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hilosophy and humor

Joan Cuscó i Clarasó

The Catalan Philosophy Society
jusco@vinseum.cat

abstract

Humour helps us to hoist and fasten the sail with which we navigate the seriousness of our lives. Ever since the Classical period, laughter and humour have informed philosophical thought and from the nineteenth century onwards, many modern thinkers have continued to debate this subject. This paper reviews the debate in the context of Catalan writing during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly the writing of Francesc Pujols. In it, the author compares Pujols and other Catalan writers with their contemporaries in other parts of Europe, like the Hungarian Béla Hamvas.

key words

Humour, greguería, Francesc Pujols, Béla Hamvas, Xavier Nogués, Johan Huizinga, Gómez de la Serna.

Unlikely as it may seem, philosophy and humor share close ties which can be traced back through the history of ideas to classical Greece. As this paper will show, their relationship is fundamental in Catalan culture and has even been debated in the field of neuroscience, which suggests that it might be time to address the subject more directly. Humor is central to the way we think and opens a window on the world around us. It is fairly significant that a writer as thoroughly pessimistic as Schopenhauer should have chosen to expound upon the subject of humor and laughter¹, or that in an essay titled *Goût* (“Taste”), Montesquieu lowered the guard of his own historical pessimism to say that “the works of nature and art can give pleasure to the soul”². In our times, the

- 1 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Presentation*, trans. Richard E. Aquila in collaboration with David Carus, New York: Longman, 2008, and *The Wisdom of Life*, trans. T. Bailey Saunders, London: Swan Sonnenschein&Co., 1890; London: Dover, 2004 (unabridged republication).
- 2 In Montesquieu’s words, «les ouvrages de la nature & de l’art, peuvent lui donner du plaisir» (Diderot and d’Alembert, *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, Vol . 7, p. 762, http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/extras/encpagemturn.pl?V7/ENC_7-762.jpeg, accessed 26 May 2015), «Taste», The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d’Alem-

philosophy–humor equation continues to enter new permutations, as evidenced in the research of writers like clinical psychologist Rod A. Martin, who proposes that “the view of humor as cognitive play may provide a framework for thinking about the interaction of cognitive, emotional and social elements”³.

Like aesthetic pleasure, humor clearly informs our human mode of being⁴ and enables us to communicate with others and seek their attention more effectively. The artist Salvador Dalí was one of a number of artists who understood this and regularly used humor in his work. And as science teaches, both human play and playful activity in other primates provide the circumstances under which laughter can appear⁵. Acts of celebration are engendered by play, and in celebration the sonorous figures created by musical instruments occupy space as laughter does. As Eugeni d’Ors understood, even culture, which emerges from the logos, is born of play.

Ancient history reveals that our concern with the workings of humor and its expression in laughter was already present in the Hebrew Scriptures, where verbs denoting laughter like *sāhaq* described the laughter of gladness and rejoicing, while other words like *lā’ag* primarily meant to mock or scorn. This basic ambivalence endured in our Judeo-Christian cultural baggage, which contains the laugh of pleasure and happiness but also the laugh of those who feel superior and are derisive of others’ misfortune or infirmity. The word “humor” has also gone through various transformations, originating in ancient humoral medicine and coming to stand as the technical term describing bodily fluids, having passed from Old French to Middle English as “humor” (and eventually acquiring its present-day meaning in the poles of “good mood”, synonymous with wellbeing, and “bad mood”, which relates to sadness and pain).

The medical theory of the humors was first used in the thirteenth century but remained prominent to the modern era. From the sixteenth century onwards, people began to speak of good and bad “moods” and in the seventeenth century the notions of “humor” and “comic” begin to be associated. The term ‘humorist’ was used to describe an eccentric person whose unbalanced temperament led him to indulge in odd or whimsical ways, so

bert Collaborative Translation Project, trans. Nelly S. Hoyt and Thomas Cassirer, Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2003. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0000.168> (accessed 26 May 2015).

3 Rod Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*, Elsevier Academic Press, 2007, p. 109.

4 It has been known since Darwin that tickle-induced laughter is a characteristic of different mammal species and can be provoked by some nonhuman primates. See David Leavens, “Animal Communication: Laughter is the Shortest Distance between Two Apes”, *Current Biology*, 19:(13) (2009), R511–3.

5 Marina Davila Ross *et al.*, “Reconstructing the Evolution of Laughter in Great Apes and Humans”, *Current Biology*, 19:(13) (2010), R511–3.

that the laughter he prompted was not so much shared with him as it was at his expense. It was not until the nineteenth century when the term was finally described someone who consciously sought to make others laugh by perceiving eccentricities and imitating these: professionals who were skilled in making people laugh. And especially in England, humor was perceived to be essential for a healthy lifestyle and as important a virtue as compassion, tolerance or common sense.

Philosophy and humor

When we consider philosophy and humor in Catalonia, the two writers who immediately come to mind are Pompeu Gener and Francesc Pujols. But both were part of a broader tradition involving various thinkers in Catalonia and the rest of Europe. For example, one of these two writers' travelling companions was the humorist Joan Martí i Trenchs (1844–1920) who, after completing his university studies in philosophy in 1874 and in pharmacy in 1879, published various articles and books. Martí published in the satirical magazine *Lo burinot, Periodich il·lustrat, satíric de bon genit i millor humor, y gastant ínfulas de literari* (“The Bumblebee: an Illustrated Periodical Buzzing with the Satire of Ingenious and Congenial humbugs”), which ran from 1879 to 1882. Amongst its targets was Darwin's evolutionary biology, which it parodied by drawing on the tradition of identifying the traits of animals in humans, proposing that while men were learning to become monkeys, the monkeys were learning to become men⁶. Martí went on to write several books between 1886 and 1916.

But philosophy's interest in humor and laughter inevitably comes from much further back. Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980) created a story around the disappearance from an Italian Benedictine abbey of the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, on comedy, of which, indeed, no copy survives. However, in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, *Rhetoric* and the extant first book of the *Poetics*, Aristotle also discusses the subject of humor and laughter, in part developing Plato's theories; and between the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of Roman Empire, Cicero and Quintilian also studied humor. From that moment until the present day the debate has continued, even though the Church drew back during the Copernican Revolution (as Eco also explains in his tale of murder, heresy and sexual awakening) and monastic law declared that laughter was the most serious violation of the vow of silence, which was one of the fundamental virtues of religious life.

6 Note that in a later period the magazine was published as *El borinot. Setmanari de barrila*, between the years 1923 and 1927, coinciding with the first years of the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera (1923–1930).

Beyond the Middle Ages, Renaissance theories of humor revisited the Classical and Roman periods and, in the modern era, an increasingly strong case was made for relating laughter and humor to the bodily humors and to health and wellbeing. In the mid-seventeenth century, Descartes was one of the first writers to examine the physiology of laughter as well as its psychology (Article 124, *Les Passions de l'âme*, 1649). In an essentially psychological analysis titled "Of the interior beginnings of voluntary motions", Hobbes proposed that the passion he called "sudden glory" led to a particular kind of laughter and pleasure (Chapter VI, Part I of *Leviathan*, 1651). In the early eighteenth century, the Scottish-Irish philosopher Francis Hutcheson argued against Hobbes by saying that any discussion of humor had to bear two subjects in mind, laughter and ridicule, and that humor came from man's ability to use metaphors inappropriately, prompting laughter by turning the other's ideas on their heads the other's ideas on their heads. For this reason, writers like Hutcheson argued, humor could encourage intellectual elasticity and make people more sociably adept (*Thoughts on Laughter*, Dublin Journal, 1725).

In the same way that Hobbes had discussed these aspects of humor in *Leviathan*, in 1651, in 1790 Immanuel Kant proposed in *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* that laughter and music were simply feelings of pleasure, Hegel addressed humor in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* in 1833 and Darwin made it a subject of *The Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals* in 1890. Laughter and humor were therefore constant subjects of philosophical disquisition all through the period, revisited by some of the most prominent thinkers.

Another writer who practised humor as a style of thought was Johann Paul Friedrich Richter (1763–1825), commonly known as Jean Paul. A key figure in German literature and also a prolific author, Jean Paul invariably went against the grain of his contemporaries, oscillating between quiet reason and a kind of feverish excess. In his writing, which combined humor, perspicacity and mordent wit, he was known for his singular ability to associate ideas that had appeared irreconcilable and he was widely considered to be a wise and cultured man who was both happy and bold in his style of thought. In a letter to Goethe, Friedrich Schiller observed that Jean Paul was a writer with a busy imagination and a sense of humor. For Jean Paul, the "science of humor" (to paraphrase Pujols) was "the inverted sublime" ("umgekehrte Erhabene"): the philosophical chuckle of an anonymous spectator lost in the infinite world, "in which both pain and a greatness abide" ("jenes Lachen, worin noch ein Schmerz und eine Größe ist"); a kind of universal comic spirit that communicated tolerance and man's willingness, as Bonghi observed, to discover the grotesque within the serious and the serious within the absurd.

These are the characteristics of humor. And to return for a moment to the subject of Francesc Pujols, we might argue that it was at a very early age that he chose to give up theology and dedicate his life to literature. Menéndez y Pelayo considered his humor to be eccentric and unclassifiable while Pujols himself said he had taken the Romantic and ideal conception of the sublime that the Germans made their altar-piece and turned it on its head. Humor and comedy could thus serve to refute the dogma and reveal the other face of reason⁷.

The figure of Jean Paul is also interesting because his work cultivates the ideas on poetic theory put forward by Friedrich Schiller in his paper *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795), which are key in the development of contemporary humor (as is the idea of “contrast” proposed by Montesquieu in 1758 in *Goût*, which is cited above).

Using Schiller’s reflections on Attic tragedy as his point of departure, in 1804 in *The Pre-School of Aesthetics* Jean Paul described the relationship that laughter and humor had with established literary genres and defined “humor or the romantic comic” as the category which went beyond the notion of the sublime. This idea was taken up again by Hegel and further explored by the avantgarde movements of the twentieth century. Musically, it might well be argued that these disquisitions acquired expression in Beethoven’s most heroic and sublime works, the *Egmont Overture* and the *Third Symphony*, and in the comic operas of Rossini’s later years, which are clearly humorous and festive⁸.

The Danish philosopher Harald Høffding (1843–1931) studied the psychology of humor and argued that humor allows people to experience disparate elements in the same instant in what becomes a complex experience. Høffding held that humor expressed pleasure in general and was at the same time a particular satisfaction related to an individual’s preservation of his life and health. He also took the Hobbesian thesis somewhat further to discuss the notion of sympathy. From 1900 until the present day, humor and laughter have been discussed by major authors like Bergson, Freud and Pirandello; and from the first third of the twentieth century, the following works are particularly noteworthy: Henri Bergson’s *Laughter* (1900); James Sully’s *An Essay on Laughter* (1904); Sigmund Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*

7 Jean Paul, *Das Lob der Dummheit* („In Praise of Stupidity“) in *Sämtliche Werke, Abteilung II, Jugendwerke und Vermischte Schriften*, vol. I, ed. Norbert Miller, Munich: Hanser, 1974.

8 Kant’s ideas were well suited to the Classicism of Haydn and Mozart, whose music was chiefly directed to the senses, while Beethoven’s music was fuelled by the ideas of German idealism and Romanticism, which called upon the listener to play an emotionally active role. The former focused on pleasure while the latter was inspired by the formative and transforming activity of human subjectivity. The classicists measured music by its beauty while the Romantics measured the degree to which it could express the sublime (and the other face of the sublime, as Jean Paul would say, in works like Rossini’s, which we have cited).

(1905); Fernand Baldensperger's chapter on the definitions of humor in his *Études d'Histoire Littéraire* (1907); Luigi Pirandello's *On Humor* (1908), which revisited classical thought and was an exploration in style; and finally André Breton's *Anthology of Black Humor* (1940), which reviewed Hegel and Freud.

Through humor in general and the joke in particular, we reveal those things that sometimes remain hidden: the flipside, the fallible nature of Pietism, the moment when all great ideas must topple and the "conflict of opposed systems or dogmas"⁹. This is what Pirandello observed when he argued that "through the ridiculous aspect of this discovery, the humorist will see the gravity and pain; he will cause this ideal construct to topple but will not only do this to laugh; and instead of protesting he may, in his laughter, express pity"¹⁰.

Humor in the twentieth century

Before fully examining Francesc Pujols in the context of Catalan contemporary culture, we should consider two of his intellectual brothers: Ramón Gómez de la Serna (1888–1963), who wrote the book *Humorismo* in 1930, and Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) who wrote his treatise *Homo ludens* in 1938.

Gómez de la Serna was born and died in almost exactly the same years as Pujols and his humorist writing is as important for Spain, culturally, as Pujols's is for Catalonia. Gómez de la Serna began his intellectual career almost at the same time as Pujols, in 1905, but this cannot be properly addressed in the context most generally employed by academic historiographers, first because our concern is these writers' use of humor and second because both men created a discursive style that combined the essay and artistic treatise. In fact, it is arguable that this was the only style they could have chosen, whether it was Wagnerian and organic, as Pujols's humor has been described, or neo-Baroque avantgarde, as Gómez de la Serna's is sometimes considered. (Taken together, this writer would argue, these styles are practically the same). Such an amalgam of genres (poetry with narrative and essay, for example) provided the two men with a text that raised new issues, shocked, pleased and generally stirred up society's thought systems, prejudices, habits and theories. In short, essay and artistic treatise converged in a single style with one objective. It is no accident, therefore, that Gómez de la Serna's style should be based on the

9 Kuno Fischer wrote in such terms in 1889, associating the catharsis of humor and joking with what he called "disinterested judgement" ("ein speilendes Urteil"), which also underlies the relationship between art and philosophy.

10 In Pirandello's words, "L'umorista [...] attraverso il ridicolo di questa scoperta vedrà il lato serio e doloroso; smonterà questa costruzione ideale, ma no per riderne solamente; e in luogo di sdegnarsene, magari, ridendo, compatirà". In Luigi Pirandello, *L'Umorismo*, Florence: Luigi Battistelli, 1920 (second, enlarged edition), p. 207.

greguería, the figure of speech which dismantles and multiplies the realities of our world and which, after various drafts and in his definitive “Prologue” of 1955, he defined as “metáfora + humor = greguería”¹¹.

For Gómez de la Serna, humor was an expansive genre that could be used to express the happiness of a life spent in search of one’s mental health:

Humor floods contemporary life and dominates almost every style [...] the humorous emerges as the most eternal of all celebrations because it honours the passing of what is false or imposed and celebrates the moment of subversion. [...] The best way to respond to the transience of our lives is with humor. The practise of humor is our rational mind’s most indispensable duty [...]. We have an obligation to upset the absolute person we appear to be.¹²

With these words Gómez de la Serna took the thesis that humor was not just a literary genre one step further; instead, he argued, it could respond to the basic challenge of living without fear and its attendant obsessions and prejudices (like the Catholicism Pujols condemned). The chemistry of humor dispelled intrigue and obsession and distanced itself from the fear that built walls around our lives, closed the doors and shot the bolts.

As for its chemical components, these were the grotesque, sarcasm, the absurd humor of the jester, and the pathetic. If we used these to illustrate what Francesc Pujols and Eugeni d’Ors did or said, we could argue that while the former was a humorist, the latter was an ironist; and that while humor is an enthusiastic partner, only too ready to take part, irony directs from a cool-headed distance. But as Gaston de Pawlowski has observed, the humorist is in no position to draw conclusions because this would mean certain intellectual death. And these are the two faces of non-academic philosophical thought in Catalonia in the first half of the twentieth century.

Francesc Pujols’s other intellectual brother was Johan Huizinga, who used the humanism of Erasmus of Rotterdam and Schiller’s game theory to discuss play as a facet of progress and civilization. Huizinga excised the negative connotation from the notion of play and shared Schiller’s view that man’s delight in play was his enactment of freedom and beauty. Play—or the playful element—was not the frivolous activity we might imagine it to be for high-brow culture, but instead involved individuals interacting in the creation of a new universe. Play was a struggle that created a drama, a competition that made people take sides and come up, repeatedly, against the rules of the game and the rules of others. Play created a style that emerged from the excess of vitality, creating repetition and rhythm. And it was clear that every culture needed to play, as it does when it feasts and performs music.

11 Ramón Gómez de la Serna, “Prologue”, *Total de greguerías*, Madrid: Aguilar, (1955), 1962, 2nd edition, xxxiv.

12 Ramon Gómez de la Serna, *Humorismo*, Madrid: Casimiro, 2014, pp. 47–50.

Huizinga would like to find in the relationship between play and wisdom a playful foundation in the work of the sophists and the ability to ask increasingly more appropriate questions. Indeed, in its original Greek the word ‘problem’ means “a task put forward” and therefore the manner in which a challenge is conceived or a gaming area for intelligence is created, where scholarship can be an intellectual competition. The history of thought reserves an important place for play and for competition (or dialogue), particularly in music¹³. No mere pastime to be separated from culture, play effectively informs the sciences and arts—far more than we might first imagine. The playful element in culture and civilization is all-important. And very often the gravest issues are the most ridiculous, while the playful ones are the issues we should be taking seriously.

Catalan humor

Francesc Pujols understood that humor was crucial in contemporary Catalan culture, as evidenced in his last published works and the notes preserved in his official residence the Torre de les Hores de Martorell¹⁴. In 1948 in the prologue to *L’humor a la Barcelona del noucents*, he had this to say:

If we were made to define the soul of the modern style of Catalan literature that had its renaissance in the seventeenth century with the Rector de Vallfogona [the pen name of the Baroque Catalan poet Francesc Vicent Garcia i Torres] and continues to this day, we could only say that it was humor, in contrast to the ancient Catalan literature, (...) [the] dominant stress.¹⁵

Pujols also considers this humor to have a painterly context in the works of Xavier Nogués, Joaquim Mir and Isidre Nonell¹⁶.

Humor as a lifestyle and attitude, a form of revolt and the defeat of game theory in the Noucentisme movement; humor as humanism and mental wellbeing: these are the issues we need to address when we study the “humorist tradition” in Catalan culture. Humor to be taken seriously, without forgetting to laugh. And it remained an open question for these reasons when in 1925 Eugeni Xammar wrote to Josep Pla about the authors included in the *Anuari dels Catalans*:

13 Johan Huizinga, ‘The Cultural Limits of Play and the Serious’, University of Leiden address, 1933 (revised as ‘*The Play Element of Culture*’, *Warburg Institute lecture, 1937*).

14 Unpublished manuscripts collection, Box 22, Lot 556, sheaves 4 and 5, the Francesc Pujols Foundation of Martorell.

15 Francesc Pujols, Preamble, *L’humor a la Barcelona del noucents*, Barcelona: Aymà, 1948, p. 9.

16 Note the publication in 1938 of *L’humorisme a la Catalunya del segle XIX*, which would be the prelude to this, published by the Government of Catalonia (Generalitat de Catalunya) for distribution amongst the soldiers fighting in front in the Civil War.

If you promise not to tell I'll let you all in on a secret, which is that I'm the only Catalan who knows how to write. But there's [Josep] Carner, you'll say, and of course you'll be right. But Carner is chiefly a poet and his *voies d'approche*, as we French call them, are infinitely less direct in his prose than the rest of yours. Mr Pujols is an exception to the general rule. The rest of you—or of us—are nothing more than fancy-looking coques.¹⁷

Before we turn exclusively to Francesc Pujols, however, there is one last figure who can provide interesting parallels: the Hungarian philosopher and essayist Béla Hamvas (1897–1968), a thinker who experienced the twentieth century's warring strife at close quarters and who attempted to create a dialogue between the eastern and western cultural traditions in the various volumes of his treatise *Scientia Sacra* (the first two published in 1942–1943). Hamvas's humor was grafted both upon the style of his writing and how he looked for intellectual freedom, as evidenced in *The Philosophy of Wine*, which addressed wine and philosophy—or perhaps more precisely, philosophy and the metaphysics of wine¹⁸. In fact, Hamvas's humor is present in both *Wine* and the three volumes of the novel *Carnival*, both written during the 1940s and 1950s but never very widely read.

A comparison between Hamvas and Pujols reveals the following. First, that they shared the same period, both dying in 1968. Second, they had a common geographic and cultural context, which put wine at the centre of their humor. Third, both believed that the mind needed cultural training and should be versed in the classical writers Homer and Euripides and in Shakespeare, Rabelais, Cervantes and Dante. Fourth (and now we begin to look at the more complex similarities), both believed that the history of the world's religions needed to be reinterpreted. Fifth, they shared a conviction that science, philosophy and religion were in reality the three boughs of a single canopy of human knowledge whose purpose was to lighten the load of human life. Sixth, neither made any bones about declaring that the mystery was not God but Nature (or Reality). And seventh, they both had a similar regard for art.

But what Hamvas and Pujols shared most, the former in his writing and the latter with Xavier Nogués in the 1919 album of drawings *La Catalunya pintoresca*, was the belief that reality is polyphonic quite simply because life is polyphonic (and that all good works of art must therefore reflect this). This was clearly appreciated by the thinkers of the period when the album was published, as the writer J.M.M. makes clear:

17 The word *coques* comes from *coca*, a sweet or savoury Catalan pastry. Xammar may have used it here to suggest that the people he described were not writers of any real substance. Eugeni Xammar, *Cartes a Josep Pla*, Quaderns Crema, Barcelona, 2000, pp. 133–134.

18 Béla Hamvas, *The Philosophy of Wine*, Editio M Publishing, 2003.

La Catalunya pintoresca is a merry breviary of all things Catalan, a raucous celebration of the Catalan soul complete in all its peculiarities and so stereotyped that Nogués might have painted it with the point of a twig taken from a branch of Mediterranean pine and dipped in the juices of the fruits of this earth.¹⁹

La Catalunya pintoresca includes all of this and chuckles happily as it classifies every manner of woman, from the commonest streetwalker to the highest paragon of virtue, and every type of man, from the crooked profiteer to the penniless beggar. It mirrors Catalan society, warts and all, multifaceted and polyphonic; it leaves theory behind and puts society down on paper as it really is, in one single piece, both excessive and miserly.

Longstanding and productive for both of them, the relationship between Nogués and Pujols eventually straddled half a century, from the years during which the magazine *Papitu* was published (1908–1937)²⁰ until the publication in 1954 of the book *Xavier Nogués, pintor del vino*. Their humor may have been of two different kinds, Pujols's defined by the sensuality of *Papitu* and Nogués's more inclined towards social irony. But twentieth-century Catalan humor has proved to be markedly multifaceted and at its side we have the tragic humor of Tomàs Roig i Llop (1902–1987), illustrated with the figures of men and women drawn by Jaume Busquets²¹.

In the first third of the twentieth century and until the Franco Regime years, Catalonia's satirical publications enjoyed a heyday that was evidenced in many aspects of the country's cultural life. Their social and political criticism became so outspoken that in 1905 a group of 400 officials of the Spanish army actually raided the printing works and offices of the magazines *Cu-cut!* and *La Veu de Catalunya*, immediately followed by central government measures restricting the materials publishers could print.

First published in 1907, the magazine *Papitu* contributed to a lively journalistic landscape which already featured *L'Esquella de la Torratxa* (a progressive publication which Pujols contributed to), *La Campana de Gràcia* (social satire) and *Cu-cut!* (associated with the political right). Understanding this variety is key in any analysis of the ideas that were being talked about and the social life during this period. Authors like Rodolf Llorens and Àngel Carmona are part and parcel of this plural, complex and dynamic context, just as

19 J. M. M., "Xavier Nogués", *L'Instant Revista Quinzenal*, II:1 (1919), Joaquim Horta, Barcelona. On a similar note was expressed that appeared in the magazine *Marvella* (December 1919).

20 Lluís Solà, *Papitu 1908–1937 i les publicacions eroticos i calíptiques del seu temps*, Dux, Barcelona, 2008. Jaume Capdevila, *Papitu. Sàtira, erotisme i provocació (1908-1937)*, Efadós, Barcelona, 2014.

21 Tomàs Roig was the father of the writer Montserrat Roig. His first book *Facècies* (Barcelona, 1924) exemplifies his tragic humor and its portrayal of a wine-based culture contrasts with the pictures offered by Hamvas or Pujols.

the down-to-earth commonsensical face of Catalonia cannot be understood separately from the Catalan character in those moments when its whimsical “catalanades” comes more to the fore²².

Three very different styles of humor in this multifaceted terrain could be seen in the work of Santiago Rusiñol (whose savage sarcasm was a regular feature of *L'Esquella de la Torratxa*), Francesc Pujols (whose humor, as we have said, was sensual and voluptuous) and Xavier Nogués (whose Anglo-saxon irony was based on the clear-eyed observation of everyday life). All three share a well-reasoned critical attitude towards the Noucentisme postulated by Eugeni d'Ors. If Rusiñol practised sarcasm, Pujols was more sensual and Nogués chose irony. This was nowhere more clearly expressed than in Rodolf Llorens's insightful and uncompromising criticism of both d'Ors and Ferrater Mora in the books *Com hem estat i com som els catalans* and *Servidumbre y grandeza de la filosofía*²³.

In this particular context, two writers offered interesting portraits of Nogués. First, in *Els Gravats de Xavier Nogués*, Jaume Pla proposed that “his was a life (...) dappled by varying shades of meaning, an inner life, a struggle conducted with elegance and absolute discretion. His was a life taken seriously under an outer guise of irony”²⁴ And second, Francesc Pujols himself provided a context for humor in Catalan painting when he made the following observation, even while he also displayed that more personal aspect of humor that ensured that imagination and irony would endure in the honest observation of everyday life at the level of the streets on which people lived:

If we want our humor to be directly absorbed by the eyes and not the mind or the ear, all we need do is look at the pictures in this book, which invoke the spirit of the author of *La Catalunya pintoresca*, the *Celler de les Laietanes* and this collection, all dedicated to humor in art and painted by the artist whose visual poems in the Born district's Sala Plandiura [in Barcelona] take their leave of humor to soar to the heavenly heights of poetry and painting, united by drawing. / Given our subject, we cannot conclude without mentioning that, beyond the paintings they left us, Xavier Nogués, Isidre Nonell (the greatest

22 The importance in the Catalan character of *rauxa* (whimsy) and *catalanades* is clearly illustrated in the story of what happened in 1948 in Costa Rica when José Figueres Ferrer, the country's recently invested president and also a native son of Catalonia, decided to abolish the state's entire army in one fell swoop. Years later when he visited the Catalan Centre in Santiago de Chile and was asked how he had dared to do something so reckless, his simple reply was that it had been a spur-of-the-moment decision or whim (“Fou una catalanada”). (Note, of course, that however whimsical he may have seemed, Figueres was perfectly aware of the substantial changes this decision would involve for his country).

23 Rodolf Llorens, *Com han estat i com som els catalans*, Pòrtic, Barcelona, 2010, and *Servidumbre y grandeza de la filosofía*, Leonard Muntaner, Palma, 2009.

24 “Prologue” in Jaume Pla, *Els gravats de Xavier Nogués*, Fundació Xavier Nogués, Barcelona, 2008, p. III.

of our twentieth-century painters) and Joaquim Mir (the most popular of all) were also humorists; that had the observations, commentaries and sayings they inspired been published, Catalonia would be blessed with one of the most intensely humorous cultures of all the world.²⁵

This ripe, overflowing humor would act as the flipside of the ethnic psychology promulgated by Tomàs Carreras i Artau in the lecture halls of academia.

In an article in the magazine *Mar Vella*, published in December 1919, the writer M.V. defined the political role these humorists played. There, he argued that in their carelessness Utrillo and Sunyer had made themselves responsible for the fact that no room was given to Catalan art in the Salon of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris (even while the same two men complained that Catalan art was always made to play second fiddle to Spanish art):

The title *The accordionists* could just as easily have been *The dilettantes*, *The apso-tates* or simply *The men who fail*. But the implications of this graphic epithet are more far-reaching. The accordionists are those who keep their real intentions well hidden behind one popular tune or another. There are so many of them and the phrase is becoming so popular that Xavier Nogués will no doubt end up drawing us a picture of the accordionist, accompanied by a brief commentary by Francesc Pujols, to be included in the definitive edition of *La Catalunya pintoresca*.²⁶

In fact, humor is very good at appealing to people's conscience and working on how they regard issues, on their imagination and ideas, not to mention their understanding of more serious issues; most of all, it also has the ability to reach out to many people at the same time.

To understand just what this means in practical terms, we might recall that for Hegel the word 'humor' was a threat to power and a potent weapon. Beyond the satire practised in *Cu-cut!* and *La Veü de Catalunya*, consider the murder of Josep M. Planes, the director of the satirical weekly *Be Negre* in 1936 by members of the Iberian Anarchist Federation [FAI]. And in our own lifetime, almost as a reminder that democracy's feet are made of clay, remember the attacks on the Spanish magazine *El Popus* in 1977 by the far-right Argentine Anticommunist Alliance, the censorship of *El Jueves* (the Barcelona magazine first published in 1977) for its cartoons of the Spanish royal family and its satirical comment on the Spanish Constitution, and finally the attack in January 2015 on the offices of the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* by Islamic fundamentalists.

25 Francesc Pujols, Preamble, *L'humor a la Catalunya del noucents*, cit., pp. 11–12.

26 M.V., "Els homes de l'acordió i una manifestació d'art català frustrada", *Mar Vella. Revista Nacionalista de Joventuts* (December 1919), Barcelona, pp. 7–8.

Laughter and humor are antidotes for intransigent discourse, hardened doctrines and puritanical attitudes. They enact reasoned respect and clear-mindedness. They favour the elasticity of reappraisal and realignment. They hone the imaginative element in language, reach out to more people than many other principles do and refresh the bureaucratic vocabulary of sensible speech. They are essential for the cultural wellbeing of our present and inseparable from well-founded thought. Our appreciation of what they mean makes it possible for us to say, as Joan Alcover once did, that the wealth of a community is not measured by how many rich people it has but by how few poor people there are²⁷. Humor is the expression of a culture experienced with pleasure and gregarious satisfaction. This is why Catalan culture celebrates popular dances like the “balls de diables” (in which the people dress as feasting devils), so that there can be a place for social satire where the everyday is turned on its head. Celebration and satire come together in this country’s culture just as, in the strictest sphere of philosophy, the work of Harald Høffding is interchangeable with the writings of Søren Kierkegaard. Here we have two contemporary authors, in the same way that in Catalan letters we may contrast d’Ors with Pujols or, in our country’s art, the woodcuts of Enric Cristòfor Ricart with the prints of Nogués²⁸.

Translated from Catalan by Barnaby Noone

27 Joan Alcover, *Art i literatura*, L’Avenç Barcelona, 1904.

28 This necessary cultural duality can also be appreciated in the individual subject and the theme of “good humor” in relation to health (as observed above). Writers have studied the role of humor under especially dramatic or extreme human circumstances, such as the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, and its effect upon people’s psychological wellbeing (an effect that is similar to the humor that each person must practice with regard to themselves) and their ability to survive. See Chaya Ostrower’s doctoral thesis “Humor as a Defense Mechanism in the Holocaust”, Tel Aviv University, 2002. (<http://web.macam98.ac.il/~ochayo/me.html>, accessed 9 June 2015).

