THE COMICAL

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The Comical

A Philosophical Analysis

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Contents

Foreword vii

Part I Defining the Comical 3

- The Theory of a Negative Feature
 and of the Superiority of the Subject
 of the Comical 8
- The Theory of Degradation 13
- The Theory of Contrast 17
- The Theory of Incongruity 23
- The Theory of Deviation from a Norm 35
- The Theories of Mixed Motifs 41
- A Defence of the Relationist Version
 of the Deviation Theory 55
- Notes to Part I* 67

Part II Forms of the Comical 75

- Major Ways of Evoking the Comical 78
- Main Forms of the Comical 93
- Notes to Part II* 139

Part III Social Significance of the Comical 145

- Cognitive Functions of the Comical 148
- The Role of Jest and Derision in Primitive Cultures 154
- The Comical as a Source of Psychic Hygiene:
 - Entertainment and Therapy 158
- Laughter: A Social Weapon 165
- Notes to Part III* 193

Bibliography 199

Foreword

The problem of the comical is one of the most interesting issues in aesthetics. Its significance extends well beyond the sphere of aesthetic studies and has attracted the attention of the scholars working in other fields such as the theorists and historians of particular art forms, sociologists, psychologists, as well as anthropologists, ethnographers and the theorists of education.

Philosophy has devoted a lot of attention to the comical. Since Aristotle almost every philosopher has felt obliged to comment on this question. However, even though they have offered a number of accurate observations on the subject, the philosophers involved in the discussion about the comical have earned a reputation of being rather devoid of the sense of the comical and many a time their considerations have been compared to those of a blind man talking about colours. And yet the problem of the comical kept attracting them to such an extent that they paid no heed to the difficulties involved and neglected the risk of becoming ridiculous themselves. Adolf Zeissig once remarked that all the literature on the comical is a "comedy of errors" committed while defining the comical. Yet even he could not resist the temptation of adding another page to this "comedy of errors". Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński claimed that the good thing about the philosophical writing concerning the comical is that it offers not only the theory of the comical but at the same time is the theory's practical application. Yet he did venture to create his own theory of laughter even though this move was the most certain way to jeopardize his reputation of being one of the wittiest Poles

of his time. His victory, however, owed a lot to the fact that his reputation was too strong to have been undermined. No wonder, then, that, unlike Boy, having nothing to lose, the author of this work yielded to the charm of this eternal problem and is now submitting to the reader the results of his preoccupation with the subject.

According to a popular conviction the writing on the comical should itself be witty. One can be witty almost about anything. However, contrary to journalism, scientific studies need neither be witty nor entertaining. No one demands from the authors of theoretical treatises on poetry that they wrote them in verse; no one claims that the works of aestheticians should evoke aesthetic experiences. No one also holds that works on tragedy and the tragic are obliged to evoke the emotions of pity and fear and produce a cathartic effect in the readers.

The present book is a re-worked (partly extended, partly shortened) version of my doctoral dissertation written in the Department of Philosophy of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin and defended in 1963 at its Faculty of Letters. It was published in 1967 by Książka i Wiedza Publishers in Warsaw and in 1974 its Russian translation appeared in Moscow (Progress Publishers).

The first version of the book was written more than a quarter of a century ago. In the life of science and of scientists a period of such a length makes an epoch. Science goes on developing and scientists get old. Together with the scientists their analyses and conclusions, even some subjects they have been working on, get old as well. Luckily, however, the comical has its place on the list of eternal subjects in the humanities which seem never to lose their attraction and importance. Besides, changes, not to mention revolutions, in the humanities take much more time than changes in the natural sciences and new ideas do not always mean that earlier conceptions are automatically rejected as completely old-fashioned.

The proposal from the editors of Nijhoff International Philosophy Series and Kluwer Academic Publishers to have the book published in English obviously had too much appeal to be rejected. My first feelings, however, were rather mixed. After twenty five years the book should actually have been rewritten from scratch, a move impossible because of my present interests and commitments.

Having re-read the book, however, I realized that its structure and its basic theoretical analyses stand the chance of self-defence. That is why I decided to publish the book in English.

Naturally, its English version differs from the Polish one. First of all, many examples of the comical taken either from the Polish humourist writing or from the comedy film production of the 1960s which either might be culturally incomprehensible to contemporary reader or were too difficult or simply impossible to translate, had to go. These changes were introduced in the process of translating the book and resulted in a slightly smaller amount of the illustrative material since it was not always possible to find English or more up-to-date substitutes.

Similar modifications have been made in the bibliography. The works of lesser importance for the theory of the comical (mainly Polish and Russian) were replaced with the most significant works on the subject published after 1967. This task was made easier with the help of the excellent Humor. International Journal of Humor Research which not only provides current news on the most important research work concerning the comical but at the same time stimulates and integrates research activities. I can only wish that the periodical had been available when I was working on my dissertation and struggling to get hold of the literature on the subject. Unfortunately, it was not possible to introduce all the most interesting latest works on the theory of the comical into the main text for which I apologize to both their authors and my readers.

Another change which needs some explanation is the omittance of the last chapter of the original version entitled "The Controversy about Socialist Satire" which presented mainly the Soviet discussions on the role of satire in the Communist countries. In terms of structure this part made an annex to the work and did not contribute theoretically to its conclusions. At present it is only a sui generis historical curiosity. Its most relevant ideas have been incorporated into Part III of the present book.

One cannot exhaust the problematic potential of the theory of the comical on two hundred or so pages. Therefore the present attempt to construct a theory of the comical does not, and cannot, provide a fully comprehensive theory. What I have rather been after is a theoretical sketch whose elements are: a) the

discussion and classification of some of the theories of the comical, b) the choice and defence of one of them or the proposal of a new one, c) a systematic discussion of more important techniques of evoking the experience of the comical, d) the characteristics and classification of the major forms of the comical and the major forms of artistic production connected with the comical, and e) the characteristics of the social role of the comical. The points mentioned have been reflected in the structure of the work with a modification such that the defence of the conception chosen will be carried out not only in Part I but also in Parts II and III.

Since the work falls generally into the category of aesthetics, it does not concentrate specifically upon a single kind of art and, furthermore, necessarily ignores a number of detailed questions which would not have been omitted in, say, a highly specialized work on the theory of literature. When talking about the artistic forms of the comical I have drawn examples from the realms of film, theatre, literature and painting, with the emphasis on the first three, for it seems that in these forms the manifestations of the comical are at their most intense and diverse.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Series Editors Dr Lynne Broughton and Professor Jan Szrednicki for their initiative to publish the book in English, to Mr Szymon Kobylński for excellent illustrations, and to Dr Marek Janiak who undertook the task of translating the work into English and helped me with his comments and suggestions in modernizing the contents. I am also indebted to Książka i Wiedza Publishers, the copyright holder to the Polish original of The Comical, for their kind assent to transfer the copyright to Kluwer Academic Publishers. The translator is particularly indebted to Dr Lynne Broughton who took pains to correct the text of the translation.