

## Philosophical and Anthropological Perspectives on Comic

Claudiu T. Arieșan, *The History of Romanian Comic*, Datagroup, Timișoara, 2022

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The comicologist Claudiu T. Arieșan, today an associate professor at the Faculty of Letters in Timișoara, began in 1986 with a study dedicated to Eminescu's bitter smile. This debut was followed by the publication in 1999 of part of his doctoral thesis, entitled *Repere pentru o comicologie românească* (Amarcord, Timișoara) and in 2003 of the book *Între surâs și rugăciune. Modele culturale din comicologia clasică și patristică* (West University Publishing House, Timișoara). This volume is now in its second edition, the first having been published in 2016, and brings together the author's research in a new synthesis that he declares an *opera uverta*.

In the book's preface, the author describes the stages of his development in the theoretical field of laughter. He justifies his orientation towards comicology by the fact that his choice could be a cultural weapon (p. 8), and "prefigures an air of dissident independence" (p. 9) in the political context of the time. In addition, the study of the comic (especially in literary criticism) was also "an exegetical path not taken here" (p. 9). Hence the need for such an approach. The expected result was not long in coming. At the end of the research, Arieșan reveals the existence of a Romanian comic tradition.

The hypothesis from which the present study started is also expressed in the preface, confessing the need for a cultural recovery of some writings concerned with comedy: "this is how we proceeded, seeking, within the limits of our possibilities, to map precisely as many regions as possible, hitherto uncharted within the perimeter of national comedy" (p. 9), referring here to folkloric literature, the first cultured authors, humorous publicity and the biographies of important writers in our country. Of course, here too the author confesses in a disclaimer, invoking the literary critic Marian Popa, that his personal speculations, as the first building site of the book, were then confirmed by a rich bibliography. With regard to the argumentative framework of the book, I consider this to be a key statement that reveals the relationship of this volume with the multiple theoretical and critical perspectives addressed by Claudiu T. Arieșan. The overflowing reference bibliography inside the book not only provides a list of titles of great interest at the end, but also gives it the character of a well-systematized reading file. The source books on which it draws belong to Bergson, Kierkegaard, Freud, Starobinski and many other thinkers from all areas of culture, from philosophy to psychoanalysis, from anthropology to religion, and even aesthetics. After all, this book is comparative and interdisciplinary in scope, for laughter is, in fact, universal.

Although the author declares that his study is not intended to be "an exhaustive comparative study, with references to cultural, circumambient spaces", aiming only to identify some landmarks in view of a "future encyclopaedic repertory dedicated to national humour" (p. 7), the 569-page book is nevertheless very comprehensive. Excluding the literary texts that Arieșan does not deal with, the volume presents diachronically, as befits any history, the theoretical perspectives and conceptual delimitations in the area of comedy starting from antiquity to modern theories of comedy, with reservations about postmodern irony, however. For this reason, I would venture to suggest a new title for the present volume: *The History and Theory of Comedy/Comic*. The configuration of the chapters bears witness to this.

The first theorizing chapter refers to the terminology of the field, presenting congruences and differences between the laughable (the cause of laughter) and the comic, the former belonging to aesthetics, the latter to poetics. (p. 20). After exposing the problem of

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confusion between laughter, comedy and humour, a discrete sub-chapter deals with the psycho-somatic description of laughter as an emotional, cathartic, uniquely human manifestation (p. 25-26), making the transition to the Freudian perspective on laughter. Laughter appears here as liberation from repression to the point of rebellion against authority. The following are cited here: Wolfenstein, Favez-Boutonier, George Dumas, Piaget, F. Kris, G. Golse, Baconschi.

Also, in its social function, laughter can temper the "functorial hostility between individuals" (p. 31). He presents French sociology's distinction between laughter of welcome and laughter of rejection and sets out the main characteristics of the laughable as presented by Bergson in his famous seminal work. Following in the footsteps of Latour and Huizinga, he reveals the interferences between the ludic and the laughable, then the typology of laughter synchronised with that of the comic (the comic of morals, the situational, the licentious, the childish) up to the noble, bourgeois and mass comic, according to Marmontel's classification (p. 40).

The same chapter dwells on philosophical and aesthetic theories of the comic, starting with Plato, who understands laughter as the penalisation of the ridiculous, "truly blameworthy" (44), but also understands the duplicity of the comic as a mixture of suffering and pleasure. Arieșan refers to this period of comicology, calling it the prehistory of philosophical comicology. Through Xenophon and Heraclitus, he reaches Aristotle's *Poetics*. Although comedy is "the imitation of rude people" (*comai*), the comedy that defines it must, according to Aristotle, be accompanied by philanthropy, by a feeling of humanity, translated by the Latin rhetoricians by the word "charity" (52-53). This feeling, which keeps the exaggerations of laughter in check, anticipates the common sense and humanity that will define, in the second part of the book, the folk humour of Romanian satirical short stories called *snoave*. Temperance of this kind takes the forms of circumspection and parsimony for Cicero (p. 57), vital to the comic.

Writing about Cicero, Arieșan also points out the importance of laughter in oratory and how it can shape speech. References to Quintilian and Curtius conclude the section on Greco-Latin philosophy. Diachronically, the author moves quickly through medieval writings to Renaissance thinkers and humanist rationalism (Descartes, Hobbes, La Bruyere). If for Descartes, laughter is a biological accident, for Hobbes it is a narcissistic triumph (p. 67). Several pages present the Kantian conception of laughter, based on the principle of the opposition of opposites, and highlighting the absurd character of laughter as "animal delight" (p. 73). After the Enlightenment's naturalist conception of laughter, the transition is made to the Romantics (Schelling, Jean Paul, Hoffman, Sulzer, Flögel). In addition to the proverbial Romantic irony, Arieșan renders, through Flögel, the main elements of laughter: the new, the unexpected, the rare, describing the anti-Kantian Romantic conception of laughter (82). The following are mentioned and commented on: Hegel, Schopenhauer with his two types of laughter (the joke and buffoonery), A. Bain, Vischer, K. Fischer and of course Bergson. Arieșan also refers to the grouping of the main theories of laughter into two categories: moral theories (Aristotle, Hobbes, Freud and others) and intellectualist theories (Cicero, Lessing, Schopenhauer, Bergson). The author also takes into account an aesthetic strand of the conception of laughter, debuting with German Romanticism. Distinctions emerge between aesthetic laughter, the elaborately comic, and anaesthetic, grotesque laughter (p. 95). This part of the theories of the comic concludes with references to the main ideas about the comic put forward by Ch. Lalo, J. Sully, Hartmann, B. Croce in the 20th century. This is followed by an anthropological and religious approach to the comic. In this respect, the author mentions the debates on discursive comedy (Perlman, J. R. Searle, Schmidt) and the gesticulation of laughter, mentioning a new humanist discipline, ethnogestics (p. 110).

Studying Bahtin, the author devotes a few pages to the *grotesque*, whose perception has deteriorated with its romantic association with the monstrous and infernal, but which Bahtin understands as the *carnavalesque*, the laughter of all people (117). Following theorisations from various fields of knowledge, Arieșan presents a phenomenology of laughter. One of the hypostases concerns the relationship with the sacred. Quoting M. Meslin, R. Otto,

Baconschi, he highlights laughter as ritual, the hierophanic meaning of laughter (p. 127), the magic-religious laughter with apotropaic functions.

The author explores, through Tertullian, the laughter of the Old Testament God and the dispute with regard to the laughter of Christ. The hermeneutical excursus continues with patristic comicology, emphasizing the importance of Clement of Alexandria. The next chapter entitled *Humour and Irony*, presents irony and humour as one of the possible modes of the comic. The delineations concern the nature of irony and humor. The Romantics were the apostles of the former, it was the British who associated humour with the comic through Ben Johnson in 1599. Humour was considered an English reality (p. 183). The chapter places the two categories, irony and humour, in parallel, diachronically highlighting their theorisations, from German Romanticism to Kierkegaard for whom irony is the joke behind seriousness (p. 190), to Louis Aragon who refused to write what humour is. The author offers several definitions of the two terms, collected from different thinkers; several types of humour are listed. The distinction between humour and the comic is important. Humour, "congenital to man" (216) belongs to the creator of the comic, it is the inner resource of the humorist that brings out the comicality of a situation, of an object (p. 197). One can detect here a triple equation in the scheme of a speech act: humour, comedy, laughter. The last one seems to us to belong to the receiver. So the first part of the book, devoted to theories of laughter, in fact inventories theories of the reception of the comic.

As humour is inseparable from the auctorial personality (p. 218), the chapter on the universal and Romanian comedy/comic/ humour starts from the author's conviction that: "humour has elective affinities with one individual temperament or another, with one national character or another, with different social, community, dialectal or regional groupings. Its study as an ethnic peculiarity is therefore perfectly possible, lawful and even instructive". (p. 219). The chapter opens with distinctions between collective humour, national humour and individual humour, with classifications of humour and the specific humour of the English, Germans, Spanish, Americans, Russians and Jews.

The last two hundred pages are devoted to Romanian comic, revealing a phenomenology of the comic in Romanian popular literature first through the satirical short stories and paremiology. Through the study of the first, "as a compensatory humorous act in Romanians" (p. 263), the satirical spirit of the Romanians, imbued with bonhomie, is highlighted. Snoava reflects a sympathetic satire, argues Arieșan, and from this point one can also highlight the quality of Romanian humour in stimulating communion between people. Nor is the main character of the stories omitted, Păcală, at times witty, at times retarded (p. 279), overflowing with resigned optimism in the face of trouble (p. 281). The author then moves on to an exposition of Romanian comicology, starting with the first writings of the chroniclers, with Dimitrie Cantemir, Simion Bărnuțiu, up to the theorisations of G. Călinescu or Radu Enescu. After all, the critic can also be a humorist, writes Arieșan.

The chapter on Romanian humour in 19th-century Romanian literature has a more applied character. Journals such as *Gura Satului*, *Calicul*, *Tutti-frutti* abound in epigrams, satires, parodies and caricatures. This chapter does seem very relevant in the recuperative act it expresses.

Two important personalities of Romanian culture receive special attention: B. P. Hașdeu and Mihai Eminescu, both analysed from the perspective of their non-literary writings, the former also being followed biographically along the path of his becoming a humorist. In Eminescu's articles, Arieșan notes the desperate joviality, the polite desperation and the acerbic polemicist tempered by "doses of compensatory humour" (p. 419). The last part dedicated to Romanian comic aims to define a specific national humour. Romanian theorists who have written about the specificity of Romanian humour and Romanian cultural humour are highlighted. Arieșan notes that comicology has aroused too little interest from specialists in our country. He attaches particular importance to P. Locusteanu and his study of the comic, but tries to list other concerns in the area of Romanian humour in Iorga, Streinu, even Dumitru Stăniloae.

Arieșan's volume ends somewhat abruptly. From our point of view, a concluding chapter would have been necessary to synthetically reconstruct the portrait of Romanian

humour, the features of which are scattered through the bibliographical labyrinth. However, in one of the final sub-chapters (pp. 448-449), the author briefly reviews some of the characteristics of Romanian humour: refinement, nobility, sympathetic, ironic and satirical profile, but with moral value.

The great merit of the book, *Istoria comicului românesc*, lies in the fact that it provides a robust theoretical framework for a future approach, even historical, of Romanian literary comic.