

IOSUD – „DUNĂREA DE JOS” UNIVERISTY OF GALAȚI
Doctoral School of Socio-Human Sciences



DOCTORAL THESIS

Political anecdote in the 80's. Urban folklore as subversive form

Abstract

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U2 Philology-Romanian No.22

GALAȚI

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ABSTRACT

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Political anecdote in the 80's. Urban folklore as subversive form

Abstract

Keywords: anecdote, joke, subversive irony, humour, urban folklore, totalitarianism, communism, wit, allusion, imaginary

The doctoral thesis entitled **Political Anecdote in the 80s. Urban folklore as subversive form** mainly studies the anti-totalitarian humour circulating in Romania in the 80's. Nevertheless, the research could not avoid the previous post-war decades. By using different critical approaches and following the interaction of the three coordinates (history, politics, and social aspects) the analysis is to discover the stylistic values of jokes and anecdotes, pleading for their integration in literature, even if it is folklore; we have also studied their message as a projection of the Romanians' spirituality and identity. We also pursued and revealed the way the totalitarian pressure determined the valuation of evil, because the anti-communist satire was the popular reaction to the absurdity practiced by the system. The four chapters of the thesis were built up, on the one hand, by a research of the works published up to 2020, and on the other, by a personal analysis of the spiritual opposition through humour, against communism. The study is an immersion in the social environment of the post-war Romania, with an analytical and recovering intention. The paper aims at highlighting the distinctive features of humour in all its forms of existence and analysing its liberating function, but also corrective, in a totalitarian space, dominated by oppressive practices, censorship and dogma. The research of anti-totalitarian, anti-communist wit was due to the propensity for joke, but also to analysis, to expressive communication, but especially to real democracy. Reading or listening to anecdotes and jokes from the '80s was a socio-cultural journey, in order to bring to attention a sample of anti-communist humour, currently under the threat of perishability.

Our thesis tries to prove that the anecdote and the political joke are the proof of the literary-folkloric processing of history and the present times by the social imaginary. The anti-totalitarian humour has as obvious intentions revenge through fiction and bringing the oppressive system to the stage of derision. The political joke is not harmless, but a socio-cultural comment. Fine humour or aggressive irony - distancing, by means of tone and directness - selects, sanctions and amplifies and this algorithm is equivalent to creation. Anecdotes and jokes are based on a kind of fiction that oscillates between individual and collective, where the comic invention meets the compensatory side of irony. Imaginary stance means creativity at the mental level and exploration of the virtual reality, because there is a factual (proper) history, but there are also representations generated by history. The political humour in post-war Romania could be divided into two categories: the first includes the anti-Western one, a directed satire that - probably - no one believed in, the second is the natural one, against the totalitarian regime under Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and subsequently Nicolae Ceaușescu, having a vindictive, liberating and compensatory function.

Actually, the present doctoral approach points out that, sometimes resigned, sometimes ironic, the anti-totalitarian spirited expression has spread ideas. The jokes were a sublimation of the pain in sarcasm and - somehow - the urban folklore is also a changing form of perennial art.

The paper mainly studies the anti-totalitarian humour circulating in Romania in the 80's. Nevertheless, the research could not avoid the previous post-war decades. The entire period 1945-1989 was marked by the ironic resistance of the peoples imprisoned in the Eastern European bloc. By way of analysis, we have tried to discover the stylistic valences of jokes and anecdotes, we pleaded for their integration in literature, even if it is folklore; we have also studied their message as a projection of the Romanians' spirituality and identity. We also pursued and revealed the way the totalitarian pressure determined the valuation of evil, because the anti-communist satire was the popular reaction to the absurdity practiced by the system. The four chapters of the thesis were built up, on the one hand, by a research of the works published up to 2020, and on the other, by a personal analysis of the spiritual opposition through humour, against communism.

The first chapter of the paper, **Irony and the force of subversion by humour**, proposes, in the first part (**Humour, between defence and liberation**) a research of the most important concerns for defining and theorizing of humour, from Aristotle to the present day.

Subchapter Two: **The Joke and the Anecdote. Audience and wagger** makes a clear distinction between joke and anecdote. Political or not, the joke is always a retelling and - sometimes - a refinement. Regardless of its axiological status, it represents the last living, fertile and relevant manifestation of popular creativity. If the anecdote requires at least an average level of culture, the joke is a democratization of humor, its catch being accessible to almost anyone. In the conditions of the old regime, the jokes had an illicit, underground existence, they were creations and comic-parabolic manifestations of the repressed impulses. Their implicit criticism, an anonymous and unwritten manifestation of "public opinion" – here we are using another cliché - was the sign of an inner resistance, but also externalized, verbalized towards the ideological line of power. Another characteristic aspect of the jokes should not be neglected in relation to the traditional *snoava* (i.e. short oral, folk tale with anecdotal content): while it leans preferentially on the imperfections of human nature (stupidity, vices, impotences), on the basis of a classical morality, jokes are oriented with predilection for social imperfections, which are typical, above everything, of the new environment, the urban centres. The Romanian short story called "*snoava*" had moral intentions, whereas the jokes are amoral, placing their characters not in the perspective of some norms, but in that of some interests.

The third subchapter presents, as the name suggests, the **Context of the emergence of anti-communist folklore**. The urban folklore of the 20th and 21st centuries has manifested and is still manifesting itself as a generating and transforming factor of vision. The rhetoric of humour knows avatars limited to history, place and individual. The rhetoric of wit knows avatars circumscribed to history, place and individual. Phenomena such as the appearance, propagation, reception and dissemination of anti-communist humour fall into the area of research of some interfering disciplines: history, psycho-sociology, cultural anthropology, philology. Our research therefore goes beyond the science of literature. An interesting component of anti-system irony is the slang of the socialist years; slang creativity is based mainly on metaphor, an existing word in the language acquires - by convention - new meanings. The slang language can work simultaneously with cryptic, expressive, ironic and playful significances. The origin of jokes can be attributed to the need for fantasy; in the case of Romanians, it meant a compensatory imaginary, as a revenge for the living conditions and an imaginary replacing the art intake. It is possible that the number of anti-Ceausescu anecdotes would have been lesser if the public television programme was rich and diverse. Jokes were the way that people had their own entertainment: ironic, sadistic, funny, subject to

prohibition and punishment. The major themes of anti-communist humour, analysed in detail in our paper are: the system imposed by the Republics of the Socialist Soviet Union, Ceausescu couple, the Army, the Militia, the Department of State Security (The Secret Police), the Informants, the Industry, the Compulsory agricultural practice, the Living standards, the Communist system-religion relationship, the Culture, the Education, the School, Agriculture, Propaganda, the Foreign Policy, the Russians (ironized for brutality, greed, primitivism), the Abuses, the Mimicking of democracy. We have discovered jokes about jokes and proposed the term **metajoke**, this concept being intended as a contribution to the terminology of structural-literary analysis.

The fourth subchapter, **Thematic and discursive constancies of the genre in specialized studies** reviews the main studies on jokes and anecdotes consulted for documentation that this paper starts from. We relied on: Adrian Cioroianu, **On the Shoulders of Marx. An introduction to the history of Romanian communism or Politics and society in Ceausescu era**, by Florin Soare. The book by Cristina Banc and Alan Dundes, **First Prize, Fifty Years**, was the first collection of Romanian political jokes (having an anti-communist character) that circulated between 1948-1985. In addition to the texts themselves, the paper contains comparative notes on the situation of the species in Eastern and Central Europe. We can also mention: Călin - Bogdan Ștefănescu, **10 years of Romanian black humour: A collection of political jokes, The history of communism through the jokes of the time**, by the British Ben Lewis, Dana Maria Niculescu Grasso's book, **Political jokes in the countries of real socialism**, Mihaela-Viorica Constantinescu, **Romanian political humour during the communist period: linguistic perspectives**, Dumitru-Alin Savu, **Humour and politics in communist Romania: life between laughter and fear** and the study **Communism and repression in Romania: the thematic history of a national fratricide**, by Ruxandra Cesereanu. Our study is an analysis of urban folklore and an unique research of the most valuable texts from **Urzica** (translator's note: The Nettle) magazine. A microanalysis, followed by a hundred samples, reviews the main theories of humour (Plato, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Umberto Eco, Thomas Hobbes, Henri Bergson, Arthur Koestler, Auguste Penjon).

The second chapter of the paper, **Humour as a reflection of totalitarian society. Manipulation and resistance**, attempts to prove that the anti-communist humour propagated as urban folklore was an art form with function and social-psychological consequences. The open satire between 1945 and 1948 harassed the system, and the anti-Ceausescu type of humour (in some developments, quite delightful) was the replacement of the real opposition and a refuge, it represented a struggle of the spirit with totalitarianism. The characters in jokes and anecdotes, the fiction of anti-communist satire, in general, represent desiderata, extensions, projections of the collective mind. Somehow, the anti-totalitarian irony functioned as a factor of social cohesion, solidarity based on critical reporting, on negative judgment. Dissent among the social masses was small, and those who dared to display it suffered, being subjected to investigation, arrest and even murder. The anti-communist protests were not as obvious, as they were in Hungary, the Czech Republic or Poland, as the Romanian opposition came forward more as a comic capitalization of evil or as resistance based on humour.

The third chapter, **The circulation of anti-communist humour. The official humour and the spiritual guerrilla**, analyses the media, the ways of conveying anti-system ironies and the fight against censorship. The totalitarian system produced a split of consciousness, resulting in at least a duality in thought, expression and reception. Although rare and fearful, anti-communist subtleties existed, especially after 1970, and were manifested mainly in caricatures. The quasi-existence of "lizards" (i.e. tendentious allusions) in the first twenty post-

war years is explained by the Stalinist terror, by the careful censorship practiced by the Groza-Dej regime. The deaths of Stalin (1953) and Gheorghiu-Dej (1965) brought a certain relaxation, but the anti-communist ironies were still to come. Both regular readers and those who checked the allusive message were initially surprised by the escape from the wooden language. The different expression of the seventh and eighth decades is evident in society and in the media.

The subchapter entitled **Subtlety and propaganda in the Romanian cinema, 1965-1989. From the parabolization of the message to humour** is a research of some films produced during Ceausescu period. We have identified their comic side, the fun coming from two directions: ostentatious propaganda (involuntary comic through embarrassment) and subtlety - bypassing censorship brought memorable "lizards" to the audience.

In the subchapter **The desecrating humour of the musicals**, we appreciated the role that the "artistic brigades" of the students; the courage, sometimes on the verge of recklessness (as they themselves confess) and the creativity of the youth groups brought texts that delighted the crowded audience in dark and cold rooms.

Subchapter **Newspapers, magazines and humour literary circles. From the centre to the edge** contains a chronological presentation of the humour press in Romania (until Urzica - the main landmark of official humour during 1949 and 1989), relates humour publications in Romania to similar magazines in communist countries and makes an analysis of the "approved" satire.

The analysis in the subchapter **Case study - Urzica Magazine** is dedicated to the most important satirical publication in the Popular Republic of Romania and the Socialist Republic of Romania. The hundreds of issues we went through conveyed the complex image of a magazine as a double-edged sword or as an illustration of what we call in comic theory the "tricked trickster" - here, the "stung stinging nettle"... Conceived as an anti-Western and proletcultist tool, Urzica served the system for almost twenty years. After 1965, it became a source of "lizards", with the general public waiting for the magazine almost as eagerly as they expected the broadcasts from Radion Free Europe. Especially the issues of the last Ceausescu decade, contained remarkable caricatures and texts with anti-system satirical potential, which was noticed and sanctioned by the censorship and the Secret Police.

Chapter Four, **Manifestations of humour in Romanian communism. Structuring strategies**, treat the humour and the categories of the comic from an aesthetic point of view. The subchapter **Aesthetics of humor and comedy** approaches the perspectives of different eras, expressed in the works of Aristotle, Evangelos Moutsopoulos, Jean Marc Defays, Umberto Eco and Cătălin Ghiță. Aesthetics is defined as "the science that studies the laws and categories of art, considered to be the highest form of creating and receiving beauty; a number of issues regarding the essence of art, its relations with reality, the method of artistic creation, the criteria and art genres."

In the subchapter **The rhetoric of anti-communist humour or the stylistics of subversion** addresses the issue of language figures from the last decade of the Socialist Republic of Romania. Ranging from allusion, pun, curse, to cryptic metaphor, they are found in everyday language, in jokes and anecdotes. In any totalitarian system, a cryptic language and more or less artistic forms of expression using ambiguity, allusion, parable, irony that emerge. We intended our thesis as a contribution to the research of urban folklore from the communist period; we hope it will be also a plus to the hoard of jokes and anecdotes that deserve - for science, but also for the soul – consideration and remembrance. Spread over the decades, this ironic frond - which I called at one point in the thesis "**spiritual guerrilla**" – used to be and still is a sign of popular creativity, a comic recovery of the everyday evil. What we call history today, for the people living during the '40s and the 80s, represented the everyday

life; lived through the social imaginary, everyday life migrated into the anecdote. Cultural dissent and subversive humour were much more present than physical resistance to communism. We analysed the division of personality in the totalitarianism, the dual thinking, phenomena encountered both in intellectuals and in other social categories. Under the sign of sadness, more or less in jest, perhaps George Bacovia's verse should be quoted here: "Oh, sad country, thou art full of humour!" One of the pillars of the thesis was the historical research, especially of the period 1945-1989. Writing of this paper was intertwined with certain clarifications, as well as the assimilation and exploitation of new historical information. Through contextualization, we showed the dependence of humour on the socio-cultural framework and we related street humour to the subversive irony of official humour; over the decades, we have seen the change of irony into humour, the return to irony and its amplification with sadistic and bitter accents. Humour - including the political sort - and its reception is the moral and cultural pulse of a society. The enormous number of anti-communist anecdotes and jokes is due to several factors, but we will mention only two, which we consider determinant: 1. the longevity of systems in Eastern Europe; 2. The laughable personalities circumscribed to the nomenclature. Going through anti-communist jokes - either by listening or reading - is a metaphorical journey into Hell under the auspices of Dej and Ceausescu. The guide would not be Virgil, but the Black Humour - a spiritual and ineffable companion. The anti-totalitarian jokes were the mildew flowers of the popular spirit, especially the urban one. Anecdotes and jokes are folkloric literary achievements, but unlike others in this category, they had no title; the small extent and the lack of title are two particularizing aspects. The irony of the despotic authority has been perpetuated since antiquity as a clandestine legacy. The black humour from the anti-communist anecdotes has its origin in the antiquity and anonymity of the folklore passed through Ion Creangă chain (Mother-in-law with three daughters-in-law, The Story of Stan Pățitul and others). To paraphrase Hegel, at some point, quantity becomes a feature of quality. Thus, even by means of many sadistic, morbid jokes, the Romanian political humour offers a national identity.

Sometimes resigned, sometimes ironic, the anti-totalitarian spirited expression has spread ideas. The jokes were a sublimation of the pain in sarcasm and - somehow - the urban folklore is also a changing form of perennial art. A living phenomenon, characteristic to the modern Romanian world, the joke has seen a visible and quite accelerated regression in the last 15 years. After reaching its peak during the communist period (especially during the '60s - 80s), the popular vein seems to have dried up. Romanians abandon a significant form of oral creativity, a spiritual resistance to history.

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