Polish Humour

Edited. By Dorota Brzozowska & Władysław Chłopicki

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This book of almost 700 pages is a valuable collection of papers depicting the story of Polish humour over centuries. The articles are mainly descriptive, and divided into three sections: Genres of Polish Humour, Forms of Polish Humour, and Humour research in Poland, the latter reporting on the present "state of the art" in humour studies and a list of relevant events in recent years.

The first nine papers deal with humour in Polish literature, from the Middle Ages and to contemporary times, arranged chronologically. The authors adopt a broad definition of humour, which means that unlike the conservative view that confines the humour in literature to jocular aspects only, they include also
genres such as irony, satire and the grotesque. Although humour is the nominal theme, one can find in these articles a vast source of information on Polish literature, history and values of the past. Raw materials originating in Polish language, sometimes archaic, are translated into English (except for the paper on humour in poetry after 1989 which includes texts in English only). Usually, translations are adequate for allowing the authors to make their points, but if you know the language, you can really enjoy the humour much more. This is especially true for the paper on the sense of humour of children and adolescents, where many examples of unintentional humour are based on *double entendre* technique.

The historical approach is embodied first in two papers presenting overviews of humour's presence in Polish prose from the Middle Ages up to the 20th century, and in ancient poetry. Next, three particular writers are dealt with: Aleksander Fredro, a facetious poet of the Romantic period; Witkacy, a mysterious multi-talented artist and master of the grotesque (1885-1939); and K.I. Gałczyński, also an eminent poet, known for his absurd humour and cabaret songs.

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A couple of papers are devoted to humour on stage, especially to the cabaret that seems to be so well rooted in the Polish tradition of entertainment, including the genre of so called Jewish szmonces. Following in this section come articles on humour in the media: the press, cinema, radio, TV and Internet.

The second section covers contemporary political humour as well as that of the period of the People's Republic. Political humour is also dealt with in articles on Polish caricature, satirical drawings and posters, and again, in cabaret songs. Humour was used as a cover for political critique and a way to circumvent political censorship. The intelligent public correctly decoded the hidden messages, and humour became a secret language between the authors and the audience. Many political jokes were actually based on Jewish jokes in the post War period as well as in the seventies (such as the joke about a boy rescuing the drowning Gierek, which parallels an earlier one about a Jewish boy rescuing Hitler from drowning). Świątkiewicz-Mośny demonstrates this universality and adaptability clearly in a table at the end of her piece.

One of the papers in the section discusses forms with "winged words". True, some eptonysms use humour to express sophisticated ideas, inconvenient truths etc. However, humour is only one of the possible attributes, and not a necessary one, of many aphorisms and proverbs.

Five papers in this section present the phenomenon of ethnic jokes from different points of view. The article by Brzozowska examines the butts of recurring ethnic jokes. Before WWII they were Jews, the minority group, whose intricate relations with the majority created the tensions necessary for such jokes to be produced and to prosper. Her conclusions are in accordance with Christie Davies's theory of universality versus locality of stereotypes in ethnic joke, as presented in his valuable book "Ethnic Humour Around the World". Accordingly, the butts during the Second World War were Germans, the enemies; later on they were Russians, who symbolized the regime. Today there exist jokes also about Americans and Oriental people.

It was very interesting to learn about the Russniak (Lemko) people, and even more, about their humour. It was a real surprise for me to find out that the portrayal of the Jew in Russniak folklore doesn't follow the universal stereotype of the shrewd person.

On the contrary, he is portrayed as a fool or simpleton: "*when a Jew appears, he must always be more stupid and worse than anyone else*" (p. 494); this is also exemplified in a comic story on the bottom of p. 496. On the other hand, other jokes cited there could very well pass for Jewish humour, as they make use of inverse logic, sophism and other characteristic attributes of the Jewish form. Some other jokes presented can be found in mainstream Polish jokes, such as those matching the pattern of "a woman comes to the doctor"' (a.k.a. "Przyszła baba do lekarza…). As there are different groups of Russniaks living in different parts of Poland, one group tends to tell jokes about another (for example on p. 501, referring to their "compatriots from the Warta region" as misers). The author considers these to be examples of self-directed humour (an attribute of Jewish humour again!), although arguably a more subtle examination of the intricate social and psychological relations between the groups points to the endeavour of one group to gain internal cohesion at the expense of another.

Then comes a most interesting paper on the image of the Roma in Polish jokes. One gets a painful picture of a minority group which seems to be doomed to a miserable fate as long as they refuse to abandon their traditional behaviour in favour of progress. Again, I will try to compare the two minorities, the Roma and Jews. Both religious Jews in Poland (especially in the past) and Roma are minorities that hold opinions abut themselves as the chosen people and both have a special word to describe those with whom they do not share kinship; *gadź* for the Roma and *goy* for the Jews. Both observe strict rules of ritualistic cleanliness, both evade assimilation in order to preserve their uniqueness. However, the Roma did it in the name of a free spirit, of behaving as they wish, whereas the Jews do it in obedience to the strict rules of *halacha*. These differences are incorporated within a single joke, so as to pose two stereotypes that work one against the other:

> *Son: "Mummy, am I a Jew or a Roma?"*
> *Mother: "You are a Roma. You have eyes like mine, your carnation is tanned. But why are you so concerned? Does it really matter to you who you are? Go and ask your father if you do not trust me."*
> *Son: "Yes, it is very important. I will ask my father then."*
> *The boy went to his father and asked him the same question.*
> *Father: "Of course you are Jewish. You wear a yarmulke, we speak Jewish, you study Torah with the rabbi. But why are you asking"*

> *Son: "You see, father, I have seen a very nice bike in a shop and I would like to have it. Only I do not know if I should negotiate the price with the shop keeper or just steal it." (in the original version a vulgar word is used for "steal")* (p. 522)

There are two ways of looking at ethnic jokes. The first way, held by Davies, is that ethnic jokes are not derogative, only built on an existing and well known stereotype. A person telling or enjoying them is not thereby proven to be in favour of the prejudice expressed through the stereotype. He merely affirms that his or her knowledge of such a stereotype exists. On the other hand, minority group members often claim the opposite, as can well be seen in the article on the image of the Roma in Polish jokes. It has to be said that most of the jokes cited in this paper are universal, and related to universal vices such as excessive thrift, dirtiness and so on, but in these examples the butt turns out to be the Roma. Unlike the cases disclosed by Davies's theory, the Roma were not close neighbours who could be grasped as an inferior version of us; on the contrary, they tried to avoid intimate contacts with the vast population, and therefore the attitude towards them was dictated mostly by mythical fears. The Roma were seen to represent danger. Therefore ethnic jokes about them were really more malignant.

It's interesting to observe the difference between two jokes treating the same stereotype—one about the Roma, another about miners, in the article *Regional Humour of Upper Silesia*—and to conclude from them why Roma could feel offended whereas the miners didn't.

> *Q: Why do the Roma get up at 5 in the morning?*
> *A: To have more time for doing nothing (there is a vulgar term for "doing nothing" in the original version*)(p. 512*)*

Versus a joke on lazy miners (p. 538):

> *- You know, Antek – says Francek – I would like to work at the North Pole.*
> *- But why?*
> *- You see, the night there lasts for half a year, so I could lie down and sleep.*
> *- Oh, but you forgot that the day lasts another half a year.*
> *- But I'm obliges to work 8 hours a day!* (p. 538*)*

It seems to me that what makes a joke offensive is neither the very fact that it is told about a particular group, nor humourous content based on a stereotype, only the additional elements put into the joke and serving the purpose only of humiliation, which are not really necessary in order to evoke laughter. They add unnecessary, offensively emotive elements, such as vulgarisms which could have been omitted without spoiling the joke. The salient offense of the first joke lies in my opinion mainly in the fact that it doesn't say verbatim "doing nothing". Instead, a vulgar term for *doing nothing* is used. By the way, it would have been advisable for the author to leave out the political correctness and quote the explicit term (the same goes for omitting the vulgar word used for "steal" in the joke on a Roma mother and a Jewish father). The joke about the miner, on the other hand, is clean; it requires knowledge of the Polar conditions, which gives the joke an intellectual air. The characters in the joke are almost complemented for their laziness, so these jokes could actually be considered to imply an admirable intelligence.

Another interesting phenomenon observed in the paper on Roma is how one stereotype can be violated by another, for the same of humourous effect.

> *A Roma has bought a lie detector. When his son returns from school he asks him if he has got any marks. The boy proudly answers that he has got the highest mark – five. The lie detector makes a BEEP. The son corrects his previous answer and says: ok, only satisfactory. And the lie detector goes BEEP, BEEP again. The son, gives up and admits that he has failed. Then the father, who wants to teach his son a lesson, says: "You should be ashamed. When I was attending school…" and the lie detector makes a loud BEEP, which makes the son say "Father, you are a liar! You never went to school!" The father replies, "Stop it, you should respect me, I am your father! And the lie detector goes BEEP, BEEP, BEEP."* (p. 518)

Thus, in order to make a point about the marital infidelity allegedly typical of the Roma, this joke violates another stereotype of Roma, as people who despise education.

To sum up, Brzozowska and Chłopicki have produced a deep and thorough work, presenting us with a volume of 33 articles, most of them very interesting and at a high

level. This is the first of its kind to present a vast and exhaustive survey of Polish humour over centuries through different disciplines and approaches.

There were a couple of typos, as is inevitable in any printed publication. Two of them should be mentioned: one on p. 371 the caricaturist Eryk Lipiński is mistakenly named Wacław Lipiński. Another, on p. 422, where a missing letter a at the end of the proper name made the protagonist of an otherwise brilliantly translated poem to be gay, and what's worse, it spoiled the rhyme of the line ("Say la la la, here goes Carl…).