

**Lada Stevanović**

Institute of Ethnography SASA  
lada.stevanovic@gmail.com

## **Ridiculed Death and the Dead: Black Humor Epitaphs and Epigrams of the Ancient Greece\***

Theories about black humor usually regard that it as a contemporary phenomenon and a culmination of the literary modernism and beginning of post-modernism. My intent in this paper is to refute the thesis that the black humor is a modern invention. I am going to prove its existence still in Greek antiquity, quoting and analyzing humorous epitaphs and black humor epigrams. Putting in relation black humor with the joy and humor in religious (fertility and funeral) rituals, I am also going to set a question about the attitude to death and life inherent for this kind of humor, arguing that its origin should be searched in the folk tradition.

**Key words:** black humor, death, life, absurdness, cult, culture

Important matter related to the Greek concept of death is humor, the most evidently embodied in the humorous epitaphs, or on the other kind of epigrams with death thematic. This amalgam of death and laughter points to the black humor that treats things that are “grotesque, morbid or terrifying”.<sup>1</sup> My intent in this paper is not only to represent the attitude to death (and of life) in the antiquity, but also to refute wide spread opinion that black-humor represents either American invention of the late 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, or European creation of the 1930s. In his study *Black Humor Fiction in the Sixties*, Max Schulz states that black humor appeared in America during the period of disillusionment and the decline of traditional values.<sup>2</sup> Defining it also as an American type of humor, Conrad

---

\* This paper is the result of project no. 147020: *Serbia between traditionalism and modernization – ethnological and anthropological researches of cultural changes* by MN RS.

<sup>1</sup> Alan Pratt, *Black Humor*, Critical Essays, New York and London 1993, xix.

<sup>2</sup> M. Schulz, *Black Humor* in *Encyclopedia of World Literature in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Frederick Ungar and Lina Maineiro, 4 Bols. New York: Ungar 1981 pp, 271-273.

Knickerbocker characterizes it as “terrible” and “marvelous” at the same time.<sup>3</sup> In this context and as a modern phenomenon, theoreticians describe black humor as a culmination of literary modernism, or as the beginning of the post-modernism. Another stream of thought suggests that the origin of black humor should be searched in European tradition of the French surrealism. Namely, it was André Breton who coined the phrase *humor noir* in the 1930s. He characterized it as a rebellious, iconoclastic and aimed at questioning social norms. But, as I am going to argue, despite of the innovation of the idiom *black humor*, the tradition of black humor is not unique invention of the twentieth century of the “sophisticated” literature or film art of the Europe or America. It equally belongs to antiquity, not only to comedigraphers and writers such as Aristophanes at the Greek side, or Juvenal and Petronius in Rome, but also to the domain of folk tradition and ritual. There is no doubt that the genre of comedy is closely and inherently related to ritual. My claim that the black humor had to be ritually justified or at least allowed, is supported by the fact that taboo around death is so strong (and this is the reason why this ritual has changed very little since the archaic period up to twentieth century, despite very strong and persistent interventions of the state and Church), that it would ban any behavior or joke that is not ritually expected or at least accepted. Furthermore, obvious relation between black humor and funeral ritual is revealed in the fact that epigrams that I am going to analyze are often found as the inscriptions on the funeral monuments.

Before I approach the thematic of black humor on epitaphs and epigrams, let me return to the ritual context in which we should search its origin. First of all it is death ritual. The good mood at the funeral was above all related to the feasting and enjoying good meal, which was inevitably followed with wine on the Greek funerals. Except on the funerals, drunkenness appears also in the Underworld.<sup>4</sup> In earlier stages of Greek history, the joyful elements of funeral were also funeral games, competitions, dancing, even sexual acts. The same joyful atmosphere at the funerals of archaic and earlier periods, stayed characteristic for fertility rituals (of the classical and Hellenistic epoch). These festivals actually represent a combination of mourning for the dying god/goddess (Demeter, Dionysos, Adonis) and celebration of new life. Embodying the specific attitude towards life and death, they also represent a kind of counterpart to funeral rites, as the opportunity for women to compensate their restricted behavior in funeral that used to be, in pre-classical period much more important, unbridled and able to influence everyday reality. The relations between funeral and fertility rituals has been already argued

---

<sup>3</sup> C. Knickerbocker, C., *Humor with a Mortal Sting* in New York Times Book Review, September 1964, Sec. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Republica*, 2, 363, c. Aristophanes, *Fragmenta*, 488, 6. The enjoyment in the food, good mood and laughter that followed, fits into the interpretation of eating as an act of confirmation and manifestation of life. The inherent relation between the grave and the food is pointed also in the Roman sources. Namely *culina* used to be the place where meal was sacrificed for the dead. From this word is derived *culinary* and all the words grouped around the same family that in many modern languages denote skills of cookery and many concepts related to gastronomy.

by numerous scholars interested in ancient Greek rituals.<sup>5</sup> It also should not be forgotten that the Earth's fertility used to be related with the women's fertility, so it is expected to suppose that human's death might have been correlated with the dying of the nature.

Let me go step back and focus for a while on a type of humor characteristic for the fertility rituals and early funerals. Namely Photius and Hesychius inform us that, during the festival of Stenia, which took place two days before Thesmophoria, on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of Pyanepsion, women shamefully abused one another. Photius uses the term *loidorein* (to abuse), while Hesychius uses *blasfheim* and *diaskoptein*<sup>6</sup> At the Haloa festival dedicated both to Demeter and to Dionysus and held in Eleusis, women were gathering around the table full of Earth's bounty, carrying presentations of male and female organs and whispering the most shameful things to each other.<sup>7</sup> Orgy, jokes and abuses, as well as phallic elements and presentation of female genitals may be correlated to the theory of Michael Bakhtin that he developed about carnivalesque, that down and inner bring rebirth and renewal, wherefore obscenities and abuses during the time of carnival created as a parody of everyday life have ability to recreate.<sup>8</sup> Both the clay models of phalluses, first fruits, as well as the obscene jokes appear with the same function – regeneration and the empowerment of life forces. Researching the concept of carnevalesque in the Medieval Culture, Bakhtin only mentioned that its origin should be searched in the antiquity, but he did not research this interesting issue. Within his approach, Bakhtin theorizes carnevalesque as the manifestation of different worldview, not going into the analysis of the genesis of such a worldview. The theoretical research that does refer to the ancient Greek carnival, offering complementary perspective to the Bakhtinian theory is done by Olga Freidenberg, who theorized a concept of hubristic/parodic. The ideas of Bakhtin and Freidenberg coincide to a large extent. However, two theoreticians start from slightly different perspectives. While Bakhtin focuses on the functioning of the carnevalesque semantic in the frame of the Medieval culture, Freidenberg's interest is more directed at the research and understanding of cognition, which creates carnevalesque through early semantic of parodic. So, Bakhtin is focused more on the nature of carnevalesque, while Freidenberg makes an effort to map its origin in

---

<sup>5</sup> See more in M. Alexiou *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, Rowman & Littlefield, Oxford 2002, 21; Gail Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices: Women's Lament and Greek Literature*, T J Press Ltd, Patsdow, Cornwall 1995, 117. The restriction of unrestrained behavior is related also to the restriction of women's influence on the decisions about property inheritance. Due to the social changes that marked the development of city-state and improvement of father-right and exclusively male citizenship, women lost the vital role that they had in religious and social life of *genos* in the archaic period. About relation between funeral and fertility rituals see also J.-P. Vernant *L'individu, la mort, l'amour: soi-meme et l'autre en Grece ancienne*, Gallimard, 1996, 100.

<sup>6</sup> Photius s.v. *Shnia*; Hesychius s.v. *Sthnia, sthniosai*

<sup>7</sup> Park suggests that the cause of the later connection of this festival to Dionysus should be seen in the exclusion of the men from the festival and in their wish to take part in it. However, this does not undermines that men and women participated the festival together.

<sup>8</sup> M. Bakhtin, *Stvaralaštvo Fransoa Rablea*, Beograd 1979, 18.

folk and ritual tradition of Greek antiquity. She approaches the earliest forms of myth and literature, recognizing in them a worldview different from ours, the one that enabled emerging of behavior/reaction/worldview that, no matter how difficult and final confrontation is, is always colored with joy and laughter.

But how does Olga Freidenberg interpret this concept? She argues that the domain of comic in Antiquity represented cognitive category especially in the stages of pre-abstract and pre-metaphoric thinking. Twofold world(view) always embodies, twofold aspects of the same phenomena and one of those aspects always represents the parody of another. This dual principle was not based on the binary view to the world; it was totality formed out of both, inseparable “sides” mutually shifting, melting and constantly representing two sides of the same reality. The same as the Sun is always followed by its shadow, the sky by the Earth, “essence” by “illusion”, the complete universe was constituted out of two opposed principles – other principle is always hubristic, comic. This concept, which refer to the human cognition of pre-metaphoric thinking and in this period, the humor, the comic of hubris did not have function to deride. On the semantic level it represents an aspect, a potential of positive/negative perplexity, embodied in the mythic images of the universe-construction and universe-deconstruction. Numerous mythic variants embody and transmit these two principles – recognized and strongly embodied in the grotesque. The cathartic images, claims Freidenberg are always and exclusively dual – melting of pure and impure. The best translation of the term hubristic is, as claims Freidenberg, parodic, but without our dimension of abstraction. Namely, antique parody represented hubristic, funny aspect, which simply distorts seriousness, without ridiculing it. These are two sides of sacred – the proper one and the other that is turned up-side-down.<sup>9</sup> The interpretation based on the theories of Bakhtin and Freidenberg opens up interesting possibility for widening the perspective and re-reading of Čajkanović’s concept of *magic laughter*.<sup>10</sup> *Magic laughter* that appears in the context of funeral ritual or human sacrifices should be understood as a trace of the ancient sacredness i.e. of its parodic side that is tightly and powerfully related exactly to its most extreme opposite of seriousness – dreadfulness and death.

So, when the parodic/comic side definitely separated from the serious one and when the idea about life and death became discerned, the parodic started to

---

<sup>9</sup> O. M. Freidenberg *Mit i antička književnost*, Beograd 1987, 330-331.

<sup>10</sup> The argumentation of Čajkanović about *magic laughter* is based on the Serbian folkloristic material as well as on the analysis of human victims on the antique Mediterranean in which victims or mothers (as in the poem or in Mysirian ritual) were laughing at the moment of death. If we add to this the belief that the dead in the Underworld keep the same shape as in the moment of burial, and applying this to the laughter in the moment of death, it results that such a laughter is not only a sign of good mood, but actually the most powerful manifestation of life, which accompanies the dead on their way to the World Beyond. Thus, if the dying person has the ability to laugh in the moment of death, this capability will exist ever after. Adding to this a picture of Underworld in which no laughter is present, it follows that laughter as an antidote for death, in the moment of it, provides immortality. V. Čajkanović *Sabrana dela*, SKZ, BGZ, Partenon, Prosveta, Beograd 1994, 1, 293, 292. 301-303.

function independently, above all in the genre of comedy.<sup>11</sup> The meaning of comic and laughter in the funeral ritual was forgotten, though ritual patterns did not easily change due to the taboo that encircles death. The function that was kept was exceeding the situation of pain and loss, recovering from the shock that confrontation with death provokes, removing death from everyday reality. The act of laughing at the funeral started to denote the first stage of coming back to reality. Original meaning of such laughter disappeared (the inevitable shift and juncture of the “serious” to “parodic”), but its regenerative power of life-giving laughter remained.

The thesis that I am starting from is that humor on funeral monuments (epitaphs) and epigrams that reveals a specific attitude towards life and death actually represent the manifestation of the “parodic” worldview, being closely related to the ancient Greek everyday reality. Exceeding the strict frames of ritual, black humor gained the ability to turn any moment of reality into the small festivity – into the carnival (u malom), at the same time challenging and reinforcing the forces of life. Apart from that, several of the epigrams that I am going to analyze are building humor in direct association either with funeral, or some other ritual praxis.

## From Cult to Culture

I have chosen several ancient Greek epitaphs and epigrams of different dates – from the sixth century B.C. until the first century A.D. The humor of these epitaphs is mostly recognized as grotesque, ironic and sarcastic.<sup>12</sup> Although it is related to the dead and death, it often reveals very strong social and political involvement. The following example is the earliest evidence that I am going to quote and belongs to the period between second half of the sixth and the first half of the fifth century B.C.

1. **polla; piwn kai; palla; fagwn kai; polla; kaj j eipwn  
ajqrwpou keimai Timokewn Rodi-.**

Having drunk many things and eaten many things and spoken  
many slanders about people,  
I lie here, Timocreon of Rhodes.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that exactly the same kind of humor that is characteristic for fertility rituals appear in comedies. This also confirms numerous noticeable parallels between works of Aristophanes and Rabelais.

<sup>12</sup> Black humor appears also in the philosophical literature. In Plato’s *Phaedon* philosophers who claim that they are in love with death are very afraid of dying. Elsewhere, they are frightened of death on the windy weather, because they believe that the wind may blow away their souls. Plato, *Phaedon*

<sup>13</sup> *Greek Anthology* 7.348, Atheneus, *Dipnosophists* 10.415, *Simonides* 37 in Page’s 1981, *EG* 167.

This epitaph of Simonides on Timocreon written in elegiac meter starts from the weaknesses of Timocreon, treating them as if they were some military or athletic virtues. In this way Simonides mocks his former friend. But, is this the only possible interpretation of this humorous epitaph? If we recall semantic analysis of tombstone inscriptions by Jasper Svenbro, every time when a passerby reads the inscription on the funeral monument, one invokes the dead, “emanating” *kleos*, the ideal that each mortal strived to reach.<sup>14</sup> Svenbro’s interpretation emphasizes that epitaphs and reading them aloud makes possible revival of the person’s *kleos* among the living. Therefore, the quoted epitaph ironizes and ridicules not only the dead who did not achieve these virtues, but at the same time it either requests the concept of *kleos* and qualities that are necessary for it, comparing them to the faults, or it criticizes character and behavior of the people who are publicly recognized. The absurdity is intensified by the black humorous context and the unbreakable tie of life and death. Even stronger ironization of the prevailing heroic ideals, of the dominant military discourse and the real attitude of the state, i.e. its commander, towards its fallen soldiers is the example of the epitaph by Alcaeus of Messene on Philip V:

2. **Ἄκλι αυτοὶ καὶ ἀφ᾽απτοὶ, ὀλοῖ πορῆ, τῶδ’ ἐπέι; νῶτ’ω/  
Qessalia~ trissai; keimeqa muriades,  
Ἥματι/ mega phma: to; de; qrasu; keino Filippou  
pneuma qown epifwn wctet j eja foteron.**

Philip on Alcaeus of Messene:

**Ἄφλοιο~ καὶ; ἀφῦλλο~, ὀλοῖ πορῆ, τῶδ’ ἐπέι; νῶτ’ω/  
Ἄκλιου σταυρο~; φηγνῦται ἡλίβατο~.**

Alcaeus:

Unwept and unburied, o traveler,  
we thirty thousand lie on this ridge of Thessaly, a great  
sorrow to Macedonia;  
but that bold sprit of Philip has departed,  
nimble than the swift deer.

Philip:

Barkless and leafless, o traveler,  
a tall stake is fixed in this back of Alceus.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from the real epitaphs with a invective character, we come across the pseudo-epitaphs. This one is dated in the Hellenistic period. Again, as the former one, it obeys the customary pattern of the epitaphs devoted to the fallen soldiers, properly corresponding to the adequate “serious” paradigm. Actually, the expected form is distorted and ironized: soldiers do not lie buried, but unburied, they are not wept but unwept, they are not a proud, but a sorrow to Macedonia. The target of the

<sup>14</sup> J. Svenbro, *Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece*, trans. from French by Janet Lloyd, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1993, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Greek Anthology 7. 247, See also Plutarch, *Flaminius*

invective is their commander, king Philip V who roughly replies to Alcaeus that a stake, similarly to some neglected funeral monument, is fixed into Alcaeus back. The appearing of the body points to the corporeal dimension of the humor characteristic for ritual laughter. Further on, this “monument” is so insignificant that that it stays even “barkless and leafless”. And while the first part of the epigram is based on irony, the consequent response is characteristic for the combination of sarcasm, morbidity and grotesque image of the Philip’s opponent.

The following epigram focuses on the absurdity of life and people’s endless effort to confront the disease or postpone the death:

3. **Tou Iiqinou Dio- ejqe- ol Ikiniko- hýato Marko-:  
kai; liqo- wh kai; Zeu-, shmeron ekferetai.**

“Yesterday Doctor Marcus touched a stone Zeus.  
Though stone and Zeus, he has his funeral today.”<sup>16</sup>

This epigram from the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. should be understood in relation to the praxis of ancient medicine and the attitude towards healing, closely related to the ritual praxis. Namely, apart from the doctor’s treatment it was inevitably to touch the stone of the statue of the god and pray for the health. The pan in this epigram is that touching of the hands of the patients by doctors was the act of treatment in which doctors used to check pulse of the ill person. Black humor in this epigram is created through the irony, the fatalism and the inevitability of death that are considered to be main characteristics of this kind of humor.

Next is the epitaph of Hippon that belongs to the standard collection of the surviving verbal fragment of the work by Hipponos of Samos dated in the Hellenistic period.<sup>17</sup>

4. **İppno- tode shma, tou; ajjanatoisi qeoisin  
ison epoihse Moira katafqimenon.**

a) “This is tomb of Hippon, whom, when he died, Fate made equal to the immortal gods.”

b) “This is tomb of Hippon, whom Fate made just as dead as the immortal gods.”<sup>18</sup>

The epigram includes a word-pun of two accusatives in the line two. I offer a double translation of it in order to show how the pun functions. Namely, in the first translation *ison* that means “equal” functions as predicative, while *katafqimenon* with the meaning of “having died” figures as circumstantial participle and the first translation is more literal. The second translation reveals the secondary meaning of *ison* → “equally” as an adverb and of *katafqimenon* “dead” as

<sup>16</sup> *Greek Antology* XI 113 by Nicarchus.

<sup>17</sup> General opinion is that this epigram is only ascribed to Hippon, but as a spurious.

<sup>18</sup> Hippon 1.

the predicate.<sup>19</sup> Again, the black humor in this epitaph is based on the combination of irony and fatalism. The absurd that death make mortals closer to the gods, may also be understood as a glorification and prizing of life.

## Byzantine Continuities – *Philogelos*

Apart from the humorous epitaphs, the special category of black humor epigrams are found in the collection of *Philogelos* (The Laughter Lover) consisting of some 265 jokes dated in the early Byzantine period of the fourth or the fifth century A.D. Sometimes manuscripts offer the names of the compilers (Hierocles and Philagrius), sometimes they drop them.<sup>20</sup> Focusing on this material, I am going to analyze several types of jokes with the black humorous content. This sub-literary genre offers an interesting perspective for establishing some cultural insights in everyday reality, folklore and attitudes during the antiquity. Moreover, like the black-humorous epitaphs, jokes often represent a form of rebellion with the subversive effect on the prevailing ideas or habits. The strength of this humor lies exactly in the pleasure that it adds to socializing. Jokes from the collection are grouped thematically, and each jest usually appears in several variants.

5. *Mequsw/ ej̄ kaphel̄iw/ pinonti ep̄istā ti- e|fh: hl̄ gunh; sou a|peqanen. ol̄ de; a|koūsa- prōw toū kaphelon̄ e|fh: oūkoun, aūpenta, e|k̄ toū melanoū keration.*

“While a drunkard was imbibing in a tavern, someone approached and told him: ‘Your wife is dead.’ Taking this in, he said to the bartender: “Time, sir, to mix a drink up from your dark stuff’.”<sup>21</sup>

This joke with the misogynist connotation belongs to the large group of jokes about a man happy for the death of his wife. Apart from other similar paradigms, this one confirms once more that drinking alcohol was the integral part of each funeral ritual. Of course, the strict ritual rules allow drinking exclusively in the frame of the ritual, not permitting any kind of public appearing, or drinking in tavern. The other example of this joke, appearing in numerous variants puts emphasis on egocentrism and happiness of misogynist who lost his wife:

6. *Misogunaiō-, th̄- gunakiō- aūt̄oū apoqanoush̄-, e|pi; twī qayaī e|kh̄deue. tinō- de; e|rwthsantō-; ti- a|penausatō; e|fh: e|gw, ol̄ tauth̄- sterhqeiv̄.*

<sup>19</sup> D. L. Page (ed.), *Further Greek Epigrams*, Cambridge 1981, 57.

<sup>20</sup> Though it is likely that this collection of jokes already existed during Hellenistic period, the document from the Byzantine era is the earliest one that is preserved. Athenaeus informs us that Philip the Great had paid for a social club in Athens to write down its members' witticisms. (614d-e) At the Roman side (at the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.) we have the references in Plautus comedies to the joke-books. Plautus, *Persa* 392; *Stichus* 400.

<sup>21</sup> Philogelos, 227A.



“A misogynist paid his last respects at the tomb of his dead wife. When someone asked him, ‘Who has gone to rest?’, he replied: ‘Me, now that I’m alone.’”<sup>22</sup>

This joke is very clear example of the way in which a tension between the content and expectation appears, and exactly this kind of incongruence has the capacity to transform fear and pity into the cathartic laughter.<sup>23</sup> The same type of jokes are those that ridicule astrologers, prophets, star-gazers, who give a false prophecy about someone already dead – either parent or a child of the client.

7. **Ἰαφουὲι μαντεὶ προσελθὼν τι- ἐκ ἀποθνήσκον- ἀνιῶν ἡρώτα περὶ τῶν οἰκείων. ὁ δὲ εἶπεν: ὑγιαίνουσι πάντες, καὶ ὁ πατὴρ μου δεκάτον ἔτος- ἐφεὶ ἀφ’ ἡ οὐλ’ ἀπεκράναν – ἀπεκρίνατο: οὐδέν γάρ οἶδα- τὸν κάτα; ἀλ’ ἠέλιαν σου πάτερα.**

“On returning from a trip, someone asked a charlatan prophet how his family was. ‘They are all well, especially your father.’ ‘But my father’s been dead for ten years!’ ‘Ah, clearly you do not know your real father.’”<sup>24</sup>

In another group of black humorous jokes from the Philogelos are those about *scolastikoi*; The word is usually translated as “intellectual”, or “professor”. Though neither of those translations is perfectly precise, the word actually refers to the self-centered educated person, so deeply preoccupied with own interests and ambitions who loses every contact with reality.

8. **Σκολαστικοῦ- ἀποκράναντο- συνφοιτήτου ἐπισκεπτέτου τού- γονεῶν. τοῦ δὲ πατρός- αὐτοῦ οἴουμένου καὶ λεγόντος: τέκνον, ἐξέλαίπρωρῆσα- με. τί- δὲ; μήτρος- λεγούσης: τέκνον, ἐξέταψαί με, ὁ σκολαστικὸς- πρό- τού- ἐταίρου- εἶπεν: εἴ τὰτα αὐτῶ/ πεπρακταί, ἐρχῆν αὐτὸν καὶ; ζῶντα κάουῆναι.**

“An intellectual checked in on the parents of a dead classmate. The father was wailing: ‘O son, you have left me a cripple!’ The mother was crying: ‘O son, you have taken the light from my eyes!’ Later, the intellectual suggested to his friends: ‘If he were guilty of all that, he should have been cremated while still alive.’”<sup>25</sup>

Another interesting level embodied in this joke is that grieving of parents resembles ritual lamentation. The absurd humor of this joke and ridiculing stupidity

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 247 A.

<sup>23</sup> S. Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* Vintage 2001, 147.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 201.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 69.

of people who are particularly proud of their intellect, intensifies absurdity of everyday problems that preoccupy people, in relation to the shortness of life and its termination.

I am going to end this review of black humorous selection from *Philogelos* with the one from the serial about inhabitants of Kyme, who were in the Greek world, often target of jokes:

9. **Ἐν Κυμῆι ἐπίσημου τικοῦ κηδευομένου προσελθὼν τι-  
ἠρώτα του· οἰκίευντα· τί· ἠρώτα του· οἰκίευντα·  
Τί· οὐ τεχνικῶς εἶπ' δε; Κυμαῖο· στραφεῖ· ὑπεδείνω  
λεγών· ἐκεῖνο· οὐ ἐπί· τῆ· κλίνῃ· ἀπακείμενο·.**

“When a distinguished man was buried in Kyme, someone came up and asked the mourners: ”Who was the dead man?” One of Kymeans turned around and pointed and said: “That guy lying on the bier.”<sup>26</sup>

The plot is weaved around the dead, while the mechanism of the joke that sets a question and gives answer that is obvious, but not real response, is recognizable in the humor all across the Balkan area and elsewhere. This is the same type of joke as e.g. “Do you know what’s the time?” with the jesting answer “Yes, I do.” The only difference is that absurd (black-humorous) context of the antique example makes it even radical and therefore funnier.

Most of the quoted black humorous jokes concern and react on the social realities. This aspect of black-humor reveals its close relation to the real life, shifting the realism into the extreme metaphysical truth. What this means is that the fact that it mentions and confronts the end of life, gives to black humor power to oppose anything and anyone. “Committed only to detachment, Black Humor can never be betrayed or duped or ever be wrong.”<sup>27</sup> That makes joking extremely serious matter, enabling people to face and win, at list for the moment, any kind of power, overcoming the feeling of helplessness in front of the social injustice, laughing at the petty cheats and those who buy their services (no. 7) and winning the power over the politicians and army commanders (no. 2). It enables opposing and making obvious human weaknesses (no. 1), vanity (no. 8) and greed. The joke, especially black humorous one, invalidates power of all existential obstacles and of the death itself, reducing everything to the absurdness of life. And, exactly this absurd provokes life-giving laughter, the only antidote for death.

My intent in this paper was to map the genesis of black humor and its relation to the sacredness and ritual, in order to refute all those streams of thought that regard black humor an invention of twentieth century. This short research of black humor in antiquity undoubtedly point the connection of humor and ritual tradition, which explicitly opens the possibility for establishing the relation between

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>27</sup> Feldman in Pratt 1993, 106.

contemporary literary, dramatic or film forms colored with black humor (as for example comedy “Family in Mourning” by Branislav Nušić or film By Goran Marković “The Collection Center”), with the traditional humor and its inherent worldview.

**Лада Стевановић**

## **Подсмевање мртвима и исмевање смрти: црни хумор на епитафима и епиграмима античке Грчке**

*Кључне речи:* црни хумор, смрт, живот, апсурд, култ, култура

Важна компонента грчког поимања смрти је црни хумор, најексплицитније изражен на духовитим епитафима и другим врстама епиграма са тематиком смрти. Амалгам смеха и умирања упућује „гротеском, морбиношћу и ужасом“ на црни хумор.<sup>28</sup> У овом раду намера ми је била да предочим однос перма смрти (и животу) у грчкој антици и да побијем широко распрострањени став према коме црни хумор представља било америчку инвенцију 50-их, 60-их и раних 70-их година двадесетог века, или европски изум из тридесетих. Макс Шулиц тврди да се црни хумор појавио у Америци у доба нестајања традиционалних вредности.<sup>29</sup> Бројни теоретичари сматрају црни хумор кулминацијом модернизма или самим зачетком постмодернизма. Постоји и струја која почетке ове врсте хумора види у европском надреализму, наводећи да је управо Андре Бретон сковао израз *humor noir*, карактеришући га као бунтовнички, иконокластичан и усмерен на преиспитивање друштвених норми. Моја је теза, међутим, да традиција црног хумора временски далеко превазилази књижевну и филмску уметност двадесетог века у Америци и Европи, припадајући једнако антици – и то не само књижевном стваралаштву попут Аристофана у Грчкој или Петронија и Јувенала у Риму, већ управо домену народне традиције, култа и ритуала. На ово упућује пре свега несумњива веза између комедије и култа у оквиру кога

---

<sup>28</sup> Види 1.

<sup>29</sup> Види 2.

је античко позориште настало и трајало. Став да црни хумор мора бити ритуално оправдан лежи и у чињеници да је табу којим је смрт окружена толико јак да би несумњиво забранио било какво понашање и шале који нису ритуално оправдани или очекивани. Осим тога, очиту везу између погребног ритуала и црног хумора потврђује управо чињеница да су анализирани епиграми пронађени као натписи на надгробним споменицима. У раним фазама грчке историје за сахране су били особени бројни елементи смеха и радости – шале, погребне игре, плес, чак и сексуални чинови. Са архајским добом ови елементи нестају из погребца, али остају, у веома сличној форми, очувани у ритуалима плодности класичне и хеленистичке епохе. Управо ови ритуали комбинација су оплакивања умрлог божанства (Деметре, Диониса, Адониса) и слављење новог живота. Оваплоћујући специфичан однос према животу и смрти, ритуали плодности истовремено представљају тип удвострученог погребца, бивајући, након рестриктивних закона који су се односили на сахране (а које је увео Солон у шестом веку старе ере), домен у коме су учесници (пре свега жене) могли компензовати улогу која им је у сахранама одузета, односно која је постала контролисана. О овој вези између погребца и ритуала плодности писали су бројни изучаоци античког грчког ритуала.<sup>30</sup>

Повезујући црни хумор са ритуалним контекстом – оргијама, шалама, псовкама – везаним за ритуале плодности – даље се у раду позивам на на чувену Бахтинову теорију карневала, као манифестацију народног погледа на свет. Карневал, опцене шале и увреде (доње и унутрашње), према Бахтину представљају пародију свакодневног живота која има снагу препорода и обнове.<sup>31</sup> Комплементарна аргументација споменутој Бахтиновој, која не само да се бави антиком, већ и самом генезом карневалског погледа на свет, тј. проучавањем когнитивних процеса који леже у његовој основи, јесте теорија Олге Фреиденберг. И док се Бахтин бави природом и семантиком карневала, Фреиденбергова понире у ритуалну и фолклорну традицију, проучава мит и књижевност трагајући за оним што је изнедрило понашање/реакцију/поглед на свет, који су увек обојени смехом и радошћу, без обзира на то колико је оно са чиме се човек суочава мучно и болно. Став Фреиденбергове је да домен комичног у антици заправо представља когнитивну категорију која је одраз пре-апстрактног и пре-метафоричког мишљења, за које је био особен искључиво двоструки полгед на свет, а управо ова двострукост саткала је свето, сачињено увек истовремено из – озбиљног („правог“) и неозбиљног („изокренутог“). Управо оваква светост као спој „пародичног“ и „озбиљног“ премешћује апсурд који спаја живот и смрт, што управо и јесте тема црног хумора – савременог и оног који сам анализирала на античким епиграмима и епитафима.

<sup>30</sup> Види 4.

<sup>31</sup> Види 8.