and the comic, as basic theoretical guidelines. At the same time, taking into account the huge number of studies, this article lays special focus on those that allow determining the reasons for the spread of disguise/imitation motifs as artistic means of constructing the tragic in creative art.

Thus, Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* recognizes the importance of pathos, and emotionality in speech, while in *Poetics,* analysing the nature of tragedy, he notes that the tragic is connected with peripeteia (transitions from happiness to unhappiness and vice versa) and anagnorisis (Aristotle 1453a). In this way, the art theorist implicitly points to the tragic potential of situations with essential-formal dissonances. It is noteworthy that theoreticians frequently pay attention to contradictions as a common source of the tragic and the comic that seem to be extreme opposites. For example, the philosopher S. Kierkegaard writes the following: "The tragic and the comic are the same, in so far as both are based on contradiction; but the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical, the painless contradiction…" (Kierkegaard, *The problem of the Crumbs* 63). J. Beattie admits that there are cases when contradictions and inconsistencies do not generate laughter, but produce other emotions, including sympathy and pity (Beattie 420). In turn, as F. Schiller points out in his work *On the Tragic Art* it is the human capacity for compassion that is the basis of the tragic in art.

Finally, the studies that present the peculiarities of disguise/imitation motifs functioning in various national literatures are worth mentioning among the theoretical milestones of this research. Their comprehensive analysis, significantly supplemented by the scholar's observations, is presented in Nikolova's monograph *Pseudomorphic Characters of Ukrainian and Russian Literatures of the Late Eighteenth – First Half of the Nineteenth Centuries (in the Context of European Tradition)* (Nikolova 12-9).

This research is grounded on the principles of comparative methodology, which allows one to make generalizations through the comparison of artistic works of different eras and national cultures; it also helps to determine important trends in the application of motifs of disguise/imitation by writers in order to create a comic effect or tragic pathos in their pieces of literature.

Motifs of disguise/ imitation as means of creating the comic

The motifs of disguise/ imitation as artistic means of creating the comic are pretty common in European literature, dating back to the time of antiquity: a certain set of such plot clichés is actively used by writers of many countries within

the genre traditions of comedy and comic epic (its large and small forms) to entertain and make a potential audience laugh. At the same time, it should be taken into account that "comedies of intrigue" and "comedies of characters" initially were based on different motifs.

The tradition of playing on the themes of disguise/imitation in "comedies of intrigue" is rooted in Antiquity. The corresponding tendency is notable in particular in the Fabula palliata (the Roman "comedy of the himation" of the third Century – first part of the second century BC), referring, in its turn, to the plots of the Attic comedy. However, the comedies of Plautus are, of course, the most significant ones from the point of view of the further formation of the European tradition. They present such comic situations with the episodes of disguise/ imitation as: "marital substitution" when an outsider pretends to be the husband of someone else's wife and, through this deception, has an intimate relationship with her (*Amphitryon*); "social substitution" when the master and his servant exchange clothes and places *(The Captives)*; "transgender travesty," when a man is mistaken for a bride (*Casina*).

Following Plautus, European Renaissance comedians also built the plots of their comedies on numerous instances of disguise and imitation. To exemplify this, one can mention the motifs of "social substitution" in L. Ariosto's *The Suppositi* based on *The Captives*; "marital substitution" in L. Dolce's *Il Marito* grounded in the *Amphitrion*; "transgender travesty" in N. Machiavelli's and P. Aretino's works *(Clitia* and *Il Marescalco* created with reference to *Casina*), N. Secchi's comedy *Gl'Inganni*; in Cardinal Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena's *La Calandria* the author presents a double travesty as a boy puts on a woman's dress for the sake of love affairs, and a girl pretends to be a young man, etc. Many scholars pay attention to the great significance of the motifs of disguise/ imitation in W. Shakespeare's comedies, the comprehensive analysis of which are presented in O. Nikolova's monograph (Nikolova 65-66). The comic effect in the works by the English playwright was very often created by transgender travesty *(The Merry Wives of Windsor, The Merchant of Venice, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Twelfth Night, or What You Will, As You Like It)*. The mentioned motifs of disguise/ imitation are also typical of Italian Commedia dell'arte: the motif of "social substitution" is present in M. Troyano's script of *Conversations*, "transgender travesty" is depicted in such as comedies as *A Man, Alexandrian Carpets, Three Pregnant Women*.

French literature in general and J.-B. Molière, in particular, played an important role in forming the tradition of the disguise/ imitation motifs in "comedies of manners". The tendency to use the motifs of "a sinner pretending to be a saint" and "a fool acting as a wise head" as artistic means of creating a comic atmosphere in such works is quite notable. As for the first motif, it spread largely due to the popularity of Molière's *Tartuffe* (probably written with reference to *The Hypocrite* by P. Aretino). The second motif was actualized also

owing to the talent of J.-B. Molière (*The Affected Young Ladies, The Learned Ladies, The Bourgeois Gentleman, The Doctor in Spite of Himself*). Though it can also be genetically linked to the heritage of ancient mime scenes, the Atellan Farce (masks of the "haughty fool" Buccus and the charlatan scientist Dossennus), medieval farces and Italian commedia dell'arte that were inherited by this famous French playwright of the seventeenth century.

The tradition of using disguise/ imitation motifs developed in European drama of the eighteenth century with the reference to Renaissance and J.-B. Molière's comedies. This tradition combines the achievements of "comedy of intrigue" and "comedy of characters". Thus, there are "social substitutions" in pieces by A.-R. Lesage *(Crispin, his Master's Rival)*, P. de Marivaux *(The Game of Love and Chance, The Unexpected Joy)*, P.-A. de Beaumarchais *(The Barber of Seville or the Useless Precaution)*; "transgender travesty" in pieces by J.-F. Regnard *(The Follies of Love)*, P. C. de Ch. de Marivaux (*The Triumph of Love*), P.-A. de Beaumarchais *(The Mad Day* or *The Marriage of Figaro);* "a sinner pretending to be a saint" in J.-F. Regnard's *The Residuary Legatee;* "a fool feigning a wise man" in W. Congreve's *The Double Dealer*, R.B. Sheridan's *The Rivals.*

The motif of "an ordinary person who pretends to have superpowers" (an alchemist, an astrologer, a magician, etc.) also deserves special attention. Comic situations based on the imitation of the possession of superhuman skills (for example, the ability to predict the future, read the signs of the planets, perform miracles, etc.) were very popular in the Italian comedies of the Renaissance (G. Bruno "*The Torchbearer", The Necromancer* by L. Ariosto), and they were in special demand in the French comic opera of the eighteenth century, e.g. *The Village Soothsayer* by J.-J. Rousseau and *The Soldier Magician* by L. Anseaume, *The Sorcerer* by F.-A. Philidor, *The Loves of Bastien and Bastienne* by Ch.-S. Favart, *Bastien and Bastienne* by W. A. Mozart. Pretending to be sorcerers, the cunning tricksters in these pieces of writing could easily get whatever they wanted.

As for the drama, the use of all the motifs highlighted in this article allows the playwrights to create comic situations in which both the swindlers and their victims become the objects of ridicule. In most cases, the fraudsters, who are traditionally condemned, are presented in a satirical light, while the gullible simpletons who evoke the sympathy of the recipient are depicted humorously.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the process of traditionalization of these motifs in the European comic tradition had been completed: the above-mentioned plot situations were finally approved as effective means of creating a humorous effect. However, motifs of imitation and disguise continue to function in modern comedies as well. The cinematography of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries inherits and modernizes all aforementioned typical situations, which have not lost their relevance as comic means.

The motifs of disguise and imitation as means of creating comic effect are also used in epic works, in large as well as in small genre forms of adventurous

and anecdotal content. This tradition dates back to Antiquity, e.g. the story of a robber disguised as a woman in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or the satirical mockery of the ignorant Trimalchio, who pretended to be an educated person in Petronius' *Satyricon*. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, these motifs became an integral feature of small comic genres of urban democratic literature such as fabliaux, Schwanks, and novelistics. So, good instances are provided by the French fabliaux about the trickster Trubert, who wears women's clothes for the sake of love adventures, about lustful churchmen who pretend to be saints (*Richiot, The Tale of the Nun, The Priest and Alison, Brother Denise*); German Schwanks by M. Montanus (where a man pretends to be a woman for the sake of love affairs) and numerous other Italian and French novellas. In *The Decameron*, Boccaccio plays on such motifs as "a sinner pretending to be a saint," "marital substitution," "transgender travesty." It is also necessary to mention the situation when

> a man, pretending to be a girl, enters a nunnery to have fun with nuns ("*Novel Pastimes and Merry Tales*" by B. des Périers) or under the guise of a monk arrives at a hermitage where he spends time with three recluses (101st novella of the collection *Novelle* by F. Sacchetti), hypocrisy helps the abbot of Toulouse to make a clerical career (149th novella by Sacchetti) and assists the bishop of Lombardy in relationship with an abbess (45th novella of *The Novels* by M. Bandello), etc. Episodes with the spouse swaps are also repeatedly reproduced: 35th novella by M. Bandello, 8th and 48th novellas in *Heptaméron* by Marguerite de Navarre, etc.; motifs of cross-gender travesty are used to create a comic effect ("a boy pretends to be a girl for love pleasures" in 28th novella by F. Sacchetti, 11th novel from *Il Novellino* by G. Masuccio) (Nikolova 213).

As for the big epic genres, the motifs of disguise and imitation are most often used within the framework of the Spanish picaresque novels and texts related to its traditions to create a comic effect. The formation of this genre naturally involves the depiction of various forms of roguery, which are impossible without travesty and play: cunning fraudsters, who are the main characters of such works, constantly resort to various hoaxes, which should amuse and entertain readers.

Poor people pretend to be rich (*History of the Life of the Swindler, called Don Pablos, Model for Hobos and Mirror of Misers* by Francisco de Quevedo, *The Marten of Seville, and Hook in the Bags* by A. de Castillo Solórzano, *Moll Flanders* by D. Defoe, *The Adventures of Gil Blas of Santillane* by A.-R. Lesage, *The Comical History of Francion* by Ch. Sorel), and rich men pass themselves off as poor kinsmen (*The Adventures of Gil Blas of Santillane* by A.-R. Lesage, *The Comical History of Francion* by Ch. Sorel), sinners imitate saints, and fools pretend to be intelligent people (Crispin from *The Marten of Seville, and Hook in the Bags* by A. de Castillo Solórzano, pseudo-doctors Gil and Sangrado from

The Adventures of Gil Blas of Santillane by A.-R. Lesage, Madame de Ferval from *The Fortunate Peasant* by P. de Marivaux). (Nikolova 214).

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the formation of this tradition had been completed: certain typical situations with disguise/ imitation continued to function within novels and novellas, but no longer as comic, but rather as adventurous ones, contributing to the creation of intrigue, enhancing the dynamism of the plot, which is due to the trends of transformation of these genres. It is in this quality that they retain their relevance for modern adventure narratives.

Motifs of disguise and imitation as means of creating tragic pathos

In contrast to the ones discussed above, situational clichés using disguise and imitation contribute to the creation of the opposite effect in European literature, they produce tragic pathos.

At the same time, these motifs often prompt philosophical reflections on injustice in the world and the complexity of moral choices. The source of potential tragic pathos can be the following: the fact that characters lose their own identity, which is associated to moral conscience, together with a hardly deserved lowering of status (humiliation of a worthy person who "deserves better"); a situation in which characters find themselves due to pretence, which is not the result of their personal flaws (like in the comic tradition), but of the "cruelty of fate".

It is noteworthy that motifs of disguise/ imitation with a tragic colouring, unlike comic ones, are not characteristic of the genre canon of tragedy itself. It can be explained by the traditions of the ancient "tragedy of fate", that presents the dissonances of the visible and the real as a result of sheer coincidences, and not of the character's deeds. In addition, disguise and imitation have long been perceived as typical motifs for the opposite vector of development of European drama, i.e. comic and entertaining, blending of these traditions was not considered to be appropriate until the eighteenth century.

The motifs of disguise/ imitation as a means of creating tragic pathos became widespread in European Renaissance literature and remained popular in Baroque art: they were extensively used in Italian and Spanish dramas, novellas, and literary fairy tales. At the same time, attention is drawn to the fact that tragic pathos is mainly created by those situations that depict disguises/imitations involving girls or women. On the pages of Renaissance texts, there appear active heroines who strive to oppose unfavourable circumstances, they are ready to meet all the ordeals and willing to take on personal responsibility for their actions.

In this regard, the previously considered comic motif of "transgender travesty" is quite vivid, especially when "a woman or a girl pretends to be a man." In the literary tradition, the depiction of male travesty, aimed at the visual change

of sex, creates purely comic effect. At the same time, female travesty is often presented as heroic and/or tragic. This phenomenon can be explained as follows:

> A man resorts to such travesty, led mainly by selfish desires: by the want of love adventures (deception allows unhindered communication with a woman, avoiding punishment for that), by the need to escape from prison (self-rescue). The girl, on the contrary, pursues a noble goal which is to save or return her beloved, to punish a treacherous lover or a slanderer, to establish justice. (Nikolova 65)

The writers show that women and girls who are forced to resort to visual gender swap often undergo unjust suffering. They are mostly oppressed and abused by men: slandered, seduced, abandoned. Cross-dressing and imitating the male gender is associated with calamity and becomes a serious test in a society where a woman cannot move safely and even exist without male supervision.

For example, in Boccaccio's *The Decameron* a slandered wife saves her life by wearing men's clothing, and then endures six years of misfortunes. In the nineth tall tale from *Patrañuelo,* by J. de Timoneda one can read the story of an unfortunate girl forced to disguise herself as a man. *The Novel of How the Revelation Source was Discovered* by A. de Eslava depicts a girl, dressed as a man, looking for her lover and overcoming all the obstacles. Ladies in men's attire left without their loved ones are portrayed in *The Fortunes of Diana* by Lope de Vega, *Life is a Dream* by Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *Don Gil of the Green Breeches* by T. de Molina, etc. In search of unfaithful lovers, girls in male outfits are forced to fight for survival in the cruel world all by themselves; their fate is tragic and reflects the position of women in the patriarchal Europe of those times. In the course of gradual positive shifts in the gender hierarchy of European society that became noticeable in the late eighteenth century, this motif, for obvious reasons, lost its relevance as an artistic means of creating tragic pathos.

Another means of creating tragic pathos is the motif of *a noble girl pretending to be a commoner*, which functions in literary fairy tales and novellas related to the fairy tale tradition: *Novella di Bianca di Tolosa* by L. Alamanni, *Daughter of the King of Britain* by F. M. Molza, *"Donkeyskin"* by Ch. Perrault, etc. The tragedy of the situation in this case is triggered primarily by the loss of the typical high status and the need to endure all the trials that befall a poor person. It is notable that in these stories, misfortune is also caused by powerful selfish men who seek to use girls utterly for the satisfaction of their desires: in the former literary piece, it is the groom, in the latter two, it is the father of the heroine. L. Alamanni refers to the well-known fairy-tale plot about a haughty beauty who becomes a victim of the revenge of her fiancé offended by her refusal to marry him. F. M. Molza and S. Perrault make use of an international fairy-tale plot about a king's daughter who is forced to flee from her father because of his desire to marry her and needs to disguise as a poor woman to avoid the sin of incest. It can be assumed that the popularization of this fairy-tale motif is due to

the growing importance of the fairy-tale tradition in European fiction, primarily in the process of the evolution of the novel. The further transformation of the genre with the strengthening of philosophical and social issues and the reduction of the role of the adventure and fantasy elements explains the disappearance of this motif from the artistic arsenal of the novel's tragic means.

Conclusions

Thus, summing up, it is necessary to emphasize that the motifs of disguise/ imitation are related to the depiction of situations that violate the usual norms of conformity, hierarchical relations, behavioural canons, this being the precise reason why they have the powerful affective potential of evoking strong emotions in the recipients. So, it is natural that they are actively used as comic or tragic artistic means. In European literature, such motifs are associated with certain genre traditions, the formation of which stretched over a long period, from Antiquity to the eighteenth century. The appropriateness of disguise/ imitation motifs for comic effect is justified by their archaic genetic links to ritual-laughter culture and their conformity to the very nature of the comic, which is based on contradictions. Tragic pathos arises due to the demonstration of the tragic consequences of losing one's identity in the process of disguise/ imitation, which at the same time leads to the awareness of the injustice of society and the "cruelty" of fate, causing the forced rejection of one's self. Comic situational clichés often occur in comedies, small epic genres of the anecdotal type, and novels, whereas tragic patterns are typical of Baroque dramas and Renaissance novellas of adventure and fantasy content. Such motifs as "marital substitution" "social substitution," "transgender travesty" (male or female), "a sinner pretending to be a saint", "a fool imitating a wise person," "an ordinary person faking superpowers" are traditionally used as means of humour and satire.

Tragic pathos is usually associated with the motifs of "transgender travesty" (when a girl or a woman wears male clothing) and "a noble girl pretends to be a commoner". In the art of the twentieth and twenty-first century, disguise/ imitation motifs are often employed in adventurous narratives to increase the dynamics of the plot and dramatic tension, and sharpen the intrigue. This issue can become a topic of a separate study and this article lays the basis for it.

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Humour and Knowledge in Katherine Mansfield's "The Daughters of the Late Colonel"

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Abstract: The present study intends to look at the ways in which humour enacts modes of knowledge and self-expression in Katherine Mansfield's short story "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" (1921). The story revolves around two spinsterly sisters who have spent most of their lives tending to their tyrannical father and now find themselves at a loss when they are finally free of him. The narrative is both sympathetic and merciless towards the sisters' fumbling attempts at independence, but the women are often in on the joke; humour is both a "black dressing-gown" which envelops the sisters and renders them objects of ridicule, but it is also a way out, offering a subversive counterpoint to the voice of the Father, as the sisters imagine the patriarch in very comical and undignified positions, while perceiving themselves as outsiders, "creeping off…like black cats". Though the short story has often been read in terms of hopelessness and despair by Rhoda B. Nathan and Gerri Kimber, this paper wishes to show how humour modulates and moderates this hopelessness, allowing for the two single women to assert their personality within the stifling society of their time. The ridiculous, in this case, does not need to be a death sentence, but rather a form of knowledge and resistance: the spinsters are aware of the absurdity of their condition and the futility of their place in the modern world and choose comedy over tragedy.
Keywords: *humour; modernism; Katherine Mansfield; feminism; existentialism; spinsterhood.*

One hundred years after her death (1923), Katherine Mansfield still elicits conflicting responses from critics at large. Depending on whom you ask, she is either at the centre or at the margins of early twentieth-century British modernism. To Rhoda Nathan, Mansfield's personal life and "bohemian" style made her a modern woman, but not a modernist in fiction (138). Her stories lacked what she calls "modernist angst" because they did not "mistrust" the politics and culture of her society (138-9), nor did they concern themselves with "the anxiety, guilt, and anomie associated with modernism" (139). S. J. Kaplan, on the other hand, claims that Mansfield was one of the first modernist writers to innovate the short story with an emphasis on stream of consciousness techniques and 'the psychological 'moment'" (3). Likewise, a critic like Peter Childs posits that she is "the most important modernist author who only wrote short stories" (95), while Kaplan again argues that she has been, to some extent, erased from the history of the movement, due in part to the way her image was altered in posterity by her editor husband, John Middleton Murray (3).

In some ways, Mansfield finds herself at both extremes: valued and forgotten, an insider and outsider, a joiner and a bohemian, a young woman who was born in New Zealand, at the periphery of empire, but who managed to infiltrate elite cliques like the Bloomsbury group in London, then the centre of empire. Despite her respectable, wealthy family and good upbringing, Katherine felt confined and misunderstood by her native New Zealand (Nathan 5). Meanwhile, in England, her colourful and unconventional life and sexual past made contemporaries like Virginia Woolf feel uncomfortable in her presence (Midorikawa, Sweeney 193). Even the fact that she mainly wrote only short stories might have garnished her as a "literary lightweight" who hadn't yet reached the destination of novelist (Nathan 136). In the realm of short prose, she was either accused of being too sentimental and confessional, or of being inauthentic and artificial. Malcolm Cowley, writing for the *TLS*, considered that some of her short stories were limited in range and theme:

> One situation recurs constantly in her work. There is a woman: neurotic, arty, hateful, and a good, stupid man whom she constantly torments . . . Another situation, which she repeats rather less frequently, is that of the destruction of a woman's individuality by some stronger member of her family . . . She has three backgrounds only: continental hotels, New Zealand upper-class society, and a certain artistic set in London. (qtd. in Meyers 227)

David Daiches described her short stories as organised in such a way as to bring "the deepest truth out of the idea" (qtd. in Kimber 50), while Frank O'Connor believed that her stories did not have authenticity and heart: "Where heart should be we usually find sentimentality, the quality that seems to go with

a brassy exterior, and nowhere more than with that of an "emancipated" woman" (92).

Such varied and conflicting views on her personality and work might, in fact, make her more of a modernist than less, given that Modernism was a movement which suffered from ambiguities and difficulties of definition with many "implicit exclusions" and question marks regarding its parameters (Childs 12). One key aspect in modernist fiction is the focus on the internal world, a "self-conscious reflexiveness" (Childs 18) that centres the subjectivity of the individual, struggling with a modern reality which is no longer stable (18). As opposed to the Victorian worldview, the modernist outlook is far more sceptical and questioning of society and the individual's place in it (18). This pervasive scepticism, Nathan argues, is absent from Mansfield's stories, even though other technical aspects of modernist writing may feature in her prose (138). But is this true? And how should a writer express the concerns and anxieties of their age?

Mansfield's approach might have struck some critics mentioned above as sentimental, artificial or "brassy" because Mansfield is often poking fun at her characters, using certain mawkish elements for a particular effect. If we return to Malcolm Cowley's description of her work, we might see it in a different light: "One situation recurs constantly in her work. There is a woman: neurotic, arty, hateful, and a good, stupid man whom she constantly torments" (qtd. in Meyers 227). Can we not see humour in this particular situation? In fact, couldn't this scenario be devised with a humorous purpose, among others, in mind? Gerri Kimber argues that this aspect of Mansfield's work has often been neglected or "glossed over", along with her wit and "incisive phrasing" that capture duplicitous states of consciousness (63). Figures like Leonard Woolf and Bertrand Russell found her to be one of the funniest persons of their acquaintance (Kimber 63, 67) and Katherine Anne Porter was an early critic who noted the humour in her work: "She possessed, for it is in her work, a real gaiety and a natural sense of comedy; there were many sides to her that made her able to perceive and convey in her stories a sense of human beings living on many planes at once, with all the elements justly ordered and in right proportion. This is a great gift" (qtd. in Kimber 63).

Indeed, Mansfield often revelled in parody and ridicule, portraying the foibles of the intellectual circles she frequented, like in the story "Bliss" (1918), where a character modelled after Aldous Huxley rhapsodizes about the beauty of a hilariously bad line of poetry: "Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup?" (Mansfield 128). She was also adept at exploring class tensions through humour, such as in this scene from "The Garden Party" (1922), where one of the workers advises the young protagonist on the placement of a marquee:

'I don't fancy it,' said he. 'Not conspicuous enough. You see, with a thing like a marquee' - and he turned to Laura in his easy way - 'you want to put it somewhere where it'll give you a bang slap in the eye, if you follow me.'
Laura's upbringing made her wonder for a moment whether it was quite respectful of a workman to talk to her of bangs slap in the eye. But she did quite follow him. (Mansfield 208)

Mansfield's humour also delved into gender tensions, where the power imbalance between men and women was depicted in a slightly absurd, tongue-in-cheek fashion, with a view to showing both the danger and the absurdity of the disparity. Take, for instance, "The Little Governess" (1915), a story about a young, naive woman, travelling alone, who is taken advantage of by an older man. After the older man forces kisses on her, the young woman sits crying on the tram, holding her mouth, a gesture which is interpreted by a fellow passenger in an absurdly humorous fashion: "'She has been to the dentist,' shrilled a fat old woman, too stupid to be uncharitable" (Mansfield 149). The comical moment both relieves the tension and enhances the grotesqueness of the situation. At the beginning of the story, an older woman advises the young girl not to trust strangers: "...it's safer to suspect people of evil intentions rather than good ones… It sounds rather hard, but we've got to be women of the world, haven't we?" (Mansfield 130). The irony of that last question is both bitter and shrewd. Mansfield, whose life was coloured by various encounters with men, understood the paradoxes of being a "woman of the world" at the turn of the century.

As a young woman, she enjoyed chipping away at men's authority, creating "sly parodies of some of the popular figures of the day, including C.K. Chesterton, H. G. Wells, and Arnold Bennett", using her "accurate ear and wicked wit" (Nathan 132). Interestingly, Wells and Bennett would also be mildly caricatured in Woolf's famous critical essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1922), since these Edwardian men were the gatekeepers of English letters at the time. Poking fun at their style and attitude is inherently modernist, not simply because Woolf and Mansfield were taking a different aesthetic approach to theirs, but because they were women, mocking the establishment.

Humour, therefore, and particularly black humour, was Mansfield's strategy for portraying the anxieties and quandaries of her age, black humour being a trademark of modernism itself (Childs 6). "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" (1921) is considered to be one of Mansfield's sharpest and funniest stories (Nathan 96), though there are many ways to look at the humour of the story and what or who is being made fun of. One way to read the story of the two middle-aged spinsters who have been dominated all their life by a tyrannical father, and now find themselves without purpose after his death is to perceive them as objects of ridicule, as Nathan does: "The two sisters are a Laurel and

Hardy duo – the one plump and ineffectual, the other desiccated and prim - both ludicrous in their regressed infantilism vis-a-vis their domineering parent" (96). Nathan underlines the fact that these two adult women act like children, even after their father's death, because of the "psychological wound of their father's harshness" (96), their lives being "mired in petty detail" (96) which they cannot seem to escape. Nathan acknowledges that there are many targets of humour in the story, such as the dead patriarch and the various household domestics and acquaintances, and though she draws a distinction between them and the sisters, claiming that what saves Josephine and Constantia from being grotesque caricatures is the "genuine pathos of their situation" (96), she still points out that "there is nothing heroic or tragic about the deceased or those he left behind" (95). We may pity the two women, but they are ultimately "ludicrous".

A very different reading offered by Gerri Kimber posits that, in fact, the two sisters are tragic, only that their tragedy is quite "ordinary", given the fact that it was common for unmarried women to suffer under patriarchal control (49). Kimber also notes the pathos of the sister's circumstances: "yet rather than ridiculing the pathos of the spinster sisters' lives, the comedy intensifies it - they become real for us, we feel for them, we look kindly upon them" (66). While I consider there is room for both interpretations, I would like to offer a slightly different reading that hinges less on ridicule and tragedy, and more on self-knowledge and existential paradox in the modern world that Josephine and Constantia inhabit.

In his seminal essay "Laughter" (1900), Henri Bergson posits that the human being is both "an animal which laughs" and "an animal which is laughed at" (62) and while there has been plenty of discussion on how the sisters are being laughed at, there has not been enough about their own laughter and how they engage with their situation through humour. The opening scene of the story finds the sisters lying in bed, tired but restless after a week of funeral preparations, contemplating, of all things, their father's top-hat and the possibility of giving it to a porter. Then, Josephine imagines a wonderfully absurd scenario:

> 'But,' cried Josephine, flouncing on her pillow and staring across the dark at Constantia, 'father's head!' And suddenly, for one awful moment, she nearly giggled. Not, of course, that she felt in the least like giggling. It must have been habit. Years ago, when they had stayed awake at night talking, their beds had simply heaved. And now the porter's head, disappearing, popped out, like a candle, under father's hat... The giggle mounted, mounted; she clenched her hands; she fought it down; she frowned fiercely at the dark and said "Remember" terribly sternly. (Mansfield 229-30)

The memory of the formidable patriarch is very much altered and diminished by the image of the detachable head, which is almost cartoonish in its irreverence. The 'head' of the family has literally and metaphorically 'lost his head', and with it, the dignity of his position. Now, a porter might as well take

his place. More than that, this passage tells us about the sisters' penchant for laughter, a "habit" which started when they were young, when their beds "heaved" with mirth. Josephine's immediate attempt to censor herself ("Remember") shows that the influence of the father is still felt, though slowly ebbing away, and that she has done this before: she is used to repressing disloyal feelings towards the patriarch.

In the next scene, Constantia proposes that they dye their dressing gowns black, in order to be more sincere in their mourning: "I was thinking - it doesn't seem quite sincere, in a way, to wear black out of doors and when we're fully dressed, and then when we're at home -" (Mansfield 230). To which Josephine replies, "But nobody sees us" (230). While we laugh at Constantia's far-fetched idea, the issue of sincerity is relevant and hints at the sisters' struggle to genuinely mourn their father. Josephine's rejoinder can be read as a comment on their invisibility as unmarried women, but also as a reminder that in their home, they do not have to keep up certain appearances. "Nobody sees us" can have an interestingly subversive echo, too, when we consider the image that Josephine conjures of the two of them, dyed in black: "Black! Two black dressing-gowns and two pairs of black woolly slippers, creeping off to the bathroom like black cats" (230). The likeness to black cats "creeping off" suggests something illicit and improper about the sisters and their behaviour. As Bergson points out, "laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity with other laughers, real or imaginary" (64); thus, perhaps what is vaguely threatening about the sisters is their ability to form a bond in laughter at the expense of authority figures. This is all the more disturbing because the sisters are older women who are expected to have moved past the "giggling" stage of girlhood. They are supposed to have serious minds and sober behaviours. But if the sisters do not exhibit this behaviour, does this reflect poorly on them? Is their inability to grow up a fault they must remedy?

The mention of cats is interestingly set off by the unexpected reference to mice, a few moments later:

> There came a little rustle, a scurry, a hop.
> 'A mouse,' said Constantia.
> 'It can't be a mouse because there aren't any crumbs,' said Josephine.
> 'But it doesn't know there aren't,' said Constantia. (Mansfield 231)

Once again, there is a humorous element in this exchange, but also an unsettling philosophical quandary. Constantia's reply seems absurd, but the mouse's lack of knowledge makes his quest for food seem absurd as well. We are invited to wonder about the many people who are in the mouse's position, including the sisters themselves. As spinsters who are no longer in the charge of a male relative, they may have gained some freedom, but their prospects are dim. Josephine and Constantia are aware of this dimness. The sisters understand that,

due to various circumstances, there are no "crumbs" left for them. Josephine ponders on the significance of their mother's early passing:

> Would everything have been different if mother hadn't died? She didn't see why . . . If mother had lived, might they have married? But there had been nobody for them to marry. There had been father's Anglo-Indian friends before he quarrelled with them. But after that she and Constantia never met a single man except clergymen. How did one meet men? Or even if they'd met them, how could they have got to know men well enough to be more than strangers? (Mansfield 258)

This passage suggests that, whatever the sisters might have done, there is a good chance they would have ended up in the same place. Their mother, who successfully performed the tasks expected of her gender died due to their father's position in the colonies and is now only a faint memory in a photograph: "As soon as a person was dead their photograph died too. But, of course, this one of mother was very old. It was thirty-five years old. Josephine remembered standing on a chair and pointing out that feather boa to Constantia and telling her that it was a snake that had killed their mother in Ceylon" (Mansfield 258). If we return to the mouse episode, we can see it as a larger metaphor for the futility of women's existence under a system that obscures their prospects and their means of self-actualization, no matter what they do. But the sisters, unlike other women in their position, are aware that there are no "crumbs". Thus, they align more with the image of the outcast black cats than the ignorant mouse, which is why treating them only with pity falls into the trap of underestimating them.

Similarly, in their relationship with their father, the sisters are apt to be described merely as victims and inheritors of "a legacy of dread and impotence in his bereavement" (Nathan 95). But many of the humorous scenes in the story derive from the sisters grieving for and remembering their father in unorthodox ways. We have already tackled the scene where Josephine imagines her father's detached head in a comical fashion, but there are other moments which make us question the sisters' legacy of dread. When both women recall the patriarch on his deathbed, they cannot help but focus on an amusing and rather undignified detail:

> He lay there, purple, a dark, angry purple in the face, and never even looked at them when they came in. Then, as they were standing there, wondering what to do, he had suddenly opened one eye. Oh, what a difference it would have made, what a difference to their memory of him, how much easier to tell people about it, if he had only opened both! But no–one eye only. It glared at them a moment and then . . . went out. (Mansfield 235-6)

The colonel's "dark" and "purple" face does little to make the moment more sober, but it is the father's wandering eye that elicits a chuckle. The sisters' focus on the ridiculousness of the situation diminishes the colonel's glare. It is

interesting to note that this is the sisters' joint stream of consciousness, their shared impressions pointing to complicity again. Their thoughts are irrepressibly irreverent when recalling their father's death, which hints at an emotional detachment. Though we are told Josephine broke down crying when she wrote the condolence letters, we are also given details that undercut the emotion of the scene: "Strange! She couldn't have put it on – but twenty-three times" (Mansfield 231), painting a mawkish picture of the sister weeping repeatedly over twenty-three letters. This is further undercut by Constantia asking "Have you got enough stamps?" (231), making it difficult for the reader to take the moment too seriously. Indeed, laughter and emotion are not good companions, as Bergson reminds us: "the absence of feeling . . . usually accompanies laughter . . . for laughter has no greater foe than emotion" (63). Fear is also abated by laughter, and though the sisters are afraid to look into their father's study and search through his things, knowing he "would never forgive them" (239), they do, in fact, go in "without knocking even" (240) and decide to symbolically lock his memory in a wardrobe:

> And then [Constantia] did one of those amazingly bold things that she'd done about twice before in their lives: she marched over to the wardrobe, turned the key, and took it out of the lock. Took it out of the lock and held it up to Josephine, showing Josephine by her extraordinary smile that she knew what she'd done–she'd risked deliberately father being in there among his overcoats. (Mansfield 243)

By deciding not to look through his wardrobe but lock it instead, the sisters choose to protect themselves and put away their father's influence, if not for good, at least for the time being. It is a humorous moment, too, because Josephine had imagined their father was "in the top drawer with his handkerchiefs and neckties" and would be "ready to spring" on them (Mansfield 242) if they opened the door. Much like in the case of his floating head, the father's body is rendered cartoonish again and his threat cannot be taken seriously.

Thus, the sisters' feelings towards their deceased father are shown to be complicated and often irreverent. Their continued existence in the wake of his death is almost a form of defiance in itself. Kimber's assessment that "there are in fact three deaths in this story, since with the death of their father, the spinsters' lives are now apparently pointless" (49) plays into the erroneous idea that the sisters could only find meaning in relationships with men. As we saw earlier, the spinsters questioned the possibility of meeting men under current societal restrictions and the text invites us to consider the fate of their mother who was supposed to find meaning in marriage to their father, only to die a meaningless death. Moreover, the sisters recall a time in their youth when a man had tried to court them, and "had put a note on the jug of water outside their bedroom door! But by the time Connie had found it the steam had made the writing too faint to

read; they couldn't even make out to which of them it was addressed. And he had left next day. And that was all" (Mansfield 258-59). This bittersweet, comical scene emphasises the absurd and arbitrary nature of the courting market, where communication between the sexes is prone to subterfuge and misunderstandings and where women are interchangeable objects (the "jug of water" echoing Josephine/Jug's name) who end up as effigies in photographs, in the case of their mother.

Returning to Kimber's conclusion, we are pressed to ask, are the sisters' lives pointless outside the sphere of men? Have they reached a dead end? In fact, Constantia sees her new life as an uncertain opening, as coming out of a "tunnel":

> There had been this other life, running out, bringing things home in bags, getting things on approval, discussing them with Jug, and taking them back to get more things on approval, and arranging father's trays and trying not to annoy father. But it all seemed to have happened in a kind of tunnel. It wasn't real. It was only when she came out of the tunnel into the moonlight or by the sea or into a thunderstorm that she really felt herself. What did it mean? What was it she was always wanting? What did it all lead to? Now? Now? (Mansfield 259)

The "other life" she and her sister lived while waiting on their father's wishes seems unreal and closed off, but "now", in this new life, the women may have the chance to be themselves. Some critics have interpreted Constantia's questions as a lack of purpose ("What did it all lead to? Now? Now?"), because the spinsters do not know what they will be or do in the future. But this, we would argue, is part of the text's modernist sensibility, insisting on the question rather than on the answer. A lack of purpose is to be celebrated, instead of criticised. The sisters are free to wonder about themselves without needing to come up with a definitive resolution. The story pokes fun at the patriarchal narrative that gives women finality. Spinsterhood is only a dead-end according to the prescribed, external narrative, but a modernist text acknowledges that the internal world of individuals is an endless pool of conflict and speculation, far more interesting, at times, than external reality. As Virginia Woolf instructs:

> Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel . . . life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (9)

With this in mind, Kimber's estimation that "Constantia is unable to understand her feelings, unable to make that leap into self-discovery" (70) does not paint an adequate picture of the sisters' complex internal world. We have seen that the sisters are aware of the limitations of the world they inhabit and that they

are drawn to self-exploration, but for them, this is only the beginning of the journey, not the end. The final scene of the story is the reason why many critics believe the sisters are ultimately doomed by the narrative, but we would argue that this ending may be more ambiguous than previously thought:

> She wanted to say something to Josephine, something frightfully important, about–about the future and what...
> "Don't you think perhaps–" she began.
> But Josephine interrupted her. "I was wondering if now–" she murmured. They stopped; they waited for each other.
> "Go on, Con", said Josephine.
> "No, no, Jug; after you", said Constantia.
> "No, say what you were going to say. You began", said Josephine.
> "I... I'd rather hear what you were going to say first", said Constantia.
> "Don't be absurd, Con. "
> "Really, Jug. "
> "Connie! "
> "Oh, Jug!"
> A pause. Then Constantia said faintly, "I can't say what I was going to say, Jug, because I've forgotten what it was... that I was going to say. "
> Josephine was silent for a moment. She stared at a big cloud where the sun had been.
> Then she replied shortly, "I've forgotten too." (Mansfield 260)

Given the humour of the scene (the back and forth between "Connie" and "Jug"), the sisters' admission that they have forgotten what they were about to say can be read as facetious: the sisters know what they were about to say, but they may be embarrassed by their longings. Constantia's hesitation, shown through ellipsis ("I've forgotten what it was ... that I was going to say") hints at there being more under the surface that she is not ready to divulge. We may think of the black cats again, united in their silence. Jug and Connie may see their future hopes and longings as pointless, but the fact that they are aware of the pointlessness, that they dwell on it and on the situation of women in their position, makes their inward journey far more interesting. Their thoughts also project on the world around them; the feeling of purposeless in the modern age is not only conscribed to the spinsters, but to their dead father too, whose legacy of "dread and impotence" (Nathan 95) speaks of the decay of the British empire and the need to uphold a false image of strength, whereas the sisters see an advantage in weakness: "Let's be weak - be weak, Jug. It's much nicer to be weak than to be strong" (Mansfield 243). Choosing weakness over strength may not be a sign of defeat, but a way through existential pointlessness. Likewise, choosing to

"forget" what they were going to say at the end of the story could be read as the sisters going against the Father and the phallocentric world to which they had been subservient. In the beginning of the story, Josephine represses her disloyal laughter by frowning fiercely and telling herself "Remember" terribly sternly" (Mansfield 229-230). The sisters' wilful forgetfulness may signal a rejection of the Father's command.

The sisters' feminine energy is also a counterpoint to the father's. We are told that the "sun is out …as though it really mattered" (Mansfield 257), and "the thieving sun touched Josephine gently" (259). In both cases, we may associate the sun with the father, who has ceased to matter, but who also keeps stealing ("thieving") their daughters' life force. Kimber asserts that Josephine is unable "to replace the sun's energy which has for so long dominated her life" (76), but the daughters are drawn more to the feminine energy of the moon: "[Constantia] remembered the times she had come in here, crept out of bed in her nightgown when the moon was full, and lain on the floor with her arms outstretched, as though she was crucified. Why? The big, pale moon had made her do it" (Mansfield 259). Mansfield herself comments on this important symbolism in a diary entry, after having read a book called Cosmic Anatomy: "It wasn't for nothing Constantia chose the moon and water" (qtd. in Kimber 71). Therefore, the sisters do not need to replace the sun, because their internal world does not require a sun, just as, perhaps, their lives do not require a socially-approved purpose, either.

In a letter to a friend, Mansfield confessed that she was not entirely pleased with the reception the story received: "For I put my all into that story ['The Daughters of the Late Colonel'] and hardly anyone saw what I was getting at" (qtd. in Hanson 116). While previous readings have emphasised the sisters' tragedy in the midst of comedy, Mansfield may also want us to look at their penchant for comedy in the midst of tragedy. Jug and Connie may be a Laurel and Hardy duo, as Rhoda Nathan previously stated, but this expression of their personality can be subversive rather than pitiful. The sisters understand that the modern world is absurd and unfair, and in the face of such impasses, it is wiser to act ridiculous; it is better to laugh.

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The Humour-Pathos Link from Late-Victorian Aestheticism to Modernism and After in British Literature

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Abstract: By using Freud's theory of humour (1927) and his *Jokes in their relation to the unconscious* (1905), we follow the dominant features of the humour-pathos nexus from the late Victorian to the postmodernist literary decadence, taking in our stride the two peaking twentieth century modernist texts published by T.S. Eliot and James Joyce in 1922 Britain. We begin with Oscar Wilde's popular *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) in relation to Walter Pater's less well-known autobiographical novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), showing what relation the latter has with T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and James Joyce's *Ulysses.* The modernist genial humour of Eliot's 1939 *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* is contrasted with Tom Stoppard's in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) and with the dark humour closer to pathos in *The Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970) by Ted Hughes.
Keywords: *aestheticism; hêdonê; pathos; modernism; pure humour; satirical humour; absurdism; postmodernism.*

Aestheticist humour and pathos in Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater

The study of the relation between humour and pathos in ages of decadent literature, namely in our late modern age, can begin with Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), a well-made play which masterfully articulates and handles with perfect ease dramatic satire in the comedy of manners and the farcical extravaganza. As a farce, this play proposes a game with masks and dandies harking back to the Shakespearean "What's in a name?" soliloquy. It also brilliantly evinces the main virtues of comedy as a didactic dramatic genre whose solid argumentative texture is grounded in clearly exposed commonplaces. The Wildean polemic with Victorian high seriousness and, for him, stultifying morality, is ironically invested in both humorous and pathetic characters. On the humorous side, Wilde triumphs by stale mate over Victorian gentility through inventing Lady Bracknell - an august colossus with crumbling limbs, excelling in ridiculously absurd eloquence coined from disparate shards of respectable upper middle-class discourse. On the other hand, the countryside governess, Miss Prism, is the obtuse, pathetic embodiment of ordinary middle-class aspirations and customs. And since satire exaggerates whatever humour nonchalantly and hurriedly delivers from the tip of the tongue, both these ridiculous and pathetic mainstream Victorian types speak ponderously, while the utterly dominant discourse of Algernon Moncrieff, as the play's aesthetic critic, moves with the concentrated, never hesitant, grace of humour, *Witz* in Freud's German, in the 1905 essay translated *Jokes in their relation to the unconscious – Witz* becoming also "wit" in English. It immediately evokes the spate of Wilde witticisms quotable in whole contexts or on their own.

In his fictional, dramatic text, Wilde's humour moves, swift as lighting, to collapse the two poles of Walter Pater's doctrine: pathos and impassibility. They were incredibly held together by a recondite, heavily historical, sophistry taught to late Victorian aesthetic critics, among them Wilde himself. The Paterite recipe for aestheticist pathos admixed with impassibility, which, according to the 1885 autobiographical philosopher's novel, titled *Marius the Epicurean*, Part I, Chapter 9, went under the name of "New Cyrenaicism", included: "great seriousness–an impressibility to the sacredness of time, of life and its events", "[n]ot pleasure, but fulness of life, and 'insight' as conducting to that fullness– energy, variety, and choice of experience, including noble pain and sorrow even". Wrapped in "the determination, adhered to with no misgiving, to add nothing, not so much as a transient sigh, to the great total of men's unhappiness", which, essentially, amounted to "hêdonê–the pleasure of the ideal present, of the mystic now" and the "absorption so entire, upon what is immediately here and now"; it lent to the practicing aesthete "a peculiar manner of intellectual confidence, as of one who had indeed been initiated into a great secret". But, on the other hand, in

the constitution of the philosopher's aestheticist pathos there also entered "a denial of habitual impressions, as the necessary first step in the way of truth" (in all likelihood derived from Heraclitus)", an "exceptional loyalty to pure reason and its 'dry light'", and, "neither frivolity nor sourness, but induc[ing], rather, an impression, just serious enough, of the call upon men's attention of the crisis in which they find themselves" (according to Aristippus of Cyrene, the Hellenistic philosopher unearthed and brought centre-stage by late Victorian decadence).

Fictionally woven, tamed for stage use in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, these ideas actuate a density of male and female dandies, all of whom busy themselves with perfecting the pleasure of their ideal present understood as a mystical moment of domestic privacy; which, moreover, consolidates one's desirable individuality by sheltering the self behind masks from the banality of public life and respectability. Algernon Moncrieff and his friend Jack Worthing invent pathetic doubles, the latter's brother who gets into the most dreadful scrapes and the former's invalid friend, called Bunbury, hence "Bunburying" as the name of the hide-away mask-game of the male dandies; by contrast to them, the feminine masks chosen to embody highfalutin, fashionable ideals are embodied in the romantic name Ernest, as seen when Gwendolen declares to Jack Worthing, who goes by the name of Ernest in town, in Act One:

> GWENDOLEN
> …We live (…) in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits, I am told; and my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you. (Wilde 263)

In Act Two, Cecily Cardew is no less fashionable and idealistic in her first real dialogue with the suddenly materialized lover, whose puppet-like strings she had actually formerly pulled in her diary for a long time.

> ALGERON
> …I don't care for anybody in the whole world but you. I love you, Cecily. You will marry me, won't you?
> CECILY.
> You silly boy! Of course. Why, we have been engaged for the last three months.
> ALGERNON.
> For the last three months?
> CECILY.
> Yes, it will be exactly three months on Thursday.

> ALGERNON.
>
> But how did we become engaged? (Wilde 286-7)
>
> > ….
> > ALGERNON.
>
> My letters! But, my own sweet Cecily, I have never written you any letters.
> > CECILY.
>
> You need hardly remind me of that, Ernest. I remember only too well that I was forced to write your letters for you. I wrote always three times a week, and sometimes oftener. (Wilde 287)

Pathos embraced, pathos avoided: Paterite accents in Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Joyce's *Ulysses*

It is perhaps not surprising to find Walter Pater' twentieth century modernist posterity in T.S. Eliot and James Joyce (with the latter demonstrably and deliberately being influenced by Pater), though the twentieth century would have to wait for postmodernism for the manifestation of a Wildean posterity – in Tom Stoppard's irresistible comedy of 1966, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

In *The Waste Land,* high modernism brings forth in its observations (to recall the full title of Eliot's "Prufrock") the concern for discerning the momentum of the mystic now at a time of intense torment and self-reproaching memory and desire. The power of Eliot's threnody for the decaying culture-land is due to its blending intense pathos with the idiom of the perfect aesthete, who is forced to contemplate from the distance, through tormented recollections, what separates him from all known perfections. These turn into chastising "fragments shored against the ruins" which spell out the degradation of intellectual hêdonê to become sterile pleasure and promiscuous desire. *The Waste Land* deepens pathos by bathos while throwing the images of tradition into the hugely defacing mirror of the Great War aftermath**.** Eliot's lament transfixes his reader with his hollow, rotten mystic now in composing "The Waste Land" – which can be punningly regarded as the *Vaast Land* because it is an encyclopaedic epic, a literary time capsule storing the disrupted proofs of our civilization for the tense, threatened future, as is Paul K Saint-Amour's term, in the title of his 2015 book; the future is tense in case our interwar civilization were, in time/tense future, annihilated by man-made nuclear disaster. "Mixing memory and desire", *The Waste Land* short-circuits the literary and artistic gratification of the cultural libido and allows grinning pathos to fill the stage at the contemplation of the whole civilized world's panorama being turned on its head by the war wounds. Pathos reigns supreme in *The Waste Land* because, not only does the repenting,

hurt ego *not* "refuse to let itself be compelled to suffer" (as it does in humour, which arises in order to "represent the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability", see Freud, *Humour* 162) but, in addition, the modern spirit is prescribed a sophisticated aesthetic flagellation. Such a return to past flogging practices pioneered the paradoxical modernist cultural palingenesis, whose self-chastising words engendered the new idiom expressive of a decadent, negative-sign perfection. Because, just as Eliot's emblematic *Waste Land* does, Woolf's novels look pathos in the eye, drawing from unfathomable darkness mystically perfect moments (to use Walter Pater's words in *Marius the Epicurean*).

By contrast, James Joyce's ego "refuses to let itself be compelled [just] to suffer" – which prompts him, firstly, to shed, in *Ulysses*, two brands of pathos endemic to Ireland. The Bloomsday artist rejects both the syndrome of Irish paralysis captured in *Dubliners*, and the religious transcendence vector developed (without fruition) in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Instead, there is (often wry) humour in his construction of a cuckolded husband and an as-yet failed great artist who, between the two of them, write the epic of the modern world's *Alltag* (as Wolfgang Iser called it[1]). Especially, in the Bloom spouses, the modern world proves to be unashamed of its ultimate hidden corners of consciousness. The choice of an ordinary day in the life of an assortment of domestic and artistic characters testifies to the writer's intention to silence the recognized Irish pathos by a new brand of commitment to what, for Marius the Epicurean was, "dry light", "neither frivolity nor sourness," "[n]ot pleasure, but fulness of life, and 'insight' as conducting to that fullness–energy, variety, and choice of experience, including noble pain and sorrow even". These, without "including noble pain and sorrow" are the factors that keep the twentieth and twenty-first century reader entertained for the book's eighteen very different episodes (of which only three, "Aeolus", "Cyclops" and "Eumaeus" are totally devoid of stream-of-consciousness discourse, if we do not count the directly dramatized flashes of the two protagonists' subconscious life in "Circe"). The key to the enjoyment of *Ulysses* is the mixture of factors already outlined by Pater under the label of "hêdonê (…)–the pleasure of the ideal present, of the mystic now" already seen above as the "absorption so entire, upon what is immediately here and now", that it imparts "a peculiar manner of intellectual confidence, as of one who had indeed been initiated into a great secret". In James Joyce's literary universe, the modernist hêdonê bypasses "the noble pain and sorrow even", which, in Pater's description of the young Marius the Epicurean, crowned the fullness

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[1] To avoid interrupting the discourse flow, Iser's study mentioned here is "Doing Things in Style: An Interpretation of 'The Oxen of the Sun' in James Joyce's *Ulysses*", from *The Implied Reader* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). A version of this essay is included in Brooker, Peter and Peter Widdowson, *A Practical Reader in Contemporary Literary Theory.* Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/ Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996.

of experience. And even when, as in Virginia Woolf's modernist fiction, noble pathos is not avoided, it is sublimated, engulfed in "the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability" (which is also one of the triumphs of the ego that explain humour, according to Freud).

In this connection, Joyce's experimental modernist fiction, actually stages this invulnerability that the victorious ego asserts with the means of comedy – given that *Ulysses* focuses on the petty details of everyday life. These take us to the other end of the scale than the ideal, or on its reverse, rather. For - comedy characteristically uncovers inhibitions, weaknesses, deformities, as Freud 1905 states, judgment coming to illuminate while emphasizing them (Freud, *Jokes and their Relation* 3). How does stream-of-consciousness handle inhibitions, weaknesses and deformities? Before judging them, the flowing consciousness illuminates and condones inhibitions and weaknesses, one's own and others', while deformities are either recorded with a straight face, or treated with sympathy, which inclines the balance away from humour, towards pathos. In *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus has empathetic thoughts in connection with his poor student Sargent, in the book's second episode, "Nestor", and the modern Odysseus has more than transient sympathy for the blind stripling whom he encounters in the street early in the day (see the episode "Lestrygonians," *Ulysses* 8.1075-1107), and who is allowed to surface in Bloom's hallucinations of the episode "Circe" (see *Ulysses* 15.1600).

In a species such as the novel is, one which lowers the noble genres and amalgamates the results amorphously, what happens to both idealist and comic writing should not amaze anyone. The idealistically regarded tokens of sobriety and seriousness meant to avoid commonplace pathos that were recommended to the end of nineteenth century aesthetes by Pater are retained in the twentieth century, but with a difference. While securing "the pleasure of the present, of the now" and by "the absorption, entire upon what is immediately here and now", stream-of-consciousness has eliminated the adjectives left out by the suspension marks in the first quotation: "ideal", which accompanied "the present", and "mystic", before "now". The resulting aesthete's "peculiar manner of intellectual confidence, as of one who had indeed been initiated into a great secret" is, of course, the condition for sharing pleasure in reading stream of consciousness prose. As regards comic textures, where "Freedom produces jokes and jokes produce freedom" (according to Jean Paul Richter, quoted in Freud, *Jokes and their Relation* 4) – the same rule manifests itself, for example, in the numerous jokes that flourish in Leopold Bloom's stream-of-consciousness. Though, unfortunately, there is no room for illustrating them here, what can be attempted, nevertheless, is to show how the freedoms of the two male protagonists of *Ulysses* reflected in their stream-of-consciousness discourse are articulated as the two halves of a whole: the Paterite "fulness of life, and 'insight' as conducting to that fullness–energy, variety, and choice of experience, including noble pain and

sorrow even." Bloom's fullness of life and fullness of energy, variety and choice of experience, which carefully and deliberately keep at bay pain and sorrow, ends up absorbing into his adult's more complete and genuine fullness of life due to experience Stephen's inclination towards noble pain and sorrow, as in the coda of the Pater quotation". We surmise that it will be after Stephen meets Mr Bloom as the right father figure for him that his loneliness breeding pathos can be enlarged to contain also the adult fulness of life enabling him to give substance, in *Ulysses*, to his outcry that closed *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man:* *"*Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." And he can do his because the young creator's self has met and absorbed the readiness of Bloom's stream of consciousness to come near comedy and to produce humour by transcending pathos. The result is *Ulysses* as the novel that transmits and adapts to the modernist century Walter Pater's doctrine for the education of the aesthetic critic.

One further prescription in this line of education was, as previously mentioned, "a denial of habitual impressions, as the necessary first step in the way of truth". This is a source of humour in Joyce's intensely satirical episodes which battle with entrenched (=habitual) ideologies and discourse-types of *Ulysses* to set right the balance of clear-sighted truth. Blind Irish ultra-nationalism is the target of the "Cyclops" satire, and, in "Oxen of the Sun", the disastrous results of colonial history is what the polyvalent satire boils down to. It is interesting that, in the latter case, Stephen has a name for his anti-colonial satire: the postcreation. It consists of intertextual tongue in cheek commentaries that attach themselves to attack the colonizer's heritage. And so, Stephen postcreates the factually precise medieval historical records of Ireland's church and state colonization (by the English and by the Catholic Church when it had the only English Pope ever) in a savagely offensive but copiously amazing fable with Plantagenet and Elizabethan bulls invented in the same fourteenth episode with oxen in the title. Posited as the colonized's parasite feeding on the brilliant colonizers' legacy, the Irish parasitical text enjoys an equally notorious posterity, which, by a typical satirical exaggeration, comes to be considered sacred: as sacred as procreation, because "[i]n woman's womb word is made flesh but in the spirit of the maker all flesh that passes becomes the word that shall not pass away" (*Ulysses* 14.292-3). Stephen applies the same treatment to Shakespearean biography in the ninth episode, "Scylla and Charybdis", where he gears an impressive number of Shakespearean and scholarly sources for inventing an unforgettable tall tale.

As regards the Joycean satire of blind ultra-nationalism, it is manifested in a list of names coined to ridicule Irish heritage themes by exciting homeric laughter, especially as the names that evoke old Irish lore (local Hibernian/Milesian memories) are combined with many non-Irish ones familiar from other cultures

– the result being a perfectly laughable assortment of non-sequiturs that make one guffaw continuously. What – or rather who – supports this enumeration, very similar to the Borgesian entry from an imaginary Chinese encyclopaedia, is a giant: a mythical Cyclops (the embodiment of Finn McCool or Cuchulainn), modelled on Irish warriors who went naked into battle and hung the scalps of the beheaded enemies around their waists:

> *From his* (the Cyclops') *girdle hung a row of seastones which jangled at every movement of his portentous frame and on these were graven with rude yet striking art the tribal images of many Irish heroes and heroines of antiquity, Cuchulin, Conn of hundred battles*" (and the list continues with ancient literary heroes and real Irish historical names very familiar for Irish cultural identity scholars; but it grows upon a random reader through what follows) *"the Village Blacksmith, Captain Moonlight, Captain Boycott"* (familiar English Chartist Movement aliases, then), "*Dante Alighieri, Christopher Columbus, S. Fursa, S. Brendan, Marshal MacMahon, Charlemagne, Theobald Wolfe Tone, the Mother of the Maccabees, the Last of the Mohicans, the Rose of Castile, the Man for Galway, The Man that Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo, The Man in the Gap, The Woman Who Didn't, Benjamin Franklin, Napoleon Bonaparte, John L. Sullivan, Cleopatra, Savourneen Deelish, Julius Caesar, Paracelsus, sir Thomas Lipton, William Tell, Michelangelo Hayes, Muhammad, the Bride of Lammermoor, Peter the Hermit, Peter the Packer, Dark Rosaleen, Patrick W. Shakespeare, Brian Confucius, Murtagh Gutenberg, Patricio Velasquez, Captain Nemo, Tristan and Isolde, the first Prince of Wales, Thomas Cook and Son, the Bold Soldier Boy, Arrah na Pogue, Dick Turpin, Ludwig Beethoven, the Colleen Bawn, Waddler Healy, Angus the Culdee, Dolly Mount, Sidney Parade, Ben Howth, Valentine Greatrakes, Adam and Eve, Arthur Wellesley, Boss Croker, Herodotus, Jack the Giantkiller, Gautama Buddha, Lady Godiva* (*Ulysses* 12.176-197).

"[E]xhibit[ing] the main characteristic of the jokework – that of liberating pleasure by getting rid of inhibitions" (Freud *Jokes and their Relation* 98), Joycean satire clears the public discourse space with liberating humour, whether in his narrative postcreative fables, or when superimposing, as in the above agglomeration of cultural identity marks, exaggeration and excess over the necessary brevity that good jokes should have, like caricatures, with their shortcuts to the essence.

From modernist to postmodernist British humour: T.S. Eliot vis-a-vis Tom Stoppard and Ted Hughes

In this connection, one wonders what distinguishes the humour of the inventory-piece titled "The Naming of Cats," meant to produce another kind of laughter at the beginning to T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*.
The Naming of Cats is a difficult matter, It isn't just one of your holiday games;

> You may think at first I'm as mad as a hatter
> When I tell you, a cat must have THREE DIFFERENT NAMES.
> First of all, there's the name that the family use daily,
> Such as Peter, Augustus, Alonzo or James,
> Such as Victor or Jonathan, George or Bill Bailey–
> All of them sensible everyday names.
> There are fancier names if you think they sound sweeter,
> Some for the gentlemen, some for the dames:
> Such as Plato, Admetus, Electra, Demeter–
> But all of them sensible everyday names.
> But I tell you, a cat needs a name that's particular,
> A name that's peculiar, and more dignified,
> Else how can he keep up his tail perpendicular,
> Or spread out his whiskers, or cherish his pride?
> Of names of this kind, I can give you a quorum,
> Such as Munkustrap, Quaxo, or Coricopat,
> Such as Bombalurina, or else Jellylorum–
> Names that never belong to more than one cat.
> But above and beyond there's still one name left over,
> And that is the name that you never will guess;
> The name that no human research can discover–
> But THE CAT HIMSELF KNOWS, and will never confess.
> When you notice a cat in profound meditation,
> The reason, I tell you, is always the same:
> His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation
> Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name:
> His ineffable effable
> Effanineffable
> Deep and inscrutable singular Name. (Eliot, *Old Possum* 24)

The above is an instance of humour understood, in Jean Paul Richter's terms already quoted by Freud: "Freedom produces jokes and jokes produce freedom". The comparison with the jokes put in a satirical frame by Joyce in his enumeration permits isolating the freedom of pure humour, differing from satirical humour which subjugates its target to the satirist's superior judgment. This points to the difference between empathy, which in pure humour is the result of the shared freedom, and irony, whose humour is, of course, patronizing, as is well known. Because Eliot is anything but an aesthete (outside *The Waste Land*, where he appears, at most, as a defeated aesthete!), his is a brand of convivial humour that uses national commonplaces to express what Freud saw as the liberating and compensatory functions that link humour with a sense of grandeur (caused by the triumph of narcissism). The grandeur in [humour] clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability.

> Like jokes and the comic, humour has something liberating about it; but it also has
> something of grandeur and elevation, which is lacking in the other two ways of

obtaining pleasure from intellectual activity. The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. (Freud, *Humour* 162)

In addition to proving the point about the link between narcissism and the humorous liberation of the ego, we find in Eliot's jocose national British epic of 1939, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats,* together with the propensity for panoramic literature, the mark of what Freud called, in 1927 also, the possession of dignity "a dignity which is wholly lacking, for instance, in jokes" (Freud, *Humour* 163). This is why it is not a mock-heroic epic, because its tone is one of genial, light-verse patriotism – with not even mild satirical overtones. Eliot's humorous prestidigitation imparts national dignity to the domestic cat space …purred in music-hall rhythms. It is dominated by the biblical patriarch *Old Deuteronomy* "who lived a long time".

> He's a Cat who has lived many lives in succession.
> He was famous in proverb and famous in rhyme
> A long while before Queen Victoria's accession.
> Old Deuteronomy's buried nine wives
> And more–I am tempted to say, ninety-nine;
> And his numerous progeny prospers and thrives. (Eliot, *Old Possum* 36)

This dignified, venerable cat links genealogically the Old Testament with England's proverbial monarchs and witnesses the decline of the British village, harking back to the Tiresias scene of *The Waste Land*. But Eliot's centrism immediately counteracts this with portraits of the terrible cat Growltiger, "The terror of the Thames" (an occasion to mention as many familiar locations on the Thames as in the conclusion to "The Fire Sermon" in *The Waste Land*) and of "Macavity, the mystery cat" or "the Napoleon of crime", who prowls prestigious British political institutions, the Foreign Office, the Admiralty and the Secret Service, rehearsing their statutory connection:

> And when the Foreign Office find a Treaty's gone astray,
> Or the Admiralty lose some plans and drawings by the way,
> There may be a scrap of paper in the hall or on the stair–
> But it's useless to investigate–*Macavity's not there*!
> And when the loss has been disclosed, the Secret Service say:
> 'It *must* have been Macavity!'–but he's a mile away. (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 42)

The picture of central London political life and of traditional English entertainment is complete with the portrait of Gus, from Asparagus, "the Cat at the

Theatre Door", who "joins his friends at their club/ (Which takes place at the back of the neighbouring pub)" and "loves to regale them, if someone else pays, /With anecdotes drawn from his palmiest days."

This allows the present review to move further, introducing, with Tom Stoppard's 1966 comedy "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead", a density of jokes and sophisticate ironies defining for postmodernism.

The decadence of English drama in mid-twentieth century, the apparently serious theme of the play, is made explicit in the promotion to the protagonist position of Shakespeare's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who appear as a pair of perfect absurdist clowns (in the best Beckett tradition). The two Elizabethan minor characters – who are meta-theatrically known in 1966 to be dead – direct the audience to the heart of the postmodernist matter: the literature of exhaustion reinvents itself as literature of replenishment, to use John Barth's terms contemporary with Stoppard's play. This performance is achieved by Stoppard's script playing the two components of tragicomedy against each other constantly in the characters' brisk exchanges of either gratuitous or carefully intertextual jokes.

Comedy gets the upper hand by endless punning, cheap games and proliferating jokes in the margin of the original tragic script. Practically, the balance is tipped in the opposite direction from comedy just by the six Tragedians. But the typically absurdist strategy of emptying standard roles of their meaning, of removing the characters' identity marks and purpose, makes the Tragedians contradict the parts prescribed to them by the Player, their mouth-piece who defines tragedy as a type of performance "with no choice involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy is": instead, the Tragedians lend themselves to a seedy performance (in the "love scene, sexual and passionate, between the Queen and the Poisoner/King, turning on stage into a homoerotic encounter).

At best, what remains of the tragic momentum of the prototype script are jokes on the theme of death – as in in the cues exchanged between Guil and Ros about the marriage of Queen Gertrude to Claudius while King Hamlet's body was still warm:

> ROS: Your mother's marriage.
> GUIL: He slipped in. [He=Claudius]
> (Beat.)
> ROS (lugubriously): His body was still warm. [Old King Hamlet's body]
> GUIL: So was hers. (Stoppard 41)

The postmodernist playwright manages his performance of playing comedy against tragedy constantly because *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* acts both as a parody of *Hamlet* and as a pastiche of *Waiting for Godot*. The Shakespearean parody is more than clearly illustrated for example in the inclusion

tale quale, without warning, of bits of the *Hamlet* text featuring Polonius, Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius and Ophelia - from the end of Act 1 to the beginning and middle of Act 2 of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The effect is that of a textual legerdemain that drains out tragedy of its force and turns it into a kind of mime. One detail which points to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* being a pastiche of *Waiting for Godot* is the use of the New Testament as a source for sick jokes, as in Guil's prayer: "Give us this day our daily cue…," very similar to the lengthier tragicomic exchange between the undistinguishable clowns Gogo and Didi invented by the master of absurdist humour, Beckett:

> VLADIMIR: But you can't go barefoot!
> ESTRAGON: Christ did.
> VLADIMIR: Christ! What has Christ got to do with it. You're not going to compare
>   yourself to Christ!
> ESTRAGON: All my life I've compared myself to him.
> VLADIMIR: But where he lived it was warm, it was dry!
> ESTRAGON: Yes. And they crucified quick. (Beckett 44)

In 1970, in *The Life and Songs of the Crow*, Ted Hughes expands such savagely humorous intertextualities with the Bible programmatically. Steeped in the horror of his second wife's suicide, Ted Hughes vents his private anger by inventing Crow, a dark, deeply ironical alter-ego of God, who is entrusted with the mission of casting a terrible shadow over the human link with God that the Bible teaches. The poems "Crow's First Lesson" and "A Childish Prank" are perfect samples of pathos underwriting postmodernist humour. The result is, of course, savage, savage irony and self-indicting gallows humour. In "Crow's First Lesson", a Genesis *à rebours*, is triggered by the project of humanising Crow, when "God tried to teach Crow how to talk. /'Love,' said God. 'Say, Love.'" But at every attempt of God uttering the word "Love", predators of the sea and the air come to life when Crow only manages to convulse, gape or retch instead of speaking; to crown it all, he makes man come up with his "bodiless prodigious head/Bulbed out onto the earth, with swivelling eyes, /Jabbering protest" and has "woman's vulva drop over man's neck and tighten"; this is the prelude to the battle scene of their copulation. "The two struggled together on the grass. /God struggled to part them, cursed, wept--/Crow flew guiltily off." In this poem, Crow is an inept clumsy learner who ends up playing a practical joke on God unintentionally (since he flies guiltily off). But in "A Childish Prank", Crow tampers with God's raw matter for the creation of the human kind, which is "the Worm, God's only son", cutting it "into two writing halves". What happens in this poem must have been inspired by the psychoanalytical sense that women lack a phallus (like in the Derridean interpretation of Ophelia's fate through an etymological-*cum*-psychoanalytical reflection of the Greek name O'Phelia/lacking a phallus), because Crow "stuffed into man the Worm's tail half/ With the wounded end hanging out" and "He stuffed the head half headfirst into woman",

"deeper and up", "To peer out through her eyes/ Calling its tail-half to join up quickly, quickly/Because O it was painful." The utmost intensity of blasphemous irony is reached in this poem when Ted Hughes plays the part of an extreme postmodernist trickster and equates the soul which God was to give man and the Word to a worm – the worm, "God's only son". The word "childish" in the title is meant to tone down the enormity of the prank, which is actually the act of an inchoate creature as Crow is, who, seeing that God was sleeping and "Man's and woman's bodies lay without souls/Dully gaping, foolishly staring, inert/On the flowers of Eden", played God in jest. And the poem ends with "God went on sleeping" followed by "Crow went on laughing".

We see in these two kinds of comedy the two characteristic extremes that postmodernist fun oscillates between: dark comedy (which has pathos in its immediate subtext) and (even though only apparently) light comedy, the comedy of more or less innocent tricksters. The two kinds are in constant competition, like two contending strong wills, because decadent humour is disputatious, in addition to courting pathos as seen in the Crow poems and in the abundance of death-related cues in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

In this, postmodernist humour differs from the convivial, kindly, comforting brand of humour met with in *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, which seems to answer the description at the end of Freud's 1927 study of humour: "[I]t is really the super-ego which, in humour, speaks such kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego. […] And finally, if the super-ego tries, by means of humour, to console the ego and protect it from suffering, this does not contradict its origin in the parental agency" (Freud, *Humour* 166) And if postmodernist humour is scathing, this is due to its propensity to move in the proximity of suffering.

Conclusion

With help from the Freudian texts on jokes and humour of, respectively, 1905 and 1927, British humour and pathos have been interpreted in terms of their link with an elevated, refined hêdonê inherited by the twentieth century from late Victorian aestheticism. It was possible to follow the transformation of high modernism into postmodernism and of light humour into sharp satire after the outburst of pathos expressed with aestheticist means in *The Waste Land* and after the experiment and performance of hushing youthful pathos with adult humour in *Ulysses*; nevertheless, in *Ulysses* one already meets with what was to become the postmodernist preference for ironic amusement instead of serene, gratifying (pacifying?) humour. It should come as no surprise that postmodernist fun grows from a thick layer of savage irony as a mode of defence against pathos in an age influenced by the absurdist fashion – one which rejects precisely the fullness of life, of energy and of experience which sparked the aestheticist decadence and the modernist revolution alike.

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I am a Comedian, That's My Job: The Stand-up Activism of Vir Das

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Humour and Pathos in Literature and the Arts (I)

Abstract: In an epoch characterized by rapid digitalization, the proliferation of disinformation, and the deepening schisms within society, the significance of stand-up comedy has assumed unprecedented prominence. Its popularity is burgeoning on a global scale, and concurrently, the Indian comedy landscape has witnessed a remarkable influx of talent over recent decades. Among this exceptional cohort of comedic voices, Vir Das emerges as a prominent figure. Known for his incisive humour, he ventures far beyond light-hearted humour, delving into the heart of pivotal societal issues. This article discusses the profound impact of comedy and satire in catalysing socio-critical transformations through a discerning analysis of select jokes from Vir Das's repertoire. As such, it is organized into three distinct sections, each contributing to the overarching objective. The initial section offers a concise exploration of the historical evolution of comedy, with a particular focus on its development within the Indian context. Subsequently, the second section delves into the core concept of stand-up comedy as a potent medium for activism, grappling with fundamental questions regarding the gravity and consequential influence of comedic discourse. Lastly, the concluding section meticulously conducts a comprehensive thematic analysis of Vir Das's body of work, accentuating his pivotal role as a stand-up activist.
Keywords: *humour; India; stand-up comedy; activism; Vir Das.*

In a period characterized by societies contending with profound divisions, political upheaval, and an incessant inundation of information, humour emerges as a formidable instrument for solace, comprehension, and connection. Equipped with acumen and perspicacity, stand-up comedians step onto the stage with the explicit intent of confronting the idiosyncrasies of contemporary life. In so doing, they challenge prevailing assumptions and serve as a poignant reminder to their audiences that laughter possesses the capacity to transcend the most entrenched boundaries. Amid this fragmented landscape, stand-up comedy undertakes the role of a unifying force, offering a much-sought respite from the prevailing chaos and, perhaps most significantly, furnishing a pathway for individuals to discover common ground through the medium of laughter, engendering thoughtful contemplation. Recognized as socially aware comedy or, as described by Rebecca Krefting, "charged humour" (3), these comedic expressions transcend mere entertainment. Instead, they are purposefully crafted to address significant socio-political issues. This intentional design enables audiences to comprehend and analyse socio-political events, fostering increased political involvement. (Becker and Bode 612) Given its unique ability to encapsulate profound ideas within humour, stand-up comedy, often taken for granted, assumes a pivotal role, especially in the context of our increasingly digitized world. This genre of comedy offers a distinctive perspective for critiquing the intricate global socio-political landscape.

In a parallel trajectory, the Indian comedy scene has experienced a remarkable upsurge in talent over the past few decades, with comedians armed with sharp sarcasm to dissect India's complex political and power dynamics (Anto and Vyas 2; Sarkar and Siraj 45). Among these exceptional voices, one stands out prominently: Vir Das. Renowned for his incisive humour, Vir goes beyond the realm of light-hearted comedy, delving deep into crucial issues. Ranging from majoritarianism to cancel culture, East vs. West dynamics to secularism, and mortality to cultural barriers, his routines serve a dual purpose – entertainment and enlightenment. His performances catalyse the creation of an alternative discourse, sparking meaningful conversations on pressing topics. This article situates itself at the intersection of socio-political comedy, socially aware comedians, and Vir Das's activist approach to comedy. Building on Sophie Quirk's assertion that "there is no such thing as 'just' being funny" (9), as laughter in any form inherently functions as "a comment" (6), the article endeavours to delve into stand-up comedy as a form of activism. It seeks to demonstrate this premise through an analysis of select segments from Vir Das's comedy routines.

Before delving deeper into the central aim of this article, it is imperative to elucidate the rationale underpinning the selection of Vir Das as the subject of inquiry. The realm of contemporary Indian comedy can be discernibly bifurcated, albeit with some degree of fluidity, given that comedians often blur the

boundaries that distinguish these categories. The first category, characterized by humour rooted in the quotidian and mundane facets of life, seeks to regale audiences by playfully ribbing the trifles of existence. Comedians such as Zakir Khan, Kenny Sebastian, Anubhav Singh Bassi, and Abhishek Upmanyu comfortably inhabit this milieu. Notably, they consciously refrain from delving into overtly political themes, as exemplified by Kenny Sebastian's aptly titled performance, *Why I Don't Engage in Political Humour in India* (2018). In stark contrast, there exists a second category of comedians who unflinchingly immerse themselves in the labyrinthine realm of political discourse. They dissect power dynamics and societal narratives within the crucible of comedy. Figures like Kunal Kamra and Varun Grover epitomize this genre. Nonetheless, Vir Das occupies a distinctive and pivotal position within this multifaceted comedy landscape. His style of humour hits across a broad spectrum of subjects, championing the cause of humanism over opposition to established norms. Armed with profound philosophical insights and an incisive satirical edge, he unflinchingly scrutinizes society's deepest taboos. His ethos of performance extends beyond mere ridicule, proffering innovative solutions to universal quandaries, thus setting him apart from most of his comedic counterparts.

Therefore, this article selects two of Vir Das's comedy sets, specifically *Religion vs. Comedy* (2021) and *Who Has Freedom of Speech?* (2021), for thematic analysis[1]. The rationale behind this choice is twofold. Firstly, these performances serve as exemplary case studies of his comedic artistry, wherein he employs a recurring pattern to deliver humour while simultaneously challenging the apparent normalcy of socio-political structures. Secondly, these sets seamlessly align with the broader context of exploring stand-up comedy as a potent form of activism.

The article unfolds in three distinct sections. The initial section succinctly traces the historical evolution of comedy, particularly the stand-up genre, within the Indian context. Subsequently, the second section discusses the central concept of stand-up comedy as a medium of activism, delving into the fundamental question surrounding the seriousness and impact of comedic discourse. Finally, the concluding section conducts a meticulous thematic analysis of Vir Das's jokes, underscoring his pivotal role as a stand-up activist.

Stand-up comedy in India

The evolution of stand-up comedy in India spans a remarkable 2000 years, tracing its roots back to ancient traditions such as *Natyashastra*. Influenced by early manifestations of humour within the realm of drama theory, comedy

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[1] As of 30th August. 2023, the videos have garnered 1,903,573 and 1,542,471 views respectively.

seamlessly integrated into Indian cinema during the mid-twentieth century, with luminaries like Rajendra Nath and Johnny Walker at the forefront of this comedic wave. A pivotal shift towards live comedy shows came in the 1980s with Johnny Lever's trailblazing *Kabbadi* (1986), heralding a distinctive departure from prevailing entertainment genres. The landscape witnessed a transformative moment with the advent of television broadcasting in the early 2000s, elevating the genre's popularity through iconic shows like *The Great Indian Comedy Show* (2004) and *Comedy Circus* (2007), However, it is imperative to note that during this epoch, Hindi comedy, which was predominant, diverged from the emerging genre of stand-up. This divergence was marked by a proclivity for slapstick humour within Hindi comedy, as opposed to the more nuanced and topical nature characterizing stand-up comedy, which delves into personal and sociopolitical subjects (Jha, *A Brief History*).

The inception of standup comedy, as known in the West, is often attributed to Vir Das, who performed a groundbreaking show in Delhi in 2003. With his roots in the US standup scene, Vir Das introduced a new form of humour to India, diverging from the prevalent slapstick genre dominated by physical gags (Bhandari, *How Vir*). The advent of *YouTube* in 2005 and platforms like *Comedy Central* fuelled the growth of standup comedy in India, drawing attention to comedians like Russell Peters from the Indian Diaspora. The global recession in 2008, coupled with the return of non-resident Indians and the booming Indian economy, contributed to the rise of standup comedy (Paul 122). The genre's popularity surged as globalization and the influx of foreign professionals infused Western tastes into India, creating a demand that transformed Indian standup comedy into a profitable industry. By 2010, *The Comedy Store*'s establishment in Mumbai signalled the professionalization of Indian standup comedy, bringing international comedians to the forefront.

Vir Das, through *Weirdass Hamateur Nights* (2009), played a crucial role in nurturing emerging talents and experimenting with diverse themes, ushering in a golden era. The subsequent formation of comedy groups like Schitzengiggles Comedy (SnG), East India Comedy (EIC), and All India Bakchod (AIB) in 2012 solidified the influence of standup comedy on the cultural landscape and led to alliances among comedians. This confluence of traditional roots, global influences, digital mediums, and the establishment of dedicated comedy platforms underscores standup comedy's dynamic and multifaceted nature in contemporary India, positioning it not merely as entertainment but as a significant cultural and social phenomenon.

Stand-up comedy as stand-up activism

The intricate interplay between humour and seriousness often raises profound questions: Can humour seamlessly coexist with serious subjects? Is it

conceivable for a joke to thrive within a realm where humour and gravity harmoniously blend? To address these questions effectively, it is imperative to delve into the very essence of humour itself. Sigmund Freud, in his seminal work *Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious* (1960), posits that comedy's societal role lies in addressing taboo subjects, challenging prevailing social norms, and serving as a form of catharsis (103). However, a common assumption within public discourse perpetuates the notion that humour is an antidote for seriousness. This widespread misconception confines humour within the boundaries of triviality, deeming it unworthy of examination. Nonetheless, Lockyer and Pickering assert that humour should not be dismissed as a mere trifle; rather, it holds profound significance that surpasses its surface levity (809). They further posit that humour, rather than being opposed to seriousness, actually harbours the potential to yield substantial implications (809). In light of this backdrop, this article attempts to conceptualize stand-up comedy as a manifestation of stand-up activism.

At its core, stand-up comedy is a nuanced and intricate dialogue. Quirk characterizes it as a "complicated interaction" (3), necessitating a high level of interpretative competence from its audience, who must navigate through a multifaceted medium of communication, discerning truth from irony and traversing the ambiguous terrain in between (3-4). Standup comedy, as a contemporary form of comedic expression deeply rooted in humour and deliberate amusement, transcends mere entertainment by serving as a potent vehicle for incisive social critique, capable of exerting significant influence over its Audience (Anto and Vyas 2; Paul 122). It sets itself apart from other forms of entertainment, such as music and cinema, primarily due to its profound reliance on the power of language and text. Comedians deftly employ linguistic tools like irony, wordplay, timing, exaggeration, and incongruity to navigate sensitive subjects, effectively avoiding potential repercussions associated with them. Essentially, their creative brilliance and artistic prowess find expression through the intricate manipulation of language. Nevertheless, Quirk contends that a joke is not merely a textual construct; more than what it is, it is what it does (5). Mary Douglas expands upon this concept, asserting that a joke serves not only as an exchange between a comedian and the audience but also as an interaction between the comedian and society at large (152, 155). In this context, jokes become performative, as they elicit laughter and, in doing so, perform a specific function. This linguistic and aesthetic manifestation of humour provides fertile ground for comedy to be an "important form of social component and dispute" and becomes a crucial tool for "social criticism" (Quirk 5). Theorists like John Limon have even theorized it as a form of "abjection" and revolt against dominant ideologies (73). It is this potential for jokes to transgress boundaries that enable standup comedy to challenge societal norms and scrutinize the prevailing status quo, thereby endowing it with its potency as a medium for social critique.

Moreover, comedy, when utilized as a medium to critique socio-political issues, possesses the extraordinary ability to shape societal norms through "the power of its distribution" and its inherent capacity for amusement and entertainment (Chattoo and Feldman 26). What confers contemporary standup comedians with a more influential standpoint is the burgeoning digital landscape and the rising global consumption of content; these unparalleled platforms expand their reach to every corner of the world. In this ongoing era of digital transformation, the opportunity to engage in and share comedy has never been as effortless and accessible to the general populace as it is today. Therefore, the profound significance of social media and the internet cannot, and must not, be underestimated. Internet-driven platforms such as YouTube have ushered in fresh prospects for content creators due to their openness, visibility, interactivity, and on-demand functionality. This revolution has not only reshaped the comedian's landscape but has also significantly altered the audience's perspective (Quirk 130). Now, audiences exercise greater control over their media consumption process, manifesting their preferences in increasingly conspicuous ways through actions such as likes, comments, and shares. This awareness of the audience's inclinations is pivotal as it assists artists in tailoring their content to align with their audience's desires. For example, comedians like Vir Das are frequently observed soliciting topics from their audiences for future performances. This digital audience fundamentally distinguishes itself by its "specificity and interactivity" (Quirk 132), providing essential validation for socially critical humour. The influence wielded by this empowered audience is immensely substantial; Quirk contends that contemporary comedians are fundamentally shaped by the capabilities of digital media (130).

Vir Das and his stand-up activism

It's just words, do you know that all of it is just words. (!) Standup is just words. Debates are words, reviews are words, analysis is words because in a civilized society, you respond to words (,) with words, (!) and that means (,) that we have tonight. (AC) (AA) And tonight, I make you feel good, tonight I will set your world on fire (AL) … tonight, I will make you feel good and uncomfortable and happy and sad … I will do all of that with just words. I am a comedian; That's my job. (!) (?) (AA)[2] (Das, *Time to Stand Up* 00:00- 01:08)

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[2] Transcription conventions employed:
(,) → A pause less than 3 seconds
(!) → Accents, it indicates emphasis.
(?) → Raising intonation
(P) → Significant pause, a pause more than three seconds
(AC)→ Audience claps
(AL)→ Audience laughs

Implicit within Vir Das's words lies a compelling notion: that comedy possesses the potential for a more significant impact. It becomes evident that his agenda extends beyond humour, transcending the simple task of entertaining his audience and delving into discomfort. His audience uncovers a resounding declaration of his comedic purpose within these words. As one of the genre's pioneers, he adeptly encapsulates the essence of stand-up comedy as activism, elevating it to a profound medium for societal reflection (Jha, *A Brief History*). According to Lawrence Mintz, the idea of social change is inherently present in a joke that contains "a critique of the gap between what it is and what we believe should be" (71). Taking the argument further, Simon Critchley asserts that humour arises from a disjunction between "expectations and actuality" (1). This gap or disjunction is a constant element in Vir's comedy. With his craft, he attempts what Quirk calls "manipulation" (1). Quirk's theory of manipulation posits that "Telling a joke is always a manipulative process" (20). It is worth noting that manipulation here does not have a negative connotation; instead, it underscores Vir's profound influence over his audience. In the ensuing subsections, his demeanour and expertise, skilfully blending humour with a profound sense of responsibility, affirm his position as a comedian who not only entertains but also fosters contemplation and meaningful discussion.

Religion vs comedy

In their pursuit of unravelling the enigma, *What makes us laugh and why?* Mascat and Moder present an interesting proposition: comedy hinges profoundly on the concept of objectification (1). This process, they assert, involves reducing the target of humour to a single trait, allowing the uncanny to surface, and granting permission to address the unspeakable. It enables people to find humour in misfortune and turn reality on its head (2). In the select set, Vir echoes this proposition of objectification. He deftly objectifies the sacrosanct institution of religion and places it alongside a frivolous phenomenon – comedy. In this juxtaposition, he utilizes humour in a Freudian manner, deploying it as a subversive psychological instrument. Freud, in his analysis, posited that "humour is not resigned; it is rebellious" (Freud, *The Standard* 163), emphasizing the inherent rebellion embedded within humour. Clearly discernible from the title itself, this is a daring venture, boldly fusing two seemingly disparate elements. The audacity of this thematic choice should not be overlooked, especially in a

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(AA) → Audience Appreciation
(CL) →Comedian laughs

nation where religious fervour holds a significant place in the cultural fabric. Vir, fully aware of the inherent risks, chooses to proceed.

> Many, many People over a long period of time have been telling me the same thing as a comedian Vir, you will not have a career in India until you start doing relatable material, and that's what I am gonna do tonight. I am gonna do material that you can relate to and that you can recognize in comfort. Are you ready, yeah? ... Let's talk about religion now … (,) (AC) (AL) (AA) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 00:00-00:19)

From the very inception of this performance, starting with his choice of subject matter, he garners enthusiastic support from his audience. It is crucial to comprehend that the seamless transition from textual content to humour hinges significantly upon active participation from the audience. The applause, mirthful laughter, and hearty cheers bestowed upon him do not merely constitute a reactive response; instead, they represent an unequivocal affirmation and acceptance of his audience. Taking this forward, Wertheim contends that joking serves as an integral negotiation of the ongoing dialogue surrounding the values, institutions, and authorities mutually negotiated between the comedian and his audience (26). Within this dynamic negotiation, his primary objective lies in unearthing the inherent incongruities at the core of religious beliefs. He conscientiously acknowledges the gravity of the situation, humorously interjecting, "Do you know how sad it is that we have to hide in a forest to have this conversation" (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 00:30-00:33). This candid recognition of fear elicits laughter, effectively diffusing the palpable tension and initiating a role reversal in which the fear itself emerges as the focal point of joke.

> Vir: In my mind, it is a female higher power (,) (AA)
> One girl in the audience: Yes (AA)
> Vir: Thank you, ma'am, I wouldn't do that. I wrote the next joke, you are not gonna like it. (AC) (AL) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 01: 31-01:39)

One notable facet of his comedic style is his remarkable ability to transition between jokes and direct engagement with his audience seamlessly. This abrupt shift, as observed when he responds to an audience member, not only sustains the ongoing dialogue but also highlights his expertise in establishing a persuasive and conversational connection with his viewers. Through these adept switches, he captures and sustains the undivided attention of his audience. These exchanges subtly lay the foundation for his subsequent examination of three major global religions: Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. He ingeniously brings religion into the contemporary sphere, cleverly mocking it by drawing a parallel with the act of venerating a joint family. His analogy humorously implies that this form of

reverence, in reality, results in lucrative contracts and opportunities, shedding light on the endemic corruption prevailing in India.

> That's what it is in India, which is we are worshiping a joint family (!), which makes no sense because we are not getting anything in return. In real life, if you worship a joint family, you can get like aviation contracts, railway contracts, electricity, cell phone networks (AL) (AA) (AC) … you get stuff back (AL) (,)
> Look at how uncomfortable you are right now. (!) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 03:20-03:39)

While making the audience uncomfortable, he transitions from religion and corruption to the severe and extreme aspects of religious fundamentalism. He begins by discussing the concept of religious ownership, humorously challenging those who assert exclusive ownership over their faith or deity. He astutely emphasizes that faith and God are not personal possessions but shared experiences, thereby exposing the fallacy of possessiveness in religious matters.

> People say, "Vir, don't talk about my faith." It ain't YOUR faith. It's faith. (!)
> "Vir, don't talk about my god." Not YOUR God! (!) (,)
> Does not belong to you.
> If you keep walking around going, "Hey man, don't talk about my girlfriend. I'll kick your ass."… But there are billions of guys saying the same thing about the same girl. (CL) (AL)
> She's not your girlfriend, buddy. (AL) (AA) (AC) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 04:09-04:29)

Moreover, he distinguishes between those who take offense at religious jokes and those who resort to fundamentalist actions, provocatively questioning the necessity of God requiring fundamentalist defenders.

> If you are offended by religious jokes, you are a human being. If you are avenging religious jokes, you are a fundamentalist. (!) (,)
> And does God need a fundamentalist? Really, he needs you? You are the first line of defense? (CL) (AL) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 04:32-04:47)
> … you know what would happen if you went up to Muslim heaven and you are like, "I beheaded sixty people because they drew a cartoon of you." (?) (!)
> Do you know the first thing God would ask? ... "What is a cartoon?" (AL)
> He doesn't know. Did you forget that God made you, and You made all this other shit. (CL) (AL) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 04:54-05:11)

> You know if you went to Jesus. If Christian missionaries went up to Jesus Christ and they were like, "Hey, we went to all these other countries, and we beat the shit out of them, (?) and now they believe in you." (!) (CL)
> He'd be like, "Hey man, I never asked you to do that. (AL) I don't speak their language. I don't understand what these white people are saying." (AL) (P)

Aww. Did we forget that Jesus was Middle Eastern, huh? Did you forget that Jesus was Brown? (!) (AL) (AC) (AA)
You know, if Jesus was walking around down the street in New York City, (?) (CL) at least five people would be like, "Get out of my way, Abdul."… He'd get pulled over by the cops every day. (AL) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 07:23-08:11)

In India, we will lynch a Muslim family for eating beef, and then we'll travel abroad where there's a McDonald's on every single corner. (!) (CL) (AL) Eating Indian cows. (?)
Do you know that India is the third largest exporter of beef in the world? (!)
Do you know if you go to the White House, they would serve you your God back to you? (!) (CL) (AL) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 00:11:26-00:11:44)

These jokes impeccably exemplify what Quirk terms "social criticism" (5). Vir adroitly employs humour to illuminate a myriad of dimensions inherent to religious convictions, concurrently offering astute scrutiny of the inherent hypocrisy and steadfast fanaticism frequently displayed by extremists. He proffers a profound commentary, revealing the intricacies enmeshed within religious identity, dismantling prevalent misconceptions, and exposing the folly of extreme actions conducted under the cloak of faith. With skilful precision, he demarcates a stark dichotomy between two distinct factions: those who take offense at religious satire and those who resort to extreme acts of reprisal. Shrewdly, he challenges the very necessity of a deity necessitating fervent defenders, all while drawing attention to the irrational foundations of religious extremism. He proceeds to delve deeper into religious misunderstandings and stereotypes, conjuring vivid scenarios from the three major religions: Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. His highlighting of the irony and hypocrisy entrenched within religious practices, juxtaposing the gruesome act of lynching a Muslim family in India due to beef consumption with the global consumption of beef sourced from Indian cows, underscores his intent to provoke contemplation among the audience.

If your faith is so rattled by a joke, is it really that strong? (?) (!) (P)
You believe in your God. You worship your God. Leave my jokes alone. (!) (,)
That's it. Your God can take it. (!) (AC) (Das, *Religion vs Comedy* 00:12:02-00:12:20)

Vir elegantly concludes the episode by shifting his focus towards introspection and philosophical contemplation. These statements encapsulate the culmination of his previous jokes and insights concerning faith and religious devotion. In a thought-provoking manner, he poses a fundamental question: when faced with a simple joke, does an individual's faith possess the strength and depth required to withstand such a challenge? This probing inquiry delves into the heart of the matter, emphasizing that genuine faith should demonstrate resilience, capable of enduring trials and jests without succumbing to vulnerability.

Who has freedom of speech?

Mary Douglas astutely observes that for humour to possess subversive power, "the element of challenge" is a vital component (155). She argues that the effectiveness of humour as a pivotal tool for conveying alternative viewpoints hinges on comedians' ability to question deeply ingrained concepts and frameworks. This stimulates the audience to expand their worldview, thereby enriching their overall comprehension of these concepts. Vir exemplifies this phenomenon by deconstructing the core essence of freedom of speech and seamlessly incorporating political commentary. He initiates his routine by probing the audience's perception of freedom of speech, a concept often taken for granted. His opening remarks serve as a clever segue into the overarching theme. He mockingly critiques those who fail to recognize their constrained freedom of speech as they engage in mundane discussions about football and intermittent fasting. This initial jest establishes the tone for his performance, accentuating the stark contrast between surface-level conversations and the authentic exercise of free speech.

> Who here feels like they have enough Freedom of speech? Never going to get into trouble, make some noise … See, (CL) those f***ing morons are the problem (!) (?)
> Right, they don't have Freedom of Speech, you just have an uninteresting thought (AL)
> Nobody is coming after you because all you tweet about f***ing football and intermittent fasting (AL) (AC) (AA) (Das, *Who has Freedom* 00:30-01:02)

He then directs his attention towards the leaders and politicians who ostensibly wield the most substantial freedom of speech. Employing a rhetorical question, he queries, *Who possesses the privilege of Freedom of Speech?* and promptly supplies the response, asserting, "Leaders and politicians, for as a leader, coherence is not a prerequisite" (Das, *Who has Freedom of Speech?* 01:25-01:30). Taking a more direct swipe at India's political landscape, he takes aim at the nation's pressing issues, including the migrant worker crises, water scarcity, agricultural struggles, and economic woes. In spite of these paramount concerns, he wryly highlights that the Prime Minister is adept at providing the public with memorable phrases such as "fifty-six inches" and "chausa Akshay chausa" (Das, *Who has Freedom* 06:41-06:42). Through this satirical commentary, he lays bare the insignificance of political discourse when juxtaposed with the genuine challenges confronting the populace.

> Look at India right now. We have a migrant worker's crisis, a water crisis, a farmer's crisis. Our GDP has shrunk like nine thousand percent (?) (!)

But two pieces of information we have from our prime minister for sure are fifty-six inches and chausa Akshay chausa (!) (AC) (AL) (Das, *Who has Freedom* 06:29-06:45)

In his distinctive manner, Das consistently imparts profound commentary. An exemplary instance of this is found in his declaration: "The most hateful, violent, misogynistic, racist and unscientific shit has always been said in front of a flag that people love and on a stage that was built for by taking money from the very people that the speech is going to oppress" (Das, *Who has Freedom* 00:11:38-00:11:52). By drawing a connection between such rhetoric and the symbols of flags and stages, supported ironically by the very people it seeks to oppress, Das illuminates the precarious link between freedom of speech and the misuse of authority. Through this discerning observation, he advocates for vigilant differentiation between genuine expressions of free speech and harmful, divisive discourse. In his discourse, he aligns himself closely with Richard Schechner's theory of performance, wherein Schechner posits an "efficacy-entertainment dyad" (622). This conceptual framework outlines two elements residing at opposing poles: entertainment, emphasizing amusement, and efficacy, signifying tangible outcomes. The presence of the efficacy-entertainment dyad is palpable as he laments the situation where comedians now must submit affidavits to the Supreme Court to clarify their tweets, recounting his own experience of receiving seventeen legal notices within a year. His humorous approach to this serious issue exemplifies his equilibrium on the spectrum between efficacy and entertainment.

In the concluding moments of his performance, he delves into the genuine potency of comedy. He asserts that comedians, writers, journalists, poets, and artists face persecution not due to the fear they individually instil in the establishment but because of the collective energy and unity stemming from the audience's laughter. Here, Das underscores the pivotal role that the audience plays in stand-up performances. He proposes that laughter surpasses mere escapism; it emerges as a formidable force capable of challenging the established order and instigating transformative change.

Who doesn't have Freedom of speech? (?) I am not gonna tell you. I'll just give you a hint. (,)
Right now, there is a comedian in prison for over a month for jokes he didn't do that evening. Comedians have to write affidavits to the Supreme Court to explain their tweets. I got 17 legal notices last year. I went to court twice. Why? (!) (?) (,)
Is it because we are not funny? Definitely (AL)
Definitely. Any comedian of any group is not funny to a large cross-section of society. Does it mean we go to jail or court? Does it? ... So why are comedians, writers, journalists, poets, artists going to jail? (!)
It's because THEY are afraid (!) (,)

Afraid of who? (?) Afraid of us? F*** no. They can squash us in a second, Watch,
They will…soon (!)
They are afraid of YOU. The scariest sound that the establishment can hear is not
the wording of my jokes. It's the energy in your laughs (P) (AA) (AC)
It is not the statement I make it is the agreement in your lungs (?) (!) (Das, *Who
has Freedom* 00:11:56-00:13:08)

In both of these sets, he employs a multifaceted approach. This approach
not only serves to foster empathy but also effectively unravels enigmatic
archetypes. Furthermore, it derides and questions authority, imparting wisdom to
the audience. This is achieved with a delightful dash of humour that consistently
elicits hearty laughter from his audience. Therefore, it can be persuasively argued
that in these collections, his stand-up comedy aligns closely with the notion of
stand-up activism.

Conclusion

The article delves into Vir Das's intricate comedic approach, shedding light
on his deliberate and purposeful demeanour as a comedian. It illustrates how Vir
Das wields humour as a potent tool to unravel the complexities and incongruities
inherent in universal phenomena. While his primary aim may not be to effect
immediate change in his audience, he remains acutely aware of the importance of
introducing alternative perspectives on ostensibly clear-cut subjects like religion,
comedy, or freedom of speech. Additionally, it demonstrates Das's unique talent
for taking intricate and multifaceted subjects and transforming them into
humorous anecdotes, thereby making weighty issues more accessible to the
general public.

Notably, he achieves this while consistently directing his humour towards
individuals in positions of power and privilege, adhering to the principle of
punching up. This approach aligns with Henry Jenkins's concept of the "civil
imagination" (29-30), wherein Vir Das envisions the potential for societal change
through popular culture, particularly within stand-up comedy. In doing so, he
assumes a crucial role in nurturing collective awareness and inspiring positive
change through the influential medium of comedy, emerging as an exemplary
artist who practices stand-up activism.

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Lugubrious Victorians, Ludicrous Narratives:
The Function of the Comic in Jane Harris' *The Observations*

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(sidebar, rotated) **Humour and Pathos in Literature and the Arts (I)**

Abstract: Given the socio-economic circumstances of the Victorian Era, one of its unassailable facts was that the conservative and solemn spirit of the time created a claustrophobic social atmosphere for some of its occupiers. Victorian, as well as Neo-Victorian novels register an exigency for laughter partly as a response to this solemnity. As a successful representative of the latter, Jane Harris' debut novel, *The Observations* (2006) narrates the dolorous life of an Irish girl, Bessy Buckley who is taken on as a maid in a Scottish manor and is asked to perform strange duties assigned to her by the mistress of the house. This study attempts to unearth *The Observations'* versatile approach to the notion of comic on three functional levels by resting on Alexander Bain's notion of 'ludicrous degradation.' Firstly, the study scrutinizes comicality arising out of situations in which clashes of value and meaning occur. Secondly, it explains how ludicrous degradation turned into humour allows for psychological release. Thirdly, it looks at how Bessy's sense of humour works as a coping mechanism and an antidote for Victorian pathos apart from being a literary source of amusement.
*Keywords***:** *comic; humour; Neo-Victorian; ludicrous degradation; release; pathos.*

Introduction

The Victorian Era is known for its multifarious restraints on social and cultural life. Infested with moral impositions, diversified obsessions, racial biases and sexual taboos, one cannot deny the claustrophobic effects of the 19th century. Thinking along with The Queen's inclination to foreclose freedoms, prohibitions on what is regarded as "unseemly" pervaded even simplest activities such as family reading which may corrupt the domestic mores when practised unheedingly. Dr. Thomas Bowdler (1754-1825), the British physician and writer who gave English language the term 'bowdlerize', edited *The Family Shakespeare in Ten Volumes* in 1818 with a fair amount of expurgation of words related to body, clergymen, and religion. Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* received its share of Bowdler's enthusiastic elimination of blasphemy due to Gibbon's conspicuous attacks on Christianity.

So, the term "bowdlerize" can be seen as a capsula of moral prudence that is prescribed to the upper classes of Victorian society. While this upper segment of society "enjoyed" inhibitions in their world of thought and action, the lower classes were crushed under savagely capitalistic motivations in order to deal with vital problems such as survival. The young chimney sweepers, homeless prostitutes, underpaid handloom weavers, cotton spinners and those who worked just in order not to perish constituted the dark side of the Victorian mindset. The accounts of the doomed orphans and child workers held an important part in the Victorian novels, some of which put forth the problem of prostitution quite differently than that of *Fanny Hill* by John Cleland. In short, this dark world contained a large space for pathos of many kinds as exemplified in Dickens' novels.

Depending on these social, moral, economic and religious insecurities we may think that neither The Queen nor the Victorian people had much reason to be cheerful or humorous. Besides, some men-of-letters were against laughing. Condemning the laughers morally and intellectually in *The Philosophy of Laughter*, George Vasey approached the phenomenon as a "no laughing matter" and claimed its effects on respiratory organs to be impairing. Perhaps because of its disconcerting effects, Victorian morality was against it. "As with grief, severe pain, extreme fear or blind rage, truly uproarious laughter involves a loss of physical self-control, as the body gets momentarily out of hand and regress to the uncoordinated state of the infant" (Eagleton 3).

Many Neo-Victorian novels, as well as their predecessors, make this strange correlation between humour and pathos, because laughter is a good way of criticising injustices, wrongdoings and other forms of bitterness in life. "The serious and mirthful are in perpetual contrast in human life. It is always a gratifying deliverance to pass from the severe to the easy side of affairs; and the comic conjunction is one form of the transition" (Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* 251-2).

The subject of humour in this study draws its major source from Bain's notion of 'the ludicrous' due to its considerable emphasis on the role of class distinction and the inevitable tension it carries. Written in the nineteenth century, his superiority theory provides a more comprehensive explanation for humour than proposing one clear-cut base as to the what, the why and the how of humour. This study attempts to unearth *The Observations'* versatile approach to the notion of comic on three functional levels by resting on Alexander Bain's notion of 'ludicrous degradation.' Firstly, the study scrutinizes comicality arising out of situations in which clashes of value and meaning occur. Secondly, it explains how ludicrous degradation turned into humour allows for psychological release. Thirdly, it looks at how Bessy's sense of humour works as a coping mechanism and an antidote for Victorian pathos apart from being a literary source of amusement.

In the literature of humour, the theories proposed to explain and define the phenomenon have subsumed under three main headings, whose relation to each has been substantially untapped. However, there is no case of laughter which can be comprehended only through one of these views. The incongruity theory prevalently attributed to Kant and Schopenhauer is found by a majority of scholars of humour as the most 'plausible' account for laughter. Therefore, the merit of the superiority thesis and its implications have been more likely to be neglected compared to the other two. The element of 'superiority' is not a cog in the machine; on the contrary, there are comic instances where the principle that stirs up and shapes laughter is indubitably social inequality, which render notions of 'superiority' and 'inferiority' irremissible in Victorian and Neo-Victorian narratives.

Alexander Bain and the notion of 'the ludicrous'

Bain's two works partially dealing with humour and pathos *The Emotions and the Will* and *English Composition and Rhetoric* elaborate on the notion of 'the ludicrous' and how 'degradation' necessarily relates to it. Thinking of the fact that the superiority thesis of humour was prevalently attributed to Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes who, commonly, had political reflections on their time, it might stand out as surprising that Bain was primarily preoccupied with linguistics, psychology and philosophy of mind, and was renowned for his products of engineering and inventions.

Although Bain, in his former work, starts to initiate the subject of humour first raising the question of power obtained from a "comparison with [inferior] others", his superiority thesis should not merely be perused in contours of social inequality. Even in what we regard as obvious incongruities, there is an element of inequality at work which is measured by the degree of value of seriousness attributed to the two incongruous components in question. "The Ludicrous in composition is for the most part based on the degradation, direct or indirect, of

some person or interest – something associated with power, dignity, or gravity. It is farther requisite that the circumstances of this degradation should not be such as to produce any other strong emotion, as pity, anger, or fear" (Bain, *English Composition and Rhetoric* 104).

When ludicrous is combined with "wit" and "tender feelings" we reach humour as it is "not always permissible to degrade a person or thing by open vituperation or depreciatory adjuncts, some disguise or redeeming ingenuity is sought out" (Bain, *English Composition and Rhetoric* 109). The inclusion of wit seems more than necessary in particular cases of required obedience. If we think of the fact that "servants were the largest category of workers for the greater part of Queen Victoria's reign" (Fernandez 2) the only tool for the maids to let out their justifiable aggression was humour.

The characterization of the 'servant' in *The Observations*

Harris, in an interview with Penguin Random House, states her source of inspiration in creating such a "coarse and untutored yet so thoughtful and engaging" character (Harris, *A Conversation* n.pg.). She suggests that her aunt's peculiar character was the idea behind Bessy's "optimistic" quality and "wicked sense of humour". In the comparison made between *The Observations* and some of prominent Victorian novels in terms of their characterization of socially discriminated female characters, the writer puts forth the distinguishing aspects of her protagonist: Bessy is "a servant girl with a shady past, an immigrant, someone who is definitely situated on the margins of society" which makes her quite different than many fictional Victorian characters exposed to discrimination. (Harris, *A Conversation* n.pg.)

The novel starts with a scene where a runaway girl named Bessy Buckley looks for somewhere to stay and work around Edinburgh highlands. On her way, she comes across Arabella Reid, who is the mistress of a country house nearby. Arabella decides to employ her as a maid when she learns that Bessy is literate. However, Arabella has a condition to employ Bessy. She must keep a daily journal in which she will note everything she does and what she thinks/feels about them during the day. For some time, Arabella treats the new maid with tender care which she has not been given by her mother. Arabella teaches her punctuation, gives her books to read, and gains her trust by telling her her own secrets. We discover that Arabella is also writing a scientific treatise *sub rosa,* titled *Observations on the Habits and Nature of the Domestic Class in My Time* which subverts Bessy's trust in and love for her dear mistress and throws her into a craving for revenge. Writing this treatise Arabella aims to prove that women like herself can also 'be' as potent intellectuals as men. Her overall aim consists of finding a pattern based on the relation between a servant's physical and mental

qualities, discovering ways to derive the utmost benefits from servants and writing a prescription for reaching the ideal servant.

A "shitty" death

Having read Arabella's condemning remarks about herself, Bessy dives into her mordant past in which Mr Levy figures as the sole provider of few good memories. After her short introduction of Levy as a "rich" but "modest" man whom Bessy believed herself to be his "heart's companion", and the times of "solace" shared with him, we begin to build a positive image – unlike Arabella – of this character and perhaps even feel, to an extent, appreciation for not treating Bessy badly. However, the death account of Levy, as Bessy describes it, does not perpetuate the image we had previously formed, on the contrary, it completely shatters every sense of nobility and seriousness Levy is laden with. Moreover, this surprising blow is followed by another kind of levelling when Levy is described to have died "on a pisspot" (Harris, *The Observations* 138).

The bathetic impression that Levy's final attempt at "a leathery pellet the size of a hazelnut" in his bedroom where "the two bones of his arse pointing at me" (137) leaves on the reader, deems an equation of death with excrement inescapable, pressing us into an uncontrollable laughter almost volcanic in nature. All meaning is lost. The gravity, every serious association we have made with the notion of 'death' is suddenly inverted. Death becomes a "shitty" nothing: Hence, the value attached to 'dying for something' – one's country, freedom, love, and other supremely regarded ideals within the imagination's reach, plummets down. "Meaning itself involves a degree of psychic strain, dependent as it is on excluding possibilities which swarm in from the unconscious. If excrement plays such a key role in comedy, it is partly because shit is the very model of meaninglessness, levelling all distinctions of sense and value to the same endlessly self-identical stuff" (Eagleton 17). However, Harris' comedic structure works more than in one way. Not only does it depotentiate our conception of death by distorting the concept's signification – an appalling notion to ponder upon for many – but also assigns a certain dignity to "his pellet" by preserving "Mr Levy's last act" in a "small velvet pouch" destined to "dry out over time" and "turn into a pinch of dust," (Harris, *The Observations* 515) as we are reminded at the end of the novel. This materialised nothingness is treated with extreme seriousness and care by Bessy and, decidedly, "[she] didn't want anyone to be staring at his last act, because it was his private matter and nobody's business but his own" (138).

The ludicrous à la Bain embraces both directions of humour: "[e]ither some elevated object is treated in a low and vulgar style, or a mean object in the style of things dignified; in both cases there is an effect of degradation" (Bain, *English*

Composition and Rhetoric 106). Perhaps the final step is completed with the absurd identification of the old man with the dried excrement.

Bessy's 'unsavoury' ballad

The second instance, differently from the first one, has a comic appeal both for the reader and several genteel characters figuring as James's guests for dinner. Bessy's first feeble move made out of frustration is the attempt to ridicule Arabella when she is asked to perform one of her "marvellous songs" to entertain the guests. "…nobody likes to be treated like a performing monkey. Missus didn't care two flips for me…. Well, I'd give her a performance, by hicky I would" (Harris, *The Observations* 176). The mistress's aim to impress, to show her own capability to "domesticate" and find something to brag about educating servants into an "ideal" form backfires as Bessy chooses to sing a vulgar song whose lyrics tell the story of a man who cannot help but evacuate the excessive "intestinal gas" in "appropriate places" (176).

The occasion showcases an abundance of what Bain regards as constituents of "the genuine comic": "false…dignities", "show without meaning", "hollow pretensions", "self-importance", "hypocrisy" and "painful strivings to gain glittering positions" (Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* 251) are almost personified by the hosts and the guests at the room among whom there are also a member of the parliament and a rapist vicar). The act overtly reflects the relationship between Mill's (147-8) notions of "action," "intention" and "motivation"; the act being 'singing the vulgar song', the intention being 'mocking', and the motivation 'being mocked' in the lines of Arabella's *Observations*. Although the Reids "look quite-ill" upon hearing the coarse content at first, "Mr Duncan Pollock began to chuckle and his chuckles grew until he was hooting with laughter. Seeing that he was enjoying himself, missus and master James started to laugh too, in fact Master James became almost hysterical" (Harris, *The Observations* 178). However, Bessy's action does not fully meet her intention, and proves to be an unsuccessful attempt at ludicrous degradation.

The guests burst into laughter, instead of reproving the mistress's apparently false claims to "domestication," since a Freudian sublimation of 'fart' becomes established in the witty lyrics of the song as 'art'. What makes the guests laugh, therefore is not a sense of "power or superiority" accomplished on Bessy's side, but rather "a sudden release from a state of constraint" (Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* 250). The comic appeal for the reader may be, however, an assumed victory of proving Arabella wrong. Bain suggests that the ludicrous degradation does not necessarily be our own, "we can also laugh sympathetically, or where the act of degrading redounds to the glory of someone else" (249).

Going back to the release component in the humorous song, bringing 'fart' and 'art' together must necessarily be rethought in the light of the 'death' and

'shit' juxtaposition in the first instance. What causes release, first and foremost, is the elevation of a bodily discharge to the level of poetic beauty. This elevation will gain further importance when looked from the Victorian point of view which demarcates between body and mind (or soul). Mill's hierarchy of mental and bodily pleasures (Mill 140-1) is exemplary of this obsessive perception. One must also note the implications of the practice of covering table legs in the Victorian era.

Seen in this light, the role of the superiority thesis cannot be disregarded, as it partly constitutes the *raison d'etre* of the release theory. Release always calls for a transition from something regarded as serious, banned or repressed to something light, allowed and freed. The incongruity, on the other hand, between expectation and occurrence constitutes the interstice through which the release is actualized.

Revenge of "the ghost"

The third comic instance is intrinsic to several parodic aspects of the Neo-Victorian novel. *The Observations* cannot rate as a parody in the fullest sense with a particular 'hypotext' in Genette's terms (Genette 27). It nevertheless carries, a certain criticism of the gothic notion of 'ghost' as something repressed, hidden or underestimated by mocking it and turning it into a failed attempt at ludicrous degradation. The mocking effect becomes apparent when Bessy's sham ghost leads Arabella to insanity. Another parodic element is closely related to Arabella's forceful desire to imitate scientific discourse in her *Observations* and prove equal to men of the time while using Bessy as an experimental object rather than treating her as a person. The sham resulting in Arabella's incarceration in asylum opens a career in writing for Bessy which Arabella originally aspired to and the servants of the Victorian era were less likely to envision. The parodic aspect problematizing the inhuman treatment of the working class of the domestic sphere, therefore, will have a close relation to the dynamics of humour, hence, the superiority theory.

The comical aura around the third instance is different from the first two. Recognizing the innocuous recitation of the ballad, Smith suggests that "Bessy's mischievous nature drives much of the early comedy, but the novel reveals more sinister forces at work" (172). It is not only her realization of having been an experimental subject to Arabella's grand plan that shocks Bessy, but also the mistress's declaration of her true intentions behind "coaxing" and "bonding" processes (Harris 119) carried out recklessly while the maid believes her affection and interest to be genuine. The prejudiced condescendence condemns her for being "superstitious" (Harris, *The Observations* 112), "raw material with no common sense" (109) and "deadened, lacking in some element, perhaps emotion" (108), which makes Bessy no-match for Nora's assumed excellence. Perhaps the

worst of humiliations is being called "the lowliest of prostitutes" (127), whom Arabella only once sees "as a person" (115).

This perception reflects an entrenched social disdain for maids and the notions they represent in the nineteenth century. "A servant is a servant…one would be hard pressed to remember their names" (96). Maids are simply characterised by their physicality, and the presence or lack of virtues expected from Victorian servants such as faithfulness, obedience and honesty. "The very sight of Morag now turns my stomach. I am sure the poor girl cannot help being so ugly but I do wish that she would disappear so that my gaze would never have to alight upon her again. She is truly a wretch. I will be glad to see the back of her" (102). The fact that Morag seems shrewd enough to discern the oddity in her mistress's "sit down" and "stand up" tests incurs Arabella's distaste for her.

Reading these sentences, despite her heart-felt affection for Arabella, evokes the inevitable and irrefutable reality of inequality, and an immense heartbreak for Bessy, which makes her sick and confines her to bed for a few days. However, Bessy is not like Genet's two maids, Solange and Claire who dream of – and also enact – strangling their mistress with dish gloves and dismembering her. Her 'humour,' as pointed out by Bain, regarding the nature of the phenomena, is not antagonistic and still involves a degree of kindness since "the essence of humour is sensibility; warm, tender, fellow feeling with all forms of existence. This is widely prevalent, although not the only mode of converting ludicrous into humour" (Bain, *English Composition and Rhetoric* 107). Although Bessy's "childish prank" goes out of control and ends up with Arabella's incarceration, it is never aimed at her devastation *ab initio*.

Having read about Nora's death, Bessy immediately starts to form a plan in order to ridicule her mistress and avenge herself against Arabella's baseless and hurtful claims. Arabella's intellectual excellence, which she believes to have crowned her mental equivalence with men is downthrown with Bessy's comic plan. "One frequent occasion of laughter is startling, or seeing someone get startled, than which there is no more startling reflection of superiority on the part of some agent" (Bain, *English Composition and Rhetoric* 250). However, the device does more than give Arabella a single satisfactory fright. Moreover, it bereaves her of her reason and drags her to insanity. A sort of Foucauldian power-knowledge dynamic here works to help Bessy casting aspersions on Arabella's sanity, since she learns that Arabella is afraid of ghosts and Nora's death can make a ghost story connected with her most favoured maid (Nora) easier.

Two of Fernandez's introductory questions, "What could servants have possibly contributed to the Victorian home by their powers of reading and writing? And what dramas of literacy could be staged in fiction and non-fiction, around masters and servants?" (1) give us here, what I think is Harris's major motive. Arabella's aspired usurpation of Bessy's literacy, on the one hand enfeebles the mistress and her scientific enquiry, and on the other strengthens the

maid against Arabella's tyranny; it is a truly a comical reversal that, thanks to Arabella's plans, Bessy gets a chance to meet Dr. Lawrence and write her history to be published. Hence, Bain's ludicrous degradation not only ensures Bessy revenge, but also publicises her as a servant-writer in a Victorian society.

Arabella's madness and the curtain of secrecy behind Nora's death, however, replace the prevalently humoristic narrative with escalating pathos. "The Tender Feelings are awakened by objects of special affection, by displays of active goodness, by humane sentiments, by pain and misery, and by pleasures, especially such as are gentle rather than acute. In highly pathetic situations, several of these modes are combined" (Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* 99). Arabella's pangs of conscience for Nora's rape, impregnation and suicide which leads the mistress to a wilful wounding of Reverend Pullock, render Arabella an identifiable and even pitiful character for the reader.

The ending is meaningful in a way that justifies the intrinsic humour of life itself. Similar to Rose's commentary on Hegelian history as "a ceaseless comedy, according to which our aims and outcomes constantly mismatch each other, and provoke yet another revised aim action and discordant outcome (Rose 71), life has a comic trajectory of its own if one can see the comedic within the tragic.

Humour as a coping mechanism

The reason behind Bessy's disappointment and indignation of being labelled as "the lowliest of prostitutes" (Harris, *The Observations* 127) is not only the humiliation these words inflict, but more dominantly, Arabella's alleged compassionate behaviour towards Bessy which turns out to be a bait to establish trust.

What makes Bessy so attached to her mistress – apart from her deceptive remarks and bodily signs of endearment – that she decidedly seeks to ruin Arabella's plan? The reader gets the necessary answer only towards the middle of the novel where Bessy starts to narrate her own doleful history and her formidable relationship to her mother. "Much of what went on in those days is a source of great shame for me. It is difficult to write about and I am sure not a very pleasant read! Indeed, it makes me feel queasy to remember some of the terrible things that followed and I dread writing about it" (Harris, *The Observations* 152).

To the social sphere outside home of a Victorian maid, is added an abusive mother, who goes as far as to enact incest with her daughter in order to gain money, and leaves her defenceless against the men she brings home. It is true we feel pathos – what Bain calls "tender feelings" – for Arabella and especially Nora; but a heavier kind of pathos is experienced at the knowledge of Bessy's ill-fated childhood. But as opposed to Nora and Arabella, Bessy manages to decide her life's destination despite her mother – who at last comes back to ask for money –

and her traumatic childhood. Bessy's humorous temperament rescues her from sharing a similar end with Nora. "[A]s soon as old Whacker discovered that 'the love of his life' was carrying a child, away off he jigged out town taking his jack with him, never to be seen nor heard again, well I don't suppose his jack made a sound. Mind you perhaps it nickered" (Harris, *The Observations* 142). Her humour allows her to laugh away the grotesque details of her unfortunate experiences at the most dreadful moments. "I knew better than to get involved in disagreements between Brigid and her men, I had done so once before and got a bruise on my arse the size of Canada for my trouble" (148). Bessy can discover the comic aspect within the severely tragic moments of her life. "The life of every individual, viewed as a whole and in general, and when only its most significant features are emphasized, is really a tragedy; but gone through in detail it has the character of a comedy" (Schopenhauer 322). Schopenhauer's pessimism regards the comical aspect of life as a "mockery" on human bitterness, as it devoids him even of the "dignity of tragic characters." However, tragic and comic perception bear more profound outlooks on one's way to evaluate certain situations one has gone through. It is a must for the humorous temperament to see the funny side of the obstacles and miseries one finds oneself immersed in. Making fun of tragic components of man's life gives him a certain pleasure for overcoming difficulties and gaining victory over what he believes to be his "ordeals." "Emotion of power," stemming from the feeling of being superior not only to someone, as Bain points out, but also to something that hits him as especially challenging, gains its possessor a merited zest for life.

Conclusion

The account of Bessy Buckley shows that humour can turn haplessness of life into chances for fortuitous yieldings. Transition from ludicrous degradation to humour is made complete with evasion from harmful hostility, an addition of tender feelings for the other and wit. Humour as a sublimation of frustration necessarily retains either a desire of superiority or at least, as we have seen in Bessy's narrative, a wish to compensate one's loss of dignity by castigating the opponent. Bain's superiority thesis of humour is particularly an epideictic approach to the Victorian notion of comic as the era was a sight for class distinction and restrictive 'moral' values. The ability to mock one's own miseries at one's own expense transforms the tragic components of human life into comic ones.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Online Satirical News as Instances of Liquid Racism: Evidence from Greek

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Abstract: When discussing the relationship between humour and racism, research usually concentrates on ethnic or racist jokes or on other humorous texts which expressly target migrants or other minorities. Relevant studies more or less explicitly ascribe to *critical humour studies* investigating topics such as how and why humour targeting the linguistic, cultural, or religious Other reproduces and maintains social discrimination and inequality, as well as how and why the generic conventions of humorous genres do not incite the audience to think critically of their content but instead enhance their tolerance for discriminatory and racist standpoints. In this context, the present study explores humorous texts that at first sight appear to have antiracist intentions. More specifically, I analyse a corpus of satirical news coming from popular Greek websites and targeting majority people for their racist views and practices towards migrants. The analysis is based on the concepts of *script opposition* and *target* as defined in the framework of the *General Theory of Verbal Humour*. The findings suggest that distinguishing between antiracist and racist interpretations is not an easy or straightforward matter: humour seems to blur the boundary between racism and antiracism. In order to account for this dimension of humour, I exploit the concept of *liquid racism* put forward by Weaver (*The Rhetoric of Racist Humour*) to account for the ambiguities of humorous discourse when it involves racist and antiracist meanings and interpretations.
Keywords: humour; satirical news; racism; antiracism; liquid racism; General Theory of Verbal Humour.

Introduction

When discussing the relationship between humour and racism, research usually concentrates on ethnic or racist jokes or other humorous texts which expressly target migrants[1] or other minorities. Relevant studies more or less explicitly ascribe to *critical humour studies* investigating topics such as how and why humour targeting the linguistic, cultural, or religious Other reproduces and maintains social discrimination and inequality; how and why the generic conventions of humorous genres do not incite the audience to think critically of their content but instead enhance their tolerance for discriminatory and racist standpoints; what kind of rhetorical strategies (e.g. disclaimers, denials) are employed by the (re)producers of racist jokes to mitigate their hostility and to exonerate themselves from the accusation of being racists; and how discriminatory humour may force the targeted groups to assimilate to prevalent social norms so as to avoid being ridiculed due to their differences (see among others Archakis and Tsakona, "Racism in Recent Greek Migrant Jokes"; "Greek Migrant Jokes Online"; Archakis et al.; Billig; Hill; Lockyer and Pickering; Malmquist; Santa Ana; Weaver, *The Rhetoric of Racist Humour*).

In this context, I will attempt a different approach by exploring humorous texts that at first sight appear to have antiracist intentions: I will analyse satirical news coming from popular Greek websites and targeting majority people for their racist views and practices towards migrants. My analysis will reveal that distinguishing between antiracist and racist interpretations is not an easy or straightforward matter: humour seems to blur the boundary between racism and antiracism. In order to account for this dimension of humour, I exploit the concept of *liquid racism* put forward by Weaver (*The Rhetoric of Racist Humour*) to account for the ambiguities of humorous discourse when it involves racist and antiracist meanings.

In what follows, I first discuss the concepts of *racism*, *new racism*, and *liquid racism* and then I provide a brief overview of the literature about satirical news. The description of the corpus examined and the analytical methodology follow and an indicative example of the data is analysed to show that humour in seemingly antiracist satirical news may reproduce racist stereotypes. The final section contains the conclusions of the study.[2]

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[1] The term *migrant* is here used as a hypernym of *immigrants*, *refugees*, and *asylum seekers*, unless the Greek translation equivalent of one of the hyponyms is attested in the data under scrutiny.
[2] This study is further developed and presented in more detail in Tsakona (2024).

Racism, antiracism, new racism, and liquid racism[3]

Modern nation-states, at least in the western world, are based on the "one state-one nation norm" (Irvin and Gal 63): monoculturalism and monolingualism constitute dominant values within them. Nation-states are more often than not perceived and represented as pure entities with internal linguistic and cultural coherence and well-defined geographical borders. Such coherence, however, is never easy or even feasible, but is met with resistance by people who may not align with the dominant sociocultural ideals (i.e. endogenous and exogenous minorities). In such cases, nationalism as the founding ideology of nation-states takes the form of racism exercising pressure on resisting minorities and forcing them either to align with national ideals or to abandon the nation-state (see also Archakis, "The Representations of Racism" 35; "Tracing Racism" 1262-63).

Racism appears to be the most efficient means for achieving homogeneity within nation-state borders through giving privileges and advantages, i.e. economic and political power as well as access to recourses, only to those who consent to its directives while excluding the Others (Golash-Boza 133). So, racism is "constituted by social practices of discrimination ... and relationships of power abuse by dominant groups, organisations, and institutions" (van Dijk, *Discourse and Power* 103; see also van Dijk, "Discourse and the Denial of Racism"). Such discriminatory practices and relations of power abuse are premised on "socially shared and negatively oriented mental representations of Us about Them" (van Dijk, *Discourse and Power* 103), that is, on negative stereotypes and prejudice which "result in the problematisation, marginalisation and exclusion" of the Others (van Dijk, *Racism and Discourse* 3, 7; see also Trepagnier 1).

Despite this oppressive and discriminatory function of racio-national discourse, we should not overlook the fact that humanitarian and antiracist values promoting the acceptance of the Others are in wide circulation, especially after the racist crimes of World War II (van Dijk, "Discourse and the Denial of Racism" 95-97). Many liberal democracies in the western world adopt laws promoting tolerance, the acceptance of the Others, and equality between majority and minority populations (van Dijk, "Discourse and the Denial of Racism" 95-96; see also van Dijk, *Antiracist Discourse*).

Given that racism in its violent and explicit versions is denounced in the western world, a more subtle form of racism emerges, that is, *new racism*, which "wants to be democratic and respectable, and hence *first off denies that it is racism*" (van Dijk, "New(s) Racism" 34, my emphasis). In order to highlight the pervasiveness of new racism, van Dijk ("New(s) Racism") observes that

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[3] This section draws on extracts from Archakis and Tsakona ("A Migrant's Public Apology"; "Antiracist and Racist Discourse") with appropriate modifications so as to suit the purposes of the present article.

[e]specially because of their often subtle and symbolic nature, many forms of the 'new' racism are discursive: they are expressed, enacted and confirmed by text and talk, such as everyday conversations, board meetings, job interviews, policies, laws, parliamentary debates, political propaganda, textbooks, scholarly articles, movies, TV programmes and news reports in the press, among hundreds of other genres. They appear mere talk, and far removed from the open violence and forceful segregation of the old racism. Yet, they may be just as effective to marginalise and exclude minorities (34).

This discursive nature of new racism is nowadays attested in mitigated verbal racist attacks, since national majority speakers attempt to denounce racism, to engage in charity actions (i.e. through offering occasional help to migrants with the expectation of their assimilation), to use ambiguous disclaimers such as *I'm not a racist, but...*, *I have nothing against blacks, but...*, *not all migrants are criminals, but...* (van Dijk "Discourse and the Denial of Racism"; also Gavins and Simpson; Goodman and Rowe) as well as to use humour to disguise racism as a kind of socially acceptable entertainment (see among others Weaver, *The Rhetoric of Racist Humour*; Ervine; Pérez). All these contribute to covering up and (unwillingly) perpetuating racist stereotypes and to effectively but covertly (re)producing inequality between minority and majority members (Trepagnier; van Dijk, "Discourse and the Denial of Racism" 88, 95, 96; "New(s) Racism" 49).

This oscillation between antiracist claims and racist views, practices, or attacks results in what Weaver (*The Rhetoric of Racist Humour*) calls *liquid racism* (see also Weaver, "Liquid Racism"; Weaver and Bradley). Through the concept of liquid racism, Weaver attempts to capture the emergence of both racist and antiracist/non-racist meanings from texts or extracts which are usually intended as non-racist, subversive of racism, or even clearly antiracist, but turn out to be polysemous and potentially racist:

> Liquid racism confronts us as a different form of racism with which to deal. It is fluid, difficult to collect and identify because it may escape or dissolve before it can be contained, and is explicitly encouraged or given coverage in mass media forms. This is a racism that requires reflexivity in the reader when questions are asked on its meaning, social impact or implications for the self. … Despite its elusiveness, liquid racism can appear as a structural form of racism that reproduces either embodied or culturally racist sign-systems. … It is a hidden or furtive racism … [and] requires the grouping or layering of signs that produces multiple racist and non-racist meanings (Weaver, *The Rhetoric of Racist Humour* 153, 154).

As a result, the boundaries between racist and antiracist discourse are often blurred and multiple interpretations emerge from the same utterance or text. Such liquid meanings and ambiguities lead to "immunity to criticism" (Weaver, *The Rhetoric of Racist Humour* 63), which in turn renders liquid racism an equally if not perhaps more serious and dangerous form of racism than the 'old', 'easily recognisable' racism.

It is exactly in this context that the present study sets out to investigate how liquid racism emerges from satirical news referring to migrants and targeting majority people for the racist ways they treat or perceive migrants. The texts examined here could be described not only as intended to produce humour but also as antiracist in the sense that they attempt to defend migrants and to denigrate racist values and practices prevailing among majority members (see among others Archakis and Tsakona, "Antiracist and Racist Discourse"; van Dijk, *Antiracist Discourse*). Yet, as I intend to show in the analysis, they do not manage to refrain from reproducing racist values and views – and humour plays a pivotal role in this.

On satirical news

Satirical news constitutes a prototypical humorous genre in the sense that it cannot exist without the presence of some kind of humour or related phenomena such as parody, irony, exaggeration, and the absurd. Two main forms of satirical news are usually investigated in the relevant literature: TV shows mimicking 'serious' TV news and written articles mimicking 'serious' newspaper articles and usually published in specialised websites. In both cases, satirical news parody 'serious' journalistic discourse and mock its (alleged) objectivity, factuality, and professionalism. Satirical news is more often than not perceived as a hybrid genre combining comedy and political opinion or news discourse and fiction. Through establishing intertextual links to a variety of genres, satirical news aims to criticise sociopolitical affairs, politicians' statements and actions, journalists' ways of representing current events, celebrities' public speech and life-style, as well as citizens' views and practices concerning sociopolitical issues. Its authors are more often than not inspired and motivated by real-life events reported by mainstream media to create exaggerated, parodying, or fictionalised versions of them in an effort to entertain the audience (Brugman et al.; Droog et al.; Ermida; Schwartz; Shilikhina).

Satirical news, especially in its written form, which is the focus of the present study, is often investigated in parallel with (and/or in comparison with) *fake news* not only due to their common fictional core, but also because the audience may at times mistake satirical news for fake news; in other words, they may interpret the former as accurate reports of real-life events and thus they may be deceived by their content (see among others Frank; Wasserman; Zhang et al.). De Sarkar et al. provide a definition of *satirical news* clearly distinguishing it from *fake news*:

> News satire is a genre of deceptive news that is found on the web, with the intent of dispensing satire in the form of legitimate news articles. These articles differ

from 'fake' news, in the sense that fake news intends to mislead people by providing untrue facts, while satirical news intends to ridicule and criticise something by providing satirical comments or through fictionalised stories. Satire is the intention of the author to be discovered as 'fake', unlike fake news, in which the intention is to make … the readers believe in the news as true (3371).

As already mentioned in the Introduction, the present study has a critical orientation, which, at least to the best of my knowledge, does not seem to be common. In a critical analysis of satirical news, Anderson and Kincaid observe that the humorous representations of sociopolitical affairs offered in such texts may convey criticism, yet they exhibit a rather conservative orientation through

- supporting militarised world views;
- frequently displaying ethnocentrism and promoting nationalist/patriotic propaganda;
- drawing on ethnic and national stereotypes to elicit automatic laughter from the audience;
- frequently using demeaning stereotypes to legitimise 'normativity';
- offering instances of ideological Othering;
- promoting feelings of political inefficacy, alienation, and cynicism;
- only partially deconstructing hegemonic discourses;
- reaffirming authority, power structures, neo-conservative orthodoxies, and conformism discourses among viewers;
- diverting audience attention from legitimate grievances at democracy's expense (174-178).

In other words, they argue that the criticism included in satirical news cannot be considered threatening for the political status quo, as it usually stays within "the implicit institutional bounds" (Anderson and Kincaid 183).

Studies in satirical news specifically referring to sociopolitical aspects of migration also seem to be scarce. Feldman and Borum Chattoo examine satirical news as a means for increasing audience engagement with the Syrian refugees' issue and for changing the former's negative views and attitudes towards Syrian refugees. Even though these authors acknowledge the possibility that the use of humour may lead the audience to discard or ignore the content of satirical news as non-serious or trivial, they underline the potential of satire for social change through critique, for sensitising the audience to specific sociopolitical issues, and for inciting them to reflect on such issues. When it comes to satirical news referring to refugees, satirical news could, in Feldman and Borum Chattoo's view, "humanise refugees and challenge fear-laden assertions that connect them with terrorism" (295) and perhaps other racist stereotypes.

Contrary to Anderson and Kincaid's critical views concerning the sociopolitical effects and functions of satirical news (see above), Feldman and Borum Chattoo's study offers a positive/positivist look on the potential of satirical news and antiracist humour by highlighting the persuasive function of humour: satirical news could, in their view, reduce the impact of negative stereotypes and promote antiracist values. It is exactly at this point where their study meets the present one: the authors of the satirical news examined here seem to attempt to defend migrants and, in general, adopt an antiracist perspective as they humorously attack those politicians, celebrities, citizens, etc. who support racist views and perform racist acts. Nevertheless, in what follows, I intend to show that, despite their antiracist intentions, these authors do not manage to avoid reproducing racist values and stereotypes: satirical news may support conservative and racist standpoints, a point also made by Anderson and Kincaid.

Data and methodology

The data under scrutiny come from two popular Greek websites, namely *To Κουλούρι/To Koulouri* ('the bagel') and *To Βατράχι/To Vatrahi* ('the frog'), which publish exclusively pieces of satirical news. Both include extensive disclaimers reminding the readers of the fictional quality of their articles, since many articles draw on real-life events reported in the media and fictionalise or parody them. Moreover, in both cases, the authors of satirical news maintain their anonymity. For the purposes of the present study, the key words *μετανάστης/τρια* '(im)migrant', *πρόσφυγας* 'refugee', and related terms were used in the search engines of the two satirical news websites. The search provided us with 63 texts referring to migrants and published from September 2012 until September 2021.

The data were analysed with the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (Attardo, *Humorous Texts*; *The Linguistics of Humour*), in particular with the knowledge resources of *script opposition* and *target*. Script opposition accounts for the incongruity emerging from two incompatible scripts included in a single text and causing a violation of readers' expectations and hence humour[4]. The target involves the person, group, idea, institution, etc. responsible for the violated expectations; in other words, the entity ridiculed through the humorous incongruity/script opposition. From the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* I also employ the analytical tools called *punch lines* and *jab lines*, which involve text extracts including a script opposition: punch lines are identified at the end of a text, while jab lines before the end of a text (see Attardo, *Humorous Texts* 82-83; Tsakona, "Towards a Revised Typology").

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[4] The terms *incongruity* and *script opposition* are used interchangeably.

The analysis of the data reveals that all the texts seem to be pro-migrant and antiracist, in the sense that they target majority members for their racist views and/or practices. None of the articles examined employs humour to denigrate migrants. More specifically, the articles ridicule various Greek governments (both Left and Right), Prime Ministers, politicians, the Greek media, journalists, celebrities, and Greek citizens. Less often, international institutions supporting migrants, foreign politicians, and tourists visiting Greece are also targeted for the same reasons. The intended as antiracist humour attempted by the authors of these texts does not manage to avoid stereotyping at migrants' expense or trivialising their lives and living conditions. Even in articles expressly defending migrants, the authors have not managed to refrain from evoking racist discourse, even in an indirect or superficially subversive manner. In this sense, the data examined here constitute instances of liquid racism, as will be shown in the piece of satirical news analysed in the following section.

Data analysis

A significant number of the texts included in the corpus examined here reproduces well known negative stereotypes about migrants: for example, migrants are dirty, dark-skinned people, they talk 'inferior' languages and 'bad' Greek, they are hostile, illegal criminals, and (hence) unwanted individuals (see also Archakis and Tsakona, "Racism in Recent Greek Migrant Jokes"; "Greek Migrant Jokes Online"; Tsakona *Exploring the Sociopragmatics of Online Humour*; "Liquid Racism in Greek Online Satirical News", and references therein). Even though these texts do not seem to intend to ridicule migrants (in fact, their humour targets majority members), they end up representing them in a stereotypical manner. Due to space limitations only one indicative example will be analysed here[5].

Γονιός που δεν πιστεύει στα εμβόλια ιδιαίτερα ανήσυχος ότι τα παιδιά των προσφύγων θα κολλήσουν το γιο του αρρώστιες

20 Οκτωβρίου 2016
Σε «αναμμένα κάρβουνα» κάθεται τις τελευταίες ημέρες ο Γιώργος Σ., πατέρας ενός πεντάχρονου παιδιού το οποίο πήγε για πρώτη φορά στο σχολείο τον περασμένο μήνα.
Ο μικρός Σοφοκλής, παρακολουθεί τα μαθήματα της πρώτης δημοτικού παρέα με αρκετά προσφυγόπουλα, *με αποτέλεσμα ο 37χρονος πατέρας να*

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[5] The articles were translated into English by the author for the purposes of the present study. Punch and jab lines are marked in italics. The spelling of the original Greek texts is maintained. The photo accompanying this piece of satirical news has been removed for copyright reasons.

αισθάνεται ιδιαίτερα ανήσυχος, αφού δεν έχει εμβολιάσει τον μικρό για καμία αρρώστια. Αντίθετα, ο άνδρας δηλώνει κατηγορηματικά αντίθετος στον εμβολιασμό, θεωρώντας πως τα εμβόλια δεν είναι τίποτα παραπάνω από φτηνά κόλπα των φαρμακευτικών εταιρειών ώστε να δημιουργήσουν στα μικρά παιδιά ευαισθησία, ωθώντας τα προς τα φάρμακα.

«Σιγά μην πάρω κι εγώ μέρος στο πάρτι εκατομμυρίων που στήνεται με θύματα τα παιδιά μας. Το ανοσοποιητικό τους σύστημα δουλεύει μια χαρά, χωρίς να χρειάζεται τις πανάκριβες σύριγγες. Για το μόνο που ανησυχώ, είναι για τις αρρώστιες που φέρνουν τα παιδιά των προσφύγων, οι οποίες είναι άγνωστες στους ελληνικούς οργανισμούς. Δεν πιστεύω κάτι παραμύθια ότι δήθεν όλα τα παιδιά κολλάνε τις ίδιες αρρώστιες. Σιγά μην κολλάει τα ίδια ο Σοφοκλάκος με τον κάθε ξένο», εξανίσταται ο Γιώργος, ο οποίος σε ερώτηση δημοσιογράφου μας για το ενδεχόμενο να ευθύνεται η απουσία εμβολίων για τις πιθανές αρρώστιες του παιδιού του ξεσπά:

«Είστε κι εσείς, τα βρωμερά ΜΜΕ, μέρος του συστήματος, για να εξυπηρετήσετε τα συμφέροντα του κεφαλαίου. Αν αρρωστήσει ο μικρός δεν θα φταίει ότι δεν έβαλε στο σώμα του τα βλαβερά εμβόλια, αλλά ότι έκατσε στο ίδιο θρανίο με έναν πρόσφυγα. Ίσως τα μικρόβια του πρόσφυγα μιλάνε άλλη γλώσσα, δεν ξέρω. Πάντως είναι επικίνδυνα».

Σε ότι αφορά τους γιατρούς, συστήνουν στα παιδιά των προσφύγων να μένουν μακριά από όσα Ελληνόπουλα δεν έχουν εμβολιαστεί, για λόγους προστασίας της πνευματικής υγείας και της κοινής λογικής των προσφυγόπουλων, ενώ διαψεύδεται η φήμη πως *διάφοροι Σύλλογοι Γονέων και Κηδεμόνων ανά τη χώρα ψάχνουν εξονυχιστικά τα τάπερ των προσφύγων για να ελέγξουν αν οι γονείς τους τα βάζουν να κουβαλάνε με το ζόρι στο σχολείο ιούς για να πλήξουν την υγεία των συμπατριωτών μας* (Anonymous).

Parent who does not believe in vaccination is particularly concerned that refugee children will contaminate his son with diseases

October 20th, 2016

George S., father of a 5-year-old child who went to school for the first time last month, is on pins and needles during the past few days.

Little Sophocles [i.e. George's son] attends the courses of the first grade together with several refugee children, *hence his 37-year-old father feels particularly concerned, because he has not had his son vaccinated for any disease. On the contrary, the man is firmly opposed to vaccination, claiming that vaccines are nothing more than cheap tricks of pharmaceutical companies to render children sensitive and to force them to take medication.*

"Of course, I am not going to participate in this million-euro party [i.e. lucrative fraud] *at the expense of our children. Their immunity system works just fine without the need for extremely expensive needles. The only thing that worries me is the diseases refugee children carry, which are unknown to Greek organisms. I don't believe in the fairy tales that supposedly all children are infected by the same diseases. There is no way little Sophocles is infected with the same disease as foreigners",* fiercely protests George, who lashes out when our journalist asks him whether the fact that his son is not vaccinated could be the reason for potential infections:

"You, filthy media, are also part of the system, you aim to serve the interests of capitalism. If my kid becomes sick, it won't be because he did not put the harmful vaccines in his body, but because he sat next to a refugee [in the classroom]. Maybe the refugee's germs speak another language, I don't know. They are dangerous anyway".

As far as the doctors are concerned, they recommend that refugee children stay away from unvaccinated Greek children to protect their mental health and common sense, while the rumour that [members of] *various Parent Teacher Associations throughout the country search refugee children's lunch boxes thoroughly to check whether their parents force them to carry viruses at school to harm the health of our compatriots*, is refuted.

In this piece of satirical news, humour is, first, based on the incongruous fact that the father who worries about his son's health has kept him unvaccinated against various diseases. Often, in countries hosting migrants (including Greece), majority parents worry and publicly complain about migrant children (supposedly) being unvaccinated, thus portraying them as responsible for the potential transmission of infectious diseases to majority children through their socialisation in the same schools (Temperekidou). Humour is also produced by George's incongruous claims that migrants carry different germs/diseases than Greeks, that the vaccines are harmful for children and beneficial only for pharmaceutical companies who make money out them, and that the media in turn promote solely the financial interests of pharmaceutical companies, not public health. Finally, humour emerges from doctors' unconventional recommendations towards refugee children and from Greek majority parents' exaggerated practices to prevent refugee children from supposedly infecting majority ones with 'their' diseases. The jab/punch lines attested in this article are based on script oppositions such as the following ones:

• Majority parents who worry about their children's health vaccinate them/refuse to vaccinate them.

• Majority children suffer from the same diseases as refugee ones/different diseases from refugee ones.

- Majority children become sick because they are unvaccinated/because they socialise with refugee children.
- Vaccines are meant to protect people from diseases/only to make profit for the pharmaceutical companies at the expense of people's health.
- The media promote vaccines to protect public health/only for the benefit of pharmaceutical companies.
- Majority parents believe that their children should stay away from refugee children to remain physically healthy/Majority doctors recommend that refugee children stay away from majority children to maintain their mental health and common sense.
- Majority parents wish to protect their children from infectious diseases/believe that refugee parents deliberately infect majority people.

Such humour ridicules Greek majority people and parents like George S. in particular, who hold racist beliefs to the effect that refugees do not take adequate care of their own and their children's health and thus become responsible for the transmission of contagious, dangerous, and even unknown to the Greek context, diseases. Hence, according to the same racist stereotype, refugee children should not attend Greek schools and socialise with majority children (on the widespread circulation of such views, see Athanasopoulou; Panagaki et al.; Temperekidou, and references therein). Simultaneously, through humour this article defends migrants and their children by suggesting that they would rather stay away from majority members. In this sense, it targets Greek racist people and exhibits antiracist intentions by defending migrants against racist practices and views.

However, it should be not be overlooked that, in order to produce such humour, the anonymous author relies on and recycles widely held racist stereotypes, which represent migrants in a negative manner as filthy, unhealthy, and dangerous for public health individuals who deliberately harm majority people. Such representations are very often used as excuses by racists for mistreating migrants and using physical or verbal violence against them, or even for stigmatising, marginalising, or even excluding them from the host communities. The lack of hygiene stereotypically attributed to migrants implies a lack of moral values as well, and eventually justifies violent or other actions for 'protecting' oneself against the Other. After all, there is a strong metaphorical connection between dirtiness and immorality, especially when attempts are made to portray specific people or groups as unwanted outcasts (Douglas; Kövecses). Consequently, there seems to be a clash between the antiracist intentions of the humourist author and his/her public reproduction of racist views intimidating and marginalising migrants.

This contradiction in meanings and readings emerging from the same text renders it an instance of liquid racism. Readers may focus on the fact that, as a piece of satirical news, the article ridicules Greek racist parents and may eventually (more or less) overlook the extensive reproduction of the racist stereotypes humour is premised on. In other words, humour could draw readers' attention to its entertaining dimension, thus not encouraging them to critically scrutinise the racist stereotypes embedded therein. It could also be the case that readers who oppose to vaccination and/or hold racist beliefs do not grasp the humorous ridiculing of racist stereotypes against migrants and thus confirm the 'accuracy' and popularity of their beliefs.

Conclusion

The present study has tried to demonstrate that distinguishing between racism and antiracism in written satirical news is not a straightforward matter. The data examined here appear to have antiracist intentions since they employ humour to ridicule Greek majority members for their racist perspectives and practices; yet they do not refrain from reproducing racist values and views. The indicative example analysed above reveals that this may be achieved by evoking racist stereotypes even when expressly defending migrants.

The fact that both racist and antiracist meanings and interpretations can emerge from satirical news articles renders them instances of liquid racism. In this sense, new racism is reinforced and further disseminated: mitigated forms of racism denying their racist quality through seemingly antiracist humour may eventually pass as antiracism. Humour thus becomes a means of perpetuating liquid and new racism. At the same time, humour may distract readers from concentrating on the reproduction of racist values and views and, consequently, they may perceive these texts as exclusively antiracist ones. When racism is missed or overlooked, it becomes normalised and the distinction between racism and antiracism becomes blurred (see among others Archakis and Tsakona, "Antiracist and Racist Discourse"; Archakis et al.; Trepagnier; Tsakona, "Talking about Humour").

More research is required to further scrutinise the subtle but effective workings of racism in satirical news and other online satirical genres, since critical approaches to such texts so far appear to be scarce. This seems to be particularly important in a "world of fast-moving sharing and likes, [where] most social media users do not take time to critically analyse articles before reacting and moving on" (Bedard and Schoenthaler 614). By adopting a critical perspective on humour and not perceiving is as 'mere fun' or 'just joking', I have tried to demonstrate that humour may be a socially acceptable and superficially innocuous way of representing minority lives and living conditions in a negative

manner, thus further contributing to their marginalisation (see also Pérez, and references therein). Undervaluing the presence of Others in our communities and neglecting their needs constitute forms of racism and, as such, reproduce social inequality and injustice.

Finally, Weaver admits that humorous/satirical texts which are instances of liquid racism cannot be restrained or censored: "Censoring satire would likely prove self-defeating and encourage increasingly coded forms of racist expression, and where racism is debated or ambiguous, might lead to subtle authoritarianism" (*The Rhetoric of Racist Humour*, 180-1). Instead, he suggests that

> we might see the analysis [of liquid racism] as a substitute for censoring it, as its rhetorical effects *can* be combatted if they can be understood, providing arguments on *how* it works and *what* it does, rather than emotively charged, serious proclamations calling for its removal (Weaver, *The Rhetoric of Racist Humour*, 191, emphasis in the original).

In other words, liquid (or any other form of) racism cannot be eliminated through censoring humour, but it can be critically analysed and brought to the limelight through relevant research projects and critical literacy activities (see among others Archakis and Tsakona, "Antiracist and Racist Discourse"; Tsakona, "Talking about Humour"; *Recontextualising Humour*, 181-188). Sensitising readers to its presence and enabling them to detect it may be the most effective weapon we have against it.

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Article

Humour, Wit, and Society in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* ("The Author's Preface")

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Humour and Pathos in Literature and the Arts (I)

Abstract: The present essay provides an analysis of humour in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, exploring its various forms, functions, and meanings. After introducing the idea of the *lex inversa* of humour, which can be observed in Sterne's unconventional storytelling style, it analyses the "Author's Preface" that appears at the end of the third volume of the book rather than at its beginning. The essay compares the satirical criticism of modern introductions found in Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* and the humorous but balanced mixture of wit and judgment in *Tristram Shandy*'s Preface. It examines the evolution of the concept of humour in the eighteenth century and traces its various meanings in Sterne's book, from ancient bodily theories to psychological character construction. It argues that Sterne's portrayal of odd humours aligns him with those who depicted England as a land of freedom, where humour played a crucial role in challenging wrong societal norms and liberating humanity from hypocrisy. This sympathetic form of comedy portrays human flaws for communal laughter, promoting harmony and balance. After addressing the ambiguity surrounding the actual subject of Sterne's "learned" satire, the essay concludes by emphasising Sterne's wit as a form of his humour, especially in the paradoxical defence of wit in the "Author's Preface", which he contrasts with the false severity of the "grave folks". The essay argues that Sterne's humorous strategy provides society with a moral foundation of humanity, sociability, and freedom.
Keywords: *Laurence Sterne; Tristram Shandy; humour; wit; satire; sociability; freedom.*

The *lex inversa* of humour

According to the German philosopher Klaus Vieweg, "Humour follows the *lex inversa*". (2013, 62) Vieweg quotes the Romantic German writer Jean Paul Friedrich Richter, who, in his treatise entitled *Vorschüle der Ästhetik*, wrote that humour's "descent to hell paves its way for an ascent to heaven" (Jean Paul, 91). This *lex inversa* makes humorous writings adopt the rhetorical figure of the hysteron proteron, "that before this", or a world turned upside down. This *hysteron proteron* causes tension in the relationship between world and word, reference and imagination, traditional morality and scepticism towards human manners and mores, or, as Sterne puts it, between judgment and wit.

A mock Lockean disquisition on the relationship between wit and judgment is contained in *Tristram Shandy*'s "Author's Preface" (*TS*, III, xx, 227-38), which is a striking example of *hysteron proteron* because it is presented in the second half of the third volume of the work instead of the normal position before the beginning of the fictional story. Furthermore, it is uncommon for a preface or introduction in a piece of fiction to be written by one of the characters. Typically, authors write a preface to explain their intentions as writers. Thus, an introduction cannot belong to the same level of the story. In the "Author's Preface", on the contrary, it is the narrator of the story, Tristram, who discusses aesthetic theories and establishes his narrative poetics without breaking the fictional continuity of his narrative sequence. He reflects on the most appropriate way of narrating by connecting narrative matters and details through associations, on the one hand, or, on the other, by giving it a formal overall coherence through hierarchically disposed structures.

At this juncture, one may assume that Tristram, with his predilection for digressions and narrative wanderings, has forsaken his tale's structure and overarching plan in favour of witty but disorienting associations. This approach may seem misguided as the story appears to lack direction. The author seems to get lost in his ramblings, as when he says that he starts "with writing the first sentence–and trusting to Almighty God for the second" (*TS*, VIII, ii, 656). Yet, the "Author's Preface" is not the result of a narrative mistake but is intentionally placed in the correct position. The third volume of *Tristram Shandy* has a pivotal role in the overall work: it introduces the much-awaited birth of the hero, although it is a disastrous episode in the life of the narrator because his nose–whatever we may understand by that word–is crushed by Dr Slop's new-fangled forceps.

Additionally, the third volume of *Tristram Shandy* introduces some key themes, with the result that the narrative begins to proceed more smoothly, though not without the usual digressions, towards some resolution, which will arrive with Tristram's "choicest morsel" (*TS*, IV, xxxii, 401; IX, xxiv, 779), his story of Uncle Toby's amours with Widow Wadman in last two volumes of the book. Thus, the third volume's central position in the narrative economy of *Tristram*

Shandy is thematised within the narrative, based as it is on an ironic objectification process that materialises metaphors and ironically confers them an almost objective quality. The use of a catachresis to create a pseudo-reification of meanings, thus transforming proverbial or metaphorical concepts into objects, had previously been employed by Jonathan Swift as a means of satirising the materialistic and modern culture that reduces the world and humanity into mere aggregates of things.

The chapter immediately following that which accommodates the "Author's Preface" mentions the squeaky hinges of the parlour door at Shandy Hall, which distract the philosophical Walter Shandy from his musings about the best parturition for his child. Walter, a rationalist with an analytical and hair-splitting intelligence, had believed for years that a few drops of oil would fix the hinges. However, the hinges had never been oiled:

> ——Inconsistent soul that man is!—languishing under wounds, which he has the power to heal!—his whole life a contradiction to his knowledge!—his reason, that precious gift of God to him—(instead of pouring in oyl) serving but to sharpen his sensibilities, ——to multiply his pains and render him more melancholy and uneasy under them!—poor unhappy creature, that he should do so!——are not the necessary causes of misery in this life enow, but he must add voluntary ones to his stock of sorrow;———struggle against evils which cannot be avoided, and submit to others, which a tenth part of the trouble they create him, would remove from his heart for ever? (*TS*, III, xxi, 239)

The hinges of Shandy Hall are a catachresis (and a synecdoche) of the "still point of the turning world", to use T.S. Eliot's phrase.[1] They continue to squeak and interrupt Walter because he, driven by his abstract reasoning, prefers to discuss them rather than mend them. Thus, Walter lingers in his involuntarily self-inflicted gloom and neglects the opportunity to heal himself through his reasoning abilities. His inaction results in increased melancholy and suffering: "*When things move upon bad hinges*, an' please your lordships, *how can it be otherwise?*" (*TS*, III, xxii, 241) The parlour door hinges at Shandy Hall serve as a synecdoche for the narrative structure, indicating a pivotal moment in the development of the story. Tristram's account of Shandy Hall's story revolves

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[1] When comparing this passage to a similar excerpt on man's inconstancy and inconsistency found in Sterne's Sermon, "Philantropy [sic] recommended", noted by the editors of the Florida edition of *Tristram Shandy*, the reifying catachresis becomes even more apparent: "Inconsistent creature that man is! who at that instant that he does what is wrong, is not able to withhold his testimony to what is good and praise worth" (*TS, The Notes* 253).

around narrative hinges embodied in the parlour door's catachresis. The question arises: will the narrative hinges, by extension, be anointed with the oil of inventiveness or fixed with the hammer of philosophy? In other words, Tristram must decide whether to continue the narration in the imaginative yet seemingly disordered way presented in the first two and a half volumes or adopt a more linear and conventional plot structure.

"The Author's Preface" shows that the narrator Tristram would like to access greater wisdom and be able to write a "good book":

> All I know of the matter is,—when I sat down, my intent was to write a good book; and as far as the tenuity of my understanding would hold out,—a wise, aye, and a discreet,——taking care only, as I went along, to put into it all the wit and the judgment (be it more or less) which the great author and bestower of them had thought fit originally to give me,—so that, as your worships see,—'tis just as God pleases (*TS*, III, xx, 227).

The narrator adds that he will continue to write using all the wit and judgment allowed to the limited human mind. It is neither a trivial nor an incidental statement, despite the Preface's position (i.e., its being a *hysteron proteron*). Tristram also says that he is writing "as God pleases". This statement carries significant weight, especially considering that the author of *Tristram Shandy* was a member of the clergy.

If we acknowledge the possibility of an ironic or satirical contrast between the author and narrator, then that Tristram's writing is intended for God's pleasure can be interpreted antiphrastically, and Sterne may be considered to be poking fun at his narrator (this is the satirical interpretation of which I speak here below, on pp. 124-25). If, however, we recall Sterne's theory of the "two handles",[2] we can see both a satiric and a more nuanced form of ironic strategy operating in the

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[2] In a letter to John Eustace, Sterne writes: "Your walking stick is in no sense more *shandaic* than in that of its having *more handles than one*—The parallel breaks only in this, that in using the stick, every one will take the handle which suits his convenience. In *Tristram Shandy*, the handle is taken which suits their passions, their ignorance or sensibility" (*Letters* 645). See also *TS*, II, vii, 118: "Every thing in this world […] every thing in this earthly world, my dear brother *Toby*, has two handles". The expression was proverbial. Marcus Walsh notices an analogy with Swift, who in *A Tale of a Tub* (203) discovers "in human nature 'several Handles', of which 'Curiosity is one, and of all others, affords the firmest Grasp: Curiosity, that Spur in the side, that Bridle in the Mouth, that Ring in the Nose, of a lazy, an impatient, and a grunting Reader'" (Walsh 27). Sterne repeats a similar concept in volume III: "("—Here are two senses, cried Eugenius […] And here are two roads, replied I, turning short upon him,—a dirty and a clean one"; *TS* III, xxxi, 258). On the proximity of the double-sidedness of *Tristram Shandy* and humour see also Bandry-Scubbi and de Voogd 1-3.

text, according to which Tristram indeed writes "as God pleases", with a plan in his mind, rather than simply responding to momentary narrative stimuli. Such a combination of writing "with a plan" and writing "to the moment" combines, in its peculiar way, Fielding's "providential" narrative with Richardson's representation of human psychology. Moreover, it represents a witty way of upholding the importance of moral *and* emotional judgment in fiction. In this witty preface, Sterne seizes the opportunity for a theoretical discussion on literature's aims and modes. Therefore, before examining the postponed preface of *Tristram Shandy,* it is crucial to acknowledge the preface's significance.

The role of "The Author's Preface" in Volume III of *Tristram Shandy*

During the Restoration and early eighteenth century, prefaces were the ideal location for poetic and aesthetic discourse (as, for example, in John Dryden's prefaces and dedications). In his parody of modern writers' obsession with organising "Prefaces, Epistles, Advertisements, Introductions, Prolegomena's, Apparatus's, To-the-Reader's," Jonathan Swift criticised such a practice by exposing the conceit and ignorance of those writers who attempted to describe the whole universe, without having any knowledge of it, of themselves and their limits, in their self-centred prefaces (*A Tale of a Tub* lvii and 85).[3] Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*, which Sterne held in great esteem (see *TS*, IX, viii, 754; also New, "Sterne, Warburton" 273-74, and Walsh), presents a convoluted series of introductions that fail to reach their intended point. In that work, the "modern" hack narrator is depicted as an untrustworthy lunatic and is ruthlessly satirised as someone who serves foolish, incoherent, and sloppy forms. The hack is revealed as one of the agents of chaos and dullness who create darkness through pedantic presumption and pseudo-science. Swift accuses modernity of succumbing to the "Temptation of being Witty [...] where [one] could be neither Wise nor Sound, nor anything to the Matter in hand" (*A Tale of a Tub* 136).

Swift's narrator is witty in a negative sense of the word. As Thomas Hobbes had observed, without "Steadiness, and Direction to some End", incompetent wits lose themselves in the madness of their own discourse, revealing their inability to arrive at sound judgment (Hobbes vol. 1, 57).[4] Locke, too, condemned the excessive use of wit and ingenuity when it disregards all

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[3] Swift might have had in mind, as Marcus Walsh remarks, the boasting of contemporary hacks' prefaces (*A Tale of a Tub* lxxxi).

[4] See also Alexander Pope's lines from *An Essay on Criticism* (I, 27-28): "[…] some made *Coxcombs* Nature meant but *Fools*: / In search of *Wit*, they lose their *common Sense*" (242). I thank Mary Newbould for calling my attention to those lines.

constraints and ends up preaching what does not exist (Locke 156-57).[5] Sterne parodies Locke's stance, which expressed suspicion towards wit as it gathers heterogeneous ideas in a way that blurs their distinction, leading to the obscurity of unreason (508). Others were of the same opinion, forgetting that wit could mean, as Hobbes had underlined, both the flimsiness of imagination and the soundness of a quick and solid mind (Hooker 1-6; see Lund). However, in aligning oneself with wit, one risked endorsing the modern practices that Swift so effectively satirised. So, is Tristram's position like that of Swift's hack narrator, or is it less mad and more fruitful?

In the "Author's Preface", Tristram challenges Locke's arguments, refuting the notion that wit lacks judgment:

> Now, *Agelastes* (speaking dispraisingly) sayeth, That there may be some wit in it, for aught he knows,——but no judgment at all. And *Triptolemus* and *Phutatorius* agreeing thereto, ask, How is it possible there should? for that wit and judgment in this world never go together; inasmuch as they are two operations differing from each other as wide as east is from west.—So, says *Locke*,—so are farting and hickuping, say I. But in answer to this, *Didius* the great church lawyer, in his code *de fartandi et illustrandi fallaciis*, doth maintain and make fully appear, That an illustration is no argument,—nor do I maintain the wiping of a looking-glass clean, to be a syllogism; ——but you all, may it please your worships, see the better for it, ——so that the main good these things do, is only to clarify the understanding, previous to the application of the argument itself, in order to free it from any little motes, or specks of opacular matter, which if left swimming therein, might hinder a conception and spoil all (*TS*, III, xx, 227-28).

The four pseudo-learned scholars introduced here, Agelastes, Triptolemus, Phutatorius, and Didius–who will reappear in the comic episode of the visitation dinner in volume IV, in which a hot chestnut falls from the table into Phutatorius's breeches and burn his genitalia–embody typically pedantic, supercilious, and erudite philosophers, the "grave folks" against whom *Tristram Shandy* is written (*TS*, III, xx, 238; see also I, xi, 28, and *TS, The Notes* 70). Their main characteristic is epitomised in the name of the first among them, Agelastes, "the one who never laughs" (*TS, The Notes* 236). The ultimate target of Sterne's satire and accusation is neither judgment nor Locke; it is gravity and pedantic thinkers.[6] Tristram humorously exaggerates Locke's distinction between wit and judgment, equating it to the difference between farting and hiccupping: a humorous explosion of a false differentiation. Tristram concludes that false judgment, i.e. the absolute and arbitrary separation of wit and judgment, can be as deceptive as

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[5] As William Hazlitt remarked, Locke took unacknowledged inspiration from Hobbes (31).
[6] The "splenetic philosophers, and Tartuffe's of all denominations", of which Sterne speaks in a letter to Richard Davenport of June 9, 1767 (*Letters* 591). On Sterne and tartuffery, see New, 1994, 113-34.

false wit, i.e. the absolute and arbitrary conjunction of wit and judgment. This false judgment, which in this specific instance soils its logical argument with a foul analogy, represents the gravity of the *agelastes*, those unaware of humanity's ludicrous nature.[7] The implicit conclusion is that humour and laughter unite and connect humanity, countering gravity that seeks knowledge solely through division by separating man's qualities (and oddities). It is wiser to possess and show a balanced combination of wit and judgment.

In another passage in *Tristram Shandy*, wit and judgment are said to be two distinct yet compatible approaches, like "brisk trotting and slow argumentation" (*TS*, I, x, 20). Wit becomes necessary in order to gain clarity in the subject under discussion and express an opinion, removing prejudices from the metaphorical lenses of pedantic periwigs and overly severe folks. When people use wit to remove the obscurities that "darken your hypothesis by placing a number of tall, opake words, one before another, in a right line, betwixt your own and your readers conception" (*TS*, III, xx, 235),[8] they regard wit as a test of truth that distinguishes authenticity from falsehood. This test exposes all forms of deception, including that of false wits, scribblers, and presumptuous and chaotic narrators, and unveils their inherent misery. On the other hand, unlike Locke, who wants communication to be completely transparent (492-93, 508), Tristram knows that such transparency cannot be had. The total removal of "opake" matter from the human soul is impossible and even undesirable, as Tristram admits with his witty image of Momus's glass. If we had a glass implanted in the human breast, the totality of our being would be visible, but "this is an advantage not to be had by the biographer in this planet": "our minds shine not through the body, but are wrapt up here in a dark covering of uncrystalized flesh and blood; so that if we would come to the specifick characters of them, we must go some other way to work" (*TS*, I, xxiii, 83). Perfect communication and knowledge are not a matter of this world, and we must cope with the imperfections of our being. The fact that Tristram invokes good communication and, at the same time, is aware of human limitations shows that he is very different from Swift's antisocial, self-absorbed,

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[7] La Rochefoucauld, whom Sterne copies when he says that gravity is a *"mysterious carriage of the body to cover the defects of the mind"* (*TS*, I, xi, 27-8; "La gravité est un mystère du corps inventé pour cacher les défauts de l'esprit"; Maxim 257, see *TS*, *The Notes* 70), wrote: "It has been a mistake to believe that wit and judgment are two different things. Judgment is only the greatness of the illumination of the wit, or mind. This illumination penetrates the depth of things. It notices there everything that must be noticed and perceives those things which seem imperceptible. Thus, it must be agreed that it is the extent of the illumination of wit which produces all the effects that are attributed to judgment" ("On s'est trompé lorsqu'on a cru que l'esprit et le jugement étoient deux choses différentes: le jugement n'est que la grandeur de la lumière de l'esprit; cette lumière pénètre le fond des choses; elle y remarque tout ce qu'il faut remarquer, et apperçoit celles qui semblent imperceptibles. Ainsi il faut demeurer d'accord que c'est l'éntendue de la lumiere de l'esprit qui produit tous les effets qu'on attribue au jugement" (Maxim 97 qtd in Milburn 91 and 322).
[8] On opacity, see also the passage in "The Author's Preface" quoted above (*TS*, III, xxx, 227-28).

and arrogant hack narrator. In contrast to *A Tale of Tub*, where the narrator's arrogance leads him to produce false witticisms, in *Tristram Shandy*, the narrator's wit triumphs over any scepticism that arises from the fleeting nature of opinions and the failings of Tristram and his characters. Tristram's self-awareness, despite its limitations, stands in opposition to the self-absorption of Swift's hack narrator.[9]

By exposing his hack narrator as being oblivious to the real world, Swift adopted a conservative satirical approach that condemned the modern world and its exponents as false and degenerate because they betray the tradition on which morality and society are founded. On the other hand, his Whig opponents, including Shaftesbury, Addison, and the Kit-Cats, promoted a more "amiable" approach. They urged the emerging society founded on virtue, which replaced the status-based society of the *ancien régime* (see McKeon 131-75), to adopt politeness as its defining characteristic. Comedy could function as a factor for inclusiveness and cohesion rather than exclusivity and superiority. In this project, humour and wit "are corroborative of *Religion*, and promotive of *true Faith*" (qtd in Klein 159). According to Stuart M. Tave, eighteenth-century comedy showed an ever-increasing interest in a compassionate view of man, rejected Hobbes's superiority theory, and transformed the pungent wit of the Restoration and the early eighteenth century into a more amiable humour (Tave 44-59). Although wit and humour did overlap, Tave thinks the latter progressively replaced the former (217-20).

The shifting notion of humour

Given the difficulty of drawing a sharp line of demarcation between wit and humour,[10] it is impossible to say when Sterne's wit ends, and humour begins. Even if some passages in *Tristram Shandy* seem to attribute a satirical quality to wit, the two notions overlap. As Leigh Hunt wrote, wit and humour appear combined in *Tristram Shandy* "under their highest appearance of levity with the profoundest wisdom" (72). Thus, Sterne's wit is in part also his humour, as

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[9] The contrast between Swift and Sterne has been exaggerated, especially after nineteenth-century writers and critics such as W.M. Thackeray transformed Swift into an "ogre" and Sterne into a lover of humankind. That opposition became a cliché that twentieth-century scholars repeated (see New, "Swift as Ogre"). However, it's important not to overlook that, despite the similarities between the two authors and Sterne's admiration for Swift, there are still significant differences in the tone of their satire.

[10] Michael Billig is right to say that "eighteenth-century theorists viewed 'wit' and 'humour' as distinctly different phenomena," wit referring to "clever verbal saying" and humour denoting a "laughable character" (62). However, that distinction was so nuanced that it was almost impossible to separate the two concepts clearly.

Tristram says it is of Yorick who had "too many temptations in life, of scattering his wit and his humour, – his gibes and his jests about him" (*TS*, I, xi, 29).[11] The concept of humour, however, is difficult to grasp as a clear and definite idea. Its modern usage had its root in the ancient physiological theory of the four humours that goes back to Galen and Hippocrates, to which *Tristram Shandy* refers by way of its insistence on the theory of the "animal spirits" – an approach that had become outdated by the time Sterne wrote his work.

During the first half of the eighteenth century, the term "humour" began to adopt its modern connotation, where the laughter associated with it took on a kind and compassionate nature. The most influential writers of the first half of the century, such as Swift and Pope, fought against literary and cultural charlatans and fanatics, using various satirical weapons ranging from wit and irony to biting satire. Their satirical approach diverted attention, in Hooker's opinion, from the evolving meaning of raillery as a more humane form of comedy. It was the result of a paradoxically "progressive anachronism", as it were. In fact, the old notion of humour "was retained as a semantic convenience in distinguishing personality and character types […] and it was only in this distinguishing of personality types that the humour theory of wit survived" (Milburn 97). Different sorts of wit depended on "tempers", "constitutions", and "humours". While the notion of wit started to decline and the Galenic explanation of psychology had already been discarded in favour of iatromechanical theories, the overall idea of humour as disposition and personality emerged in the form of the *je ne sais quoi* of human being and as a universal feature that appealed to common humanity.

Consequently, a momentous change in the cultural climate divided Swift from Sterne. Sterne recognises England as a land of humourists – not just of freaks and eccentrics but also of ordinary individuals. Uncle Toby is among its manifestations and cannot be confused – none of Sterne's contemporaries did so– with the various hacks and dunces of Scriblerian satire, for the pathos with which he is invested and his capacity for empathetically sharing emotions and values. So, we can consider humour as a form of wit as personality, endowed with a social pathos (Tave 221-43).

This "amiable" interpretation of humour can be found in the famous and influential essay by Corbyn Morris of 1744, *An Essay towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire, and Ridicule*. Morris advocates for

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[11] The phrase seems to allude to a satirical quality of the hendiadys "wit and humour", but the context alludes to some of the other meanings of "humour" that are analysed in the following pages of this article: its medical sense ("That instead of that cold phlegm and exact regularity of sense and humours, you would have look'd for, in one so extracted;---he was, on the contrary, as mercurial and sublimated a composition […] as the kindliest climate could have engendered and put together"; *TS*, I, xi, 27), and its aesthetic, compositional sense ("either in a *bon mot*, or to be enliven'd throughout with some drollery or humour of expression"; *TS*, I, xi, 29). On Sterne's use of hendiadys and other pleonasms, see Lamb 51 and 76-77.

using humour as a harmless and friendly way of depicting human flaws as common traits of our nature. He believes in laughing together with people at their defects as if they were our own rather than mocking their faults. We may call this a sympathetic form of comedy, whereby comic objects might also become objects of pity (in the sense of *pietas),* not just mere compassion. A common feature of comedy was that it did not show empathic feelings towards the object of its satire or raillery.

However, before humour replaced wit as a general denominator of gentle comedy, the term had to go through several stages of semantic development. Wit had to be distinguished from humour when the former began uniquely to signify a pungent form of biting at people's incongruities (Milburn 268-312). At the beginning of this process, the two terms were more frequently combined and could in part be synonymous, as in the title of Shaftesbury's celebrated *Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*, or miscellaneous collections of songs, jokes, mottoes, verses, such as *The Merry Companion or, Universal Songster: Consisting of a New Collection of over 500 Celebrated Songs, with* […] *210 English Love Songs, Expressing their different Passions. 93 Songs for the Bottle, And others of Wit and Humour* (1742), or prose miscellanies, such as Abel Boyer's *Dialogues of Wit and Humor* (collected in his *The Compleat French Master*, 1694, reprinted numerous times) or journals such as Ambrose Philips's *The Free-Thinker or, Essays of Wit and Humour* (1718-1740).[12] To some extent, it is impossible to distinguish wit from humour with absolute clarity: if the latter stems and differentiates from the former, it still keeps wit's ability to gather different ideas, meanings, and characteristics and to mix them in incongruous yet unexpected and fascinating ways.

Notwithstanding the famous controversy between John Dryden and Thomas Shadwell (the latter an exponent of the Jonsonian comedy of humour) concerning the pre-eminence of wit over humour, or vice versa, "the disturbing truth was that both wit and humour contained obvious similarities which tended to confuse them". Even Dryden and Shadwell concede that comedy results from a mixture of those qualities. William Congreve claimed that the nuances of wit and humour are too numerous to define one in relation to the other, "yet we may go near to show something which is not Wit or not Humour, and yet often mistaken for both" (Milburn 202). As late as 1884, William Fleet was still asking why distinguishing humour from wit was so daunting.

However, Congreve, in his letter to John Dennis, *Concerning Humour in Comedy* (1695), offered a distinction between types of humour that could also

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[12] This tradition would be retrospectively reflected, as it were, in collections that stemmed from *Tristram Shandy*, such as *The Cream of the Jest: or, The Wits Out-Witted, Dedicated to Poor Yorick. Being an Entire New Collection of Droll Wit and Humour* (1760) and *Yorick's Jests: Being a New Collection of Jokes, Witticisms, Bon Mots, and Anecdotes, of the Genuine Sons of Wit and Humour of the Late and Present Age* (1770).

help to differentiate between wit and humour, at least between characters to which a witty satire can be applied and characters that are appreciated and loved due to their humorous qualities. According to Congreve, authentic humour naturally arises "from the different Constitutions, Complexions, and Dispositions of Men" (Erskine Hill and Lindsay 91). Genuine humour could not be discarded, unlike in the denouement of almost all comedies of humour: "thô our Actions are never so many, and different in Form, they are all Splinters of the same Wood, and have Naturally one Complexion; which thô it may be disguised by Art, yet cannot be wholly changed: We may paint it with other Colours, but we cannot change the Grain [...] A Man may change his Opinion, but I believe he will find it a Difficulty to part with his Humour'" (Erskine Hill and Lindsay 95-96; see also Snuggs 120). In the new world of mutable, ephemeral, but influential opinions in which writers like Sterne and characters like Tristram Shandy found themselves, the stability and consistency of humour could provide an *ubi cōnsistam* that helped evaluate and establish personality and humanity.

One of the best sources for observing eighteenth-century modifications of the meaning of "humour" is Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopædia*. First published in 1728, the *Cyclopædia* received several new editions and expansions. It represents the best *locus* in which one finds the development of most cultural, scientific, and philosophical meanings in eighteenth-century England. Sterne used it as a reference book for most of his scientific and cultural knowledge and to keep himself updated on contemporary philosophical and scientific theories and discoveries (Greenberg; Hawley). There are various entries for *Humour* in the *Cyclopædia*, the most conspicuous of which derives from the Latin word for "liquid". From it, a medical meaning stems, which comprises both the old Galenian and a new sense: that liquid is "any juice, or fluid part of the body, as the chyle, blood, milk, fat, serum, lymph, spirits, bile, feed, saliva and pancreatic juices […] The *four Humours*, so much talked of by the antient physicians, are four liquid substances which they suppose to moisten the whole body of all animals, and to be the cause of the divers temperaments thereof. See *Temperament*". Chambers explains that "the moderns do not allow of these divisions, the *Humours* they rather chuse to distinguish into *nutritious*, called also *elementary*, as chyle and blood; those separated from the blood, as bile, saliva, urine, etc. and those returned into the blood" (Chambers s.v. *Humour*).

The ancient medical definition is present in Sterne's frequent mentions of the "animal spirits", especially at the beginning of *Tristram Shandy*, where the troubled voyage of the little "homunculus", Tristram's spermatozoon, accompanied by the "animal spirits" towards the mother's egg, is discussed in vivid and ingenious terms. Chambers defined the "animal spirits" – itself a concept under debate and somewhat obsolete in the eighteenth century– as "a fine subtile juice, or humour in animal bodies; supposed to be the great instrument of muscular motion, sensation, &c". A few examples of the presence of the medical sense in *Tristram Shandy* can be found in the following passages:

[...] for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost:——[during Walter and Elizabeth Shandy's procreation of Tristram] (*TS*, I, I, 1).

The HOMUNCULUS [...] consists, as we do, of skin, hair, fat, flesh, veins, arteries, ligaments, nerves, cartileges, bones, marrow, brains, glands, genitals, humours, and articulations;——is a Being of as much activity,——and, in all senses of the word, as much and as truly our fellow-creature as my Lord Chancellor of England (*TS*, I, ii, 3; the passage is reminiscent of Rabelais and eighteenth-century medical treatises; see New, "Laurence Sterne and Henry Baker's *The Microscope Made Easy*", 599-600).

[…] instead of that cold phlegm and exact regularity of sense and humours, you would have look'd for, in one so extracted;---he was, on the contrary, as mercurial and sublimated a composition,----as heteroclite a creature in all his declensions [here Tristram talks of Yorick] (*TS*, I, xi, 27).

There was little danger, he [Walter] would say, of losing our liberties by *French* politicks or *French* invasions;——nor was he so much in pain of a consumption from the mass of corrupted matter and ulcerated humours in our constitution (*TS,* I, xviii, 53).

Now, Sir, if I conduct you home again into this warmer and more luxuriant island, where you perceive the spring tide of our blood and humours runs high,—where we have more ambition, and pride, and envy, and lechery, and other whoreson passions upon our hands to govern and subject to reason,——the *height* of our wit and the *depth* of our judgment, you see, are exactly proportioned to the *length* and *breadth* of our necessities,—and accordingly, we have them sent down amongst us in such a flowing kind of decent and creditable plenty, that no one thinks he has any cause to complain (*TS*, III, xx, 231-32).

[...] there is something, under the first disorderly transport of the humours, so unaccountably becalming in an orderly and a sober walk towards one of them […] (*TS*, IV, xvii, 351).
[...] as the bilious and more saturnine passions, by creating disorders in the blood and humours, have as bad an influence, I see, upon the body politick as body natural—and as nothing but a habit of virtue can fully govern those passions, and subject them to reason (*TS*, IV, xxxii, 402).

[...] what a nation of herbs he had procured to mollify her humours, *&c. &c.* and that if the waters of Bourbon did not mend that leg [...] (*TS*, VII, xxi, 609).

[Walter] saw a thousand reasons to wipe out the reproach, and as many to reproach himself——a thin, blue, chill, pellucid chrystal with all its humours so at rest, the least mote or speck of desire might have been seen at the bottom of it, had it existed [...]

A temperate current of blood ran orderly through her veins in all months of the year, and in all critical moments both of the day and night alike; nor did she superinduce the least heat into her humours from the manual effervescencies of devotional tracts, which having little or no meaning in them, nature is oft times obliged to find one (*TS*, IX, I, 736).

However, it is the notion of humour as "the particular temperament or constitution of a person, considered as arising from this or that *Humour*, or juice of the body", that prevails in *Tristram Shandy*.[13] It reflects the modification of the notion of humour that we have noticed, passing from a Hippocratic theory of the body-mind relationship to a psychological theory of character that, however, continued to use the bodily origin of human attitudes metaphorically. "Thus we say", the *Cyclopædia* continues, "a bilious, or choleric *Humour*; a melancholic, hypochondriac *Humour*; a [...] gay, sprightly *Humour*, etc." (notice the transition from concrete functions to abstract qualities). Here are some of the passages in which Sterne uses this intermediate notion of humour:

It is in pure compliance with this humour of theirs [the readers'], and from a backwardness in my nature to disappoint any one soul living, that I have been so very particular already (*TS*, I, iv, 5).

[...] to his [Yorick's] friends, who knew his foible was not the love of money, and who therefore made the less scruple in bantering the extravagance of his humour, – instead of giving the truecause, – he chose rather to join in the laugh against himself (*TS*, I, x, 20).

[...] this self-same vile pruriency for fresh adventures in all things, has got so strongly into our habit and humours, – and so wholly intent are we upon satisfying the impatience of our concupiscence that way, – that nothing but the gross and more carnal parts of a composition will go down [...] (*TS*, I, xx, 66).

His [Uncle Toby's] humour was of that particular species, which does honour to our atmosphere [...] (*TS*, I, xxi, 72-73).
Sir, I am of so nice and singular a humour, that if I thought you was able to form the least judgment or probable conjecture to yourself, of what was to come in the next page, – I would tear it out of my book [...] (*TS*, I, xxv, 89)

It is very strange, says my father, addressing himself to my uncle *Toby*, as *Obadiah* shut the door, – as there is so expert an operator as Dr. *Slop* so near---that my wife should persist to the very last in this obstinate humour of hers, in trusting the life of my child, who has had one misfortune already, to the ignorance of an old woman [...] (*TS*, II, vi, 114-15).

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[13] It is what both eighteenth-century physiology and psychology would call *crasis*, human "constitution arising from the various properties of humours", as defined in Johnson's *Dictionary* (see *TS*, I, xi, 27, and *The Notes*, 69).

[…] forgive, I pray thee, this rash humour which my mother gave me [Walter speaks to his brother] (*TS*, II, xii, 133).

[...] the petulancy of my father's humour [...] (*TS*, III, xix, 225).
[Uncle Toby's hobby horse] tickled my father's imagination beyond measure; but this being an accident much more to his humour than any one which had yet befall'n it, it proved an inexhaustible fund of entertainment to him (*TS*, III, xxiv, 248).

[...] as my father and my uncle Toby are in a talking humour [...] (*TS*, IV, x, 336).

Yet the shot hitting my uncle Toby and Trim so much harder than him, 'twas a relative triumph; and put him into the gayest humour in the world (*TS*, VII, xxvii, 619).

I own it looks like one of her ladyship's obliquities; and they who court her, are interested in finding out her humour as much as I (*TS*, VII, xxx, 626).

[...] and some dismal winter's evening, when your honour is in the humour, they shall be told you with the rest of Tom's story, for it makes a part of it (*TS*, IX, vi, 747).

Sometimes, the material and psychological meanings coincide, as when Tristram speaks of his father's "subacid humour":

He [Walter] was, however, frank and generous in his nature, – at all times open to conviction; and in the little ebullitions of this subacid humour towards others, but particularly towards my uncle Toby, whom he truly loved […] (*TS*, II, xii, 132).

Nothing but the fermentation of that little subacid humour, which I have often spoken of, in my father's habit, could have vented such an insinuation (*TS*, IX, i, 735).

[Walter] broke out at once with that little subacid soreness of humour which, in certain situations, distinguished his character from that of all other men (*TS*, IX, x, 757).

The notion of "subacid humour" is a modified version of the ancient doctrine of the four humours, combining an iatromechanical understanding of the body-soul relationship and the Jonsonian idea of a prevailing fixation. Such a revived conception paved the way for appreciating portrayals of whimsical yet endearing oddities, such as Shakespeare's Falstaff, Cervantes's Quixote, and Sterne's Uncle Toby. Sterne's contemporaries were particularly struck by the "pathetic" qualities of Uncle Toby, which were praised in reviews of *Tristram Shandy* and anthologies such as *The Beauties of Sterne*.[14] This cultural and

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[14] The different editions of *The Beauties of Sterne* offer an interesting development of the appreciation of Sterne's humour over the years. The "Preface" to the 10th edition of that anthology observes that "the past compilers of Sterne, keeping their eye rather upon *morality*, than his *humour*–upon his

aesthetic shift transformed aggressive satire into sympathetic and social humour. In this modern aesthetic usage, "humour" was still a vague notion, "one that tend[ed] to sound less literary than 'comic' and less cerebral than 'wit', not to mention less enjoyable than 'laughter', a sort of anti-analytic humour for humour's sake" (Vigus 1-2).

When Sterne departs from the technical meaning of "bodily liquid", he uses "humour" to convey the sense of "disposition" or "habit", as in "being in a talking humour" to mean "being in a talking disposition", or in the expression "our habit and humour".[15] This secondary connotation had been part of the language for a long time. The *OED* defines "humour" as "[a] temporary state of mind or feeling; a mood. Frequently with *in* and modifying word, as *bad, happy, mad"* (*OED*, "humour", II. 5. a), with examples dating back to 1525 that increase in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (such as "1711- 'When I am in a serious Humour'. J. Addison *Spectator* No. 26. ¶1"). From this secondary meaning, other

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judgment, than his *wit*, had liken'd the work to his *Can Chair, deprived of the one of his knobs*–incomplete and uniform" (vi). I thank Mary Newbould for bringing this important detail to my attention.

[15] This is the principal, though not the unique, meaning in Sterne's *Sermons of Mr Yorick*: "instead of giving a direct answer which might afford a handle to malice, or at best serve only to gratify an impertinent humour"; "It was not a transient oversight, the hasty or ill advised neglect of an unconsidering humour, with which the best disposed are sometimes overtaken, and led on beyond the point where otherwise they would have wished to stop" ("Philanthropy Recommended"; *Sermons, The Text* 21 and 25); "they are many, and of various casts and humours, and each one lends it something of its own complexional tint and character"; " The moment this sordid humour begins to govern farewell all honest and natural affections! farewel all he owes to parents, to children, to friends!" "Thanks to good sense, good manners, and a more enlarged knowledge, this humour is going down, and seems to be settling at present, chiefly amongst the inferior classes of people where it is likely to rest" ("Felix's Behaviour towards Paul, Examined"; *Sermons, The Text*, 180, 184); "to know what is good by observing the address and arts of men, to conceive what is sincere, and by seeing the difference of so many various humours and manners, to look into ourselves and form our own" ("The Prodigal Son"; *Sermons, The Text* 192); "[...] from force of accidents from within, from change of circumstances, humours and passions of men" ("National Mercies Considered"; *Sermons, The Text* 198); " Look upon the world he [God] has given us, observe the riches and plenty which flows in every channel, not only to satisfy the desires of the temperate, but of the fanciful and wanton every place is almost a paradise, planted when nature was in her gayest humour" ("The History of Jacob, Considered"; *Sermons, The Text* 212); "The fact is, mankind are not always in a humour to be convinced,— and so long as the pre-engagement with our passions subsists, it is not argumentation which can do the business" ("The Parable of the Rich man and Lazarus"; *Sermons, The Text* 216); "Self-love, like a false friend, instead of checking, most treacherously feeds this humour, points out some excellence in every soul to make him vain, and think more highly of himself, than he ought to think" ("Pride"; *Sermons, The Text* 229); " [...] the foundation of which mistake arising chiefly from this previous wrong judgment—that true happiness and freedom lies in a man's always following his own humour" ("Temporal Advantages of Religion"; *Sermons, The Text* 269); " But, good God! how would he be astonished to find,—that though we have been so often tost to and fro by our own tempestuous humours,—that we were not yet sick of the storm" ("Thirtieth of January"; *Sermons, The Text* 311). A last quotation ("how tedious it is to be in the company of a person whose humour is disagreeable to our own") in "Our Conversation in Heaven" (*Sermons, The Text* 279-80) is discussed in this essay.

secondary meanings developed in the premodern age that *OED* now records as "obsolete": **"**A particular disposition, inclination, or liking, *esp.* one having no apparent ground or reason; a fancy, a whim. Also occasionally as a mass noun. Now *archaic* and *rare*" (*OED*, "humour", II. 6. a); and **"**Usual or permanent mental disposition; constitutional or habitual tendency; temperament. Now *rare*" (*OED*, "humour", II. 7. a). The notion also extended to the fields of aesthetics and style: "Character, style, or spirit (of a musical or literary composition, etc.). *Obsolete*" (*OED*, "humour", II. 7. b).

A third connotation of "humour" finally refers to the meaning that is now prevalent: "the ability of a person to appreciate or express what is funny or comical; a sense of what is amusing or ludicrous" (*OED*, "humour", II. 9. a). From it, the phrase "sense of humour" originated as "the ability to appreciate or express what is funny or comical" (P. 3). This last meaning developed from habit or disposition, emphasising the funny but not contemptuous aspects of one's character or social oddities. In *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne mockingly describes this kind of humour as a "hobby-horse", meaning an "amusement" or "plaything" that governs one's life".[16] In a letter to a friend of January 30, 1760, Sterne explicitly states that this notion of "humour" as a whimsical "disposition" or "hobby-horse" serves as the foundation for his construction of characters: "The ruling passion *et les egarements du coeur* are the very things which mark, and distinguish, a man's character——in which I would as soon leave out a man's head as his hobby-horse" (*Letters* 114).[17]

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[16] The notes to the Florida edition of *Tristram Shandy* observe that a hobby-horse was "a child's plaything, a stick with a horse's head attached, thus making clearer Sterne's constant play on *riding* the hobby-horse [...] Sterne may also have had in mind *Hamlet*, III.ii.135: 'For O, for O, the hobby-horse is forgot,' a line from a popular anti-puritanical ballad lamenting the prohibition of country games and dances, in which the hobby-horse, a participant costumed like a horse, played a large part" (*TS, The Notes* 59).

[17] Melvyn New and Peter de Voogd, the editors of the Florida *Letters*, write that "Sterne's interest in the concept of the 'ruling passion' is already evident in sermon 9, 'The character of Herod,' probably preached in December 1758 […] and continues in *A Political Romance* and *Tristram Shandy*" (*The Letters* 118). In that sermon, Sterne wrote: "Not to be deceived in such cases we must work by a different rule, which though it may appear less candid,——yet to make amends, I am persuaded will bring us in general much nearer to the thing we want,—which is truth. The way to which is—in all judgments of this kind, to distinguish and carry in your eye, the principal and ruling passion which leads the character—and separate that, from the other parts of it,—and then take notice, how far his other qualities, good and bad, are brought to serve and support that. For want of this distinction,—we often think ourselves inconsistent creatures, when we are the furthest from it, and all the variety of shapes and contradictory appearances we put on, are in truth but so many different attempts to gratify the same governing appetite" (*Sermons, The Text* 86; see also *Sermons, The Notes* 132-33). The identification of people's "ruling passions" appears to serve the purpose of differentiating their ethical and emotional makeup. The hobby-horse achieves the same effect in a more comical and witty fashion, a technique that blends judgment and wit, as Tristram notes in "The Author's Preface".

The co-existence of various meanings of "humour" is acknowledged in Chambers's *Cyclopædia*:

> *Humour* is usually considered by cricks, as a fainter or weaker habitual passion peculiar to comic characters, as being chiefly found in persons of lower degree than those proper for tragedy […] Every passion may be said to have two different faces, one that is serious, great, formidable, and solemn, which is for tragedy; and another that is low, ridiculous, and fit for comedy; which last is what we call its *Humour*.

Although it joins wit and humour in the same entry, the *Cyclopædia* introduces a slight distinction between them that reflects that shift from the bitter and more satirical aspects of the former to the more encompassing characteristics of the latter (here considered as more beneficial to dramatic composition):

> Wit only becomes few characters; it is a breach of character to make one half the persons in a modern, or indeed in any comedy, talk wittily and finely; at least at all times, and on all occasions.——To entertain the audience, therefore, and keep the dramatic persons from going into the common, beaten familiar ways and forms of speaking and thinking, recourse is had to something to supply the place of wit, and divert the audience, without going out of character: and this does *Humour* [i.e., "humour" keeps a character together, and a story organic]; which is therefore to be looked on as the true wit of comedy.

From Chambers's perspective, true wit can be found only in humour, which appears to absorb the best of wit's functions. Such a semantic shift aligns the *Cyclopædia* with the views of Addison and Shaftesbury, which added political implications to the aesthetic issues. In 1690, Sir William Temple had shown how the love of the English for oddities depended on their passion for freedom: "Thus we come to have more Originals, and more that appear what they are, we have more Humour because every man follows his own, and takes a Pleasure, perhaps a Pride to shew it" (357; see Kliger).[18] In his *Essay towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire, and Ridicule*, Corbyn Morris observed that a humourist is a lover of reason and liberty, someone who follows and exposes the ambitious and dangerous actions of rulers. The humourist, in his opinion, is someone who dares to speak out against tyranny: "It is He that watches the daring Strides, and secret Mines of the ambitious Prince, and desperate Minister: He gives the Alarm, and prevents their Mischief. Others there are who have Sense and Foresight; but they are brib'd by Hopes or Fears, or bound by softer Ties; It is He only, the Humourist, that has the Courage and Honesty to cry out, unmov'd by personal Resentment: He flourishes only in a Land of liberty" (Morris 20-1).

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[18] Sterne indirectly alludes to Temple's ideas in "The Author's Preface;" see *TS, The Notes* 244-45.

Although he does not mention Morris, Sterne would have subscribed to his views. He, too, makes it clear that wit, comedy, and even eccentricity can contribute to the freedom of the British people. While Sterne may have disagreed with Shaftesbury's social aloofness and, conversely, Sterne's bawdiness would have been indigestible to the Whig philosopher, Sterne shared Shaftesbury's goal of liberating humanity and society from the tyranny of hypocrisy and zeal. Sterne's statement that the arch-enemy of wit is gravity implies that wit and humour can coincide in challenging imposed and hypocritical norms and liberating the potential freedom of odd yet sociable characters. As the anonymous author of a 1748 *Essay on Wit* observed, "Humour is the only Test of Gravity; and Gravity of Humour. For a subject which will not bear Raillery is suspicious; and a Jest which will not bear a serious Examination, is certainly false Wit" (qtd in Milburn 205).

"Learned wit" and "Shandean humour"

Sterne's humour became, to the eyes of most contemporary European readers, prototypical of English freedom: the *gaîté* of the Britons and their literature was envied, imitated, and seldom achieved, as Friedrich Nietzsche acknowledged (see Vigus 4-9; de Voogd and Neubauer 80-81). However, Sterne's humour is not always characterised by innocence, amiability, and *gaîté de coeur.* According to Simon Dickie, who posits that cruelty and sardonic satire were prevalent in both eighteenth-century literature and society, *Tristram Shandy* can be considered a "ramble novel" that belongs, at least in part, to a tradition of literary works (such as erotic or pornographic fiction, criminal biographies, playful "it" narratives, and travel memoirs) that "defied the literary and ethical standards of the day" (Dickie 252, 273). Yet rather than the "ramble" mode, it is the Scriblerian tradition of "learned wit" in which Sterne's work is rooted that seems to conflict with the "amiable humour" theory. Sterne's attempted satirical piece on a clergyman, known as the "Fragment in the Manner of Rabelais" (written in 1759 and first published by Sterne's daughter, Lydia Sterne Medalle, in 1775)[19] and his short prose titled *A Political Romance* (published in 1759 and banned by Church authorities) are clear indications of Sterne's intention to continue the Scriblerian work of Swift and Pope (see New, "Swift and Sterne" and "Single and Double"; Regan; Walsh). Sterne's letter to the London publisher, Robert Dodsley, advertising the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy* further reinforces the notion of Sterne as another Scriblerus secundus: "The Plan, as you

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[19] In Melvyn New's opinion, the Fragment is an imitation of Alexander Pope's *Peri Bathous, or The Art of Sinking in Poetry* (*Tristram Shandy: A Book for Free Spirits* 29).

will perceive, is a most extensive one,—taking in, not only, the Weak part of the Sciences, in which the true point of Ridicule lies—but every Thing else, which I find Laugh-at-able in my way—" (*Letters* 80)[20].

Tristram Shandy contains ribald coarseness and biting ridicule that may call to mind the style of Swiftian and Hogarthian social scorn or Menippean satire, corroborating Dickie's interpretation. The portrayal of Dr Slop, when he falls from his horse into the mud and enters Shandy Hall covered with filth, is reminiscent of scenes found in Pope's *Dunciad* (the diving contests in the Fleet Ditch; see Kolb) and John Gay's *Trivia* (the appearance of the goddess Cloacina). Not only does Sterne pass satirical judgment on the inept doctor, a portrayal of the physician and obstetrician Dr John Burton and, more generally, of Catholics, or on censorious Bishop Warburton (New, "Sterne, Warburton"), he also targets the hypocrisy, gravity, and "tartuffery" of the world (New, *Tristram Shandy: A Book for Free Spirits* 113-34). His satire is far less topical than Swift's and Pope's but comprises the "abuses of conscience" committed by individuals and communities. And yet, even if we consider *Tristram Shandy* as a satire not only on Dr Slop but also on Walter, Toby, and the whole of Shandy Hall, Tristram included, with Yorick as the satirist-scourger of the vices of humankind, we may still wonder what the real subject of *Tristram Shandy*'s satire is. Ashley Marshall (278-83) points out the bewilderment among Sterne's contemporaries regarding the true aim and scope of his work as they struggled to categorise it: "Oh rare Tristram Shandy!–Thou very sensible–humorous–pathetick–humane–unaccountable! what shall we call thee?–Rabelais, Cervantes, What?" *Tristram* Shandy, in the opinion of many, is a humorous performance, "of which we are unable to convey any distinct idea to our readers" (Howes 52). The early critical responses to *Tristram Shandy* play with the work's unclear generic status and cast doubt upon its satirical nature *strictu senso*. Marshall disagrees with those who argue that *Tristram Shandy* represents a friendlier and softer version of Scriblerian satire, stating that it is frustratingly difficult to categorise it as satire because, unlike Pope and Swift, Sterne does not pass judgment onto specific categories.[21] While

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[20] In another letter Sterne wrote to an acquaintance in 1760, he declared that he meant to make fun of ranks, professions, and educational projects (*Letters* 682).

[21] For a criticism of Marshall's positions, see New, "Single and Double" 71-73. New advocates a broader view of satire and disputes the use of the term "novel" to describe *Tristram Shandy*. I cannot expand on the satire-novel theme here for space reasons. My opinion is that, unless we consider it as a *unicum sui generis*, *Tristram Shandy* may be classified as both a satire and a novel if we stretch the former to include a larger variety of works, deriving satire from *saturus*, "full", as in *satura lanx* and *lex satura* (for instance, see Isidore of Sevilla's definition: "Satura vero lex est quae de pluribus simul rebus eloquitur, dicta a copia rerum et quasi a saturitate"; "A medley [*satura*] is a law which is concerned with many things at once; it is so called from the abundance of topics, and, as it were, from fulness [*saturitas*]"; 118-19). At the same time, we should stretch the term "novel" to include its complex and multifarious developments, as advocated, among others, by Margaret A. Doody and Franco Moretti. The question remains, however, whether *Tristram Shandy* is satirical in the

it is true that, on the contrary, Sterne passes judgment on specific categories, as we have seen, those categories do not represent humankind.

Paradoxically, it was Swift, whom some critics considered the perfect misanthropist, who had to defend himself, saying that he hated all nations, professions, and communities, and principally "that animal called man", but loved individuals: "I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth" (Letter to Alexander Pope, September 29, 1725; Woolley 606-7). In contrast, Laurence Sterne seemed to dislike specific individuals, like Burton, Warburton, and a few others who are difficult to identify within the dense layers of indirect mockeries in *Tristram Shandy*. Nonetheless, Sterne ultimately expressed love for humanity. This sentiment may have been why Sterne, in another letter, declared his intentions to maintain a distance from Rabelais, like Swift's detachment from the same writer ("I have not gone as far as Swift—He keeps due distance from Rabelais—& I from him"; *Letters* 84). Sterne's style of "learned wit" (Jefferson) deviates from that of the Scriblerians to such an extent that his satire becomes distinct from their *saeva indignatio*. If Sterne is Scriblerian, it is in a modern and humorous way. His use of wit is like that discussed by Chambers in the *Cyclopædia*, a "humorous wit" that unites various aspects of wit and humour and refines the concept of comedy to reflect human sociability.

This idea is particularly evident in the image of the "Shandean humour":

> I write a careless kind of a civil, nonsensical, good humoured *Shandean* book, which will do all your hearts good———
> ———And all your heads too,—provided you understand it (*TS*, VI, xvii, 525).

Sterne's "Shandean book" is intended for the "good honest, unthinking, Shandean people" (*TS* III, iv, 190), those who appreciate the moral lesson imparted by Uncle Toby's benevolent behaviour towards the fly (contained in the same chapter in which this last quotation is found).

But what is this "Shandean humour"? It is a mock notion that encompasses the bodily idea of "animal spirits and functions" and promotes a gentle and healthful attitude that corrects the imbalances caused by illness (Vigus 3; see also Tadié). The concept of "Shandean humour" is characterised by an individual's benevolent disposition and empathetic engagement, as well as the artistic representation of such a distinct and kind-hearted trait. Sterne's recognition of the

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same manner as *A Tale of Tub* or *The Dunciad*. Both Swift's and Pope's masterpieces exhibit overtly satirical-aggressive aims almost monothematically. Conversely, *Tristram Shandy* presents complex characters who interact with one another, a character-narrator engaged in a dialogue with his characters and implied readers, and a story plot that deals with individuals' lives, thin though it may appear. In other words, in *Tristram Shandy*, the *historia personarum* interacts with and takes precedence over the *historia doctrinarum* (the story of the characters' lives being the narrator's "choicest morsels"), while *The Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*, despite their being presented as the history of a family, comprise a series of mock doctrinal disquisitions.

significance of socially acceptable humour is articulated in Sermon 29, entitled "Our Conversation in Heaven" (*Sermons, The Text* 279-82), wherein he highlights the potentially antisocial implications of a clash between unrelated and disagreeable humours: "We see, even in the common intercourses of society,— how tedious it is to be in the company of a person whose humour is disagreeable to our own, though perhaps in all other respects of the greatest worth and excellency—" (*Sermons, The Text* 279-80).[22]

The idea of humour that emerges from Sterne's works and letters refers to the inner qualities of a person, which can be good or neutral or evil, yet must be considered if we want to know people and converse with them. Tristram Shandy's personal hobby horse is his desire to understand people, events, and ideas through writing, albeit in the odd way he does so. His hobby-horse is as weird as his father's and his uncle's and sometimes produces terrible effects, such as an inability to get to the point or to be coherent. Still, it is also a valuable tool for promoting knowledge, especially self-knowledge. In turn, Tristram's awareness of his ancestors' and his own peculiarities, which he also grasps thanks to his narrative projection onto the satirical character of Yorick,[23] make him an amiable, social character.

According to "Shandean humour", proper knowledge is social knowledge. As Sterne/Tristram states in the "Author's Preface", judgment is not merely based on one's ability to distinguish between ideas but rather on the capacity to find pleasurable agreement between ideas and those who express them, even if this agreement is based on incongruity. This notion encompasses both aesthetic and moral dimensions, viewing pleasure as a social aspect of human interaction: from the agreeableness of ideas follows the amiability of people, the conversation on earth that should correspond to the conversation in heaven in which men are found in their "gayest humour"[24]. As Simon Critchley writes, "raillery and ridicule can be defended as far as they enable instruction in reason by making its use pleasurable. One is more likely to use reason if its use gives pleasure. Therefore, liberty is precisely a freedom in wit and humour. The measure of liberty to which reason appeals, for Shaftesbury, is *sensus communis*, sociableness, one's willingness and ability to be "friendly and communicative" (43).

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[22] The sentence is lifted from John Norris of Bemerton's *Practical Discourses upon the Beatitudes* (Hammond, 142); see Melvyn New's note to this passage concerning Sterne's use of the concept of earthly and heavenly happiness in *A Sentimental Journey* and its interpretation by Gardner D. Stout in his edition of the *Journey* (*Sermons, The Notes* 318-19).

[23] Yorick is not Tristram, of course; however, Tristram absorbs some of Yorick's characteristics, language, and ethos. The final words of *Tristram Shandy* about the "cock and bull story" belong to Yorick but are indistinguishable from Tristram's *ductus*. In fact, they give a kind of circularity and closeness to the whole of *Tristram Shandy*'s story. They are, as it were, the last bite of his own choicest morsel, after the story of Toby's amours with Widow Wadman and their conclusion under the aegis of Charron's thought (see Gregori, "Making and Unmaking Man" 18).

[24] Sterne uses this expression, speaking of Eden, in Sermon 22, "The History of Jacob" (*Sermons, The Text* 212).

On the one hand, laughter can target certain attitudes and behaviours (hypocrisy, religious absurdity, gravity, etc.) and the people representing them (Dr Slop, the pedantic Doctors of the Sorbonne, the learned scholars who meet at the visitation dinner). On the other, it also is shared "with" others, becoming a social laughter in *Tristram Shandy*. As Alexis Tadié explains, laughter "is more frequently associated with a sense of community, if not communion, of the Shandy family – it reveals the 'secret bond' [between us and our fellow-creatures] identified by [Francis] Hutcheson" (34). John Mullan describes Sterne's humour as a unique narrative strategy that allows his readers to establish social connections with his narrator. Unlike the Scriblerian hack, who is alienated from his readers (as from anyone else), Tristram encourages and establishes communication with his readers. Even the examples of misunderstanding and failed communication in *Tristram Shandy* serve to emphasise the importance of humorous communication. Mullan offers the example of the two Shandy brothers, who often, though unintentionally, exhibit comical miscommunication and whose "unknowing disagreement is resolved into intelligible gesture. Eccentric differences of perception are only eccentric—the accidental crossings of Walter's and Toby's reasonings are comic because the novel can trace the different paths by which they appear to arrive at the same point" (161). The narrator can offer his readers a vantage point from which the characters' differences can be understood and all deadlocks resolved: "It is [the] implied reader with whom *Tristram Shandy* establishes its sociality, a reader privileged to look down on the possibilities of misinterpretation which the novel invokes" (161).

Consequently, all instances of miscommunication are, in fact, examples of a different, more profound form of communication. In Sterne's book, sociability is portrayed as a crucial moral objective, underscored by his use of satire and wit. His *lex inversa*, which involves the reversal of wrong and tyrannical stances, ideas, worlds, and conceptions, serves as a means of restoring the proper, natural order that has been inverted over time by "grave people".

Conclusion: wit as part of humour (by way of paradox)

Returning to the point from which we began, the *hysteron proteron* of the "Author's Preface", Sterne's defence of the sincere seriousness of his literary intentions confirms what we have seen so far about his being witty in an extraordinary way. This intention finds a propitious occasion in the Preface itself, even if or because it is cleverly postponed. By defending the wit of the book in a witty and seemingly improper tone, Sterne establishes the true seriousness and wisdom of his work in contrast to the false severity of the grave folks.

Perhaps mocking Locke's occasional use of metaphorical language to express purely denotative thoughts (see his metaphors of the mind as a white

paper, probability as twilight or o consciousness as the Lord's candle, for example), the "Author's Preface" demonstrates a remarkable though odd congruence between thought and expression. As a theoretical synthesis, or synecdoche, of *Tristram Shandy*, the Preface can be considered a humorous analogue of propriety. Its light-hearted and seemingly immoral tone reveals a moral tension towards propriety as a social obligation.

"The Author's Preface" presents a topsy-turvy world that, in its apparent disorder, reveals itself as truly "straight" and even as the best of all possible worlds, a world that, in its funny and incomplete ways, shows nature "in her gayest humour". Tristram illustrates the necessity of harmony between wit and judgment with the comical example of the chair and its knobs. The two knobs on the chair represent wit and judgment and are the highest and most important part of its frame, just as wit and judgment are of human faculty. Removing one of the knobs would disrupt symmetry, harmony, and balance, that is, true judgment. In fact, the presence of only one of the knobs, standing for judgment, would only be a constant reminder of the absence of the other knob, wit, with no different result than an imbalance of judgment itself: [25]

> Will you give me leave to illustrate this affair of wit and judgment, by the two knobs on the top of the back of it […]
>   ——Here stands *wit*,——and there stands *judgment*, close beside it, just like the two knobs I'm speaking of, upon the back of this self-same chair on which I am sitting.
>   ——You see, they are the highest and most ornamental parts of its *frame*,——as wit and judgment are of *ours*,——and like them too, indubitably both made and fitted to go together, in order as we say in all such cases of duplicated embellishments,——*to answer one another*. […]—nay, lay your hands upon your hearts, and answer this plain question, Whether this one single knobb which now stands here like a blockhead by itself, can serve any purpose upon earth, but to put one in mind of the want of the other;——and let me further ask, in case the chair was your own, if you would not in your consciences think, rather than be as it is, that it would be ten times better without any knobb at all (*TS*, III, xx, 235-36).

The mock imagery of the two knobs is reflected in the more classical ideal of the light of truth. Shaftesbury said: "Truth, 'tis supposed, may bear all Lights [...] and one of those principal Lights is Ridicule itself" (30). In turn, Tristram states: "That of these two luminaries, so much of their irradiations are suffered from time to time to shine down upon us; as he, whose infinite wisdom which dispenses everything in exact weight and measure, knows will just serve to light us on our way in this night of our obscurity" (*TS*, III, xx, 232). In this way, Tristram expresses the moral foundation of harmony, proportion, balance, and

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[25] This final section partly revises Gregori, *Il wit nel 'Tristram Shandy'* 27-40.

symmetry in a dual manner, simultaneously comical and earnest. Although seemingly absent in the "Author's Preface", as in the entirety of *Tristram Shandy*, that moral foundation unfolds through a comical analogue of serious propriety. The comical harmony of wit and judgment also refers to the seriocomic social harmony writing must aspire to, despite all the sceptical pains provoked by the misunderstandings, the lack of communication between characters, and even Tristram's isolation from which his writing originates.

The witty tone of "The Author's Preface" deliberately distances itself from the "gravity" and hypocrisy of the pedantic fools, the "Anti-Shandeans, and thrice able critics, and fellow-labourers", the "most subtle statesmen and discreet doctors […] renowned for gravity and wisdom", who signed the "Magna Charta of stupidity" (*TS*, III, xx, 228 and 238). It serves as a rejection of their tyrannical and dogmatic impositions and aligns with those who appreciate wit and are provided with "Shandean humour". Tristram affirms: "I have no abhorrence whatever, nor do I detest and abjure either great wigs or long beards——any further than when I see they are bespoke and let grow on purpose to carry on this self-same imposture—for any purpose—peace be with them;—☞mark only—I write not for them" (*TS*, III, xx, 238). *Tristram Shandy*'s humour, in all its meanings and declensions, is not written for them. It is written for those of us who can appreciate a satire that is witty, humorous, funny, and serious at the same time and who believe in humanity, sympathetic feelings, sociability, and, above all, freedom.

Disclosure statement

Acknowledgements

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