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<https://doi.org/10.31820/f.35.1.4>

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THE TONGUE CUT OFF – THE RHETORIC OF REBELLION IN VESNA PARUN’S HUMOROUS POEMS AND OTHER HUMOROUS TEXTS

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izvorni znanstveni članak

UDK 821.163.42.09Parun, V.

rukopis primljen: 12. ožujka 2023; prihvaćen za tisak: 16. svibnja 2023.

Satire is an elegant rebellion, self-defence, new vitality.
It erases in us emotions unfit for a fight.

Vesna Parun¹

Humour [...] calls on us to face the folly of the world
and change the situation in which we find ourselves.

Simon Critchley²

The paper analyses Vesna Parun’s humorous literature – satirical poetry and short forms such as aphorisms and epigrams – from the perspective of recent theoretical elaborations of humour and the comic. The interpretation is based on the presumption that the author’s poetic humour is a kind of political event that can put pressure on power systems in various areas of human life. It encourages readers to question the supposedly unquestionable worldviews, values, boundaries, and authorities. Since Vesna Parun’s humorous literature produces both linguistic and social scandal, it is read as a world-creating

¹ Parun, Vesna (2001) *Mozak u torbi*, Stajergraf, Zagreb, str. 148.

² Critchley, Simon (2004) *On humour*, Routledge, London & New York, str. 18.

linguistic event that aims e.g., to reorganise public opinion, disturb the common knowledge or so called ideologies of seriousness.

Keywords: *poetry; humour; satire; Vesna Parun; rhetoric of rebellion; politics of literature*

Introduction

Vesna Parun's satirical poetry and her short humorous forms such as aphorisms and epigrams have rarely been in the focus of Croatian academic criticism. Taking that into consideration, the goal of this paper is to analyse Vesna Parun's humorous literature as a linguistic and literary-political gesture that urges readers to question established worldview models, indisputable values, the firmness of set boundaries, and the authorities to which they are inclined. The interpretation is based on recent theoretical elaborations of humour and the comic, and it attempts to show that the author's poetic humour can put pressure on power systems in various areas of human life, indicating that radical change is both necessary and possible. The thesis is that Vesna Parun's humorous literature produces and encourages both linguistic and social scandal because it persistently challenges good taste or ideologies of seriousness. Therefore, my approach to humour in Vesna Parun's poetry is based on the assumption that it is a world-creating linguistic event that aims to shake up public opinion and unsettle the guardians of certified knowledge. From my perspective, Vesna Parun's humorous literature – which encompasses around fifteen books – strives to provoke laughter or ridicule which inspire a certain will to change the way we perceive the existing world of social relations and roles, and even to change the very circumstances that make them possible. The author's humour is basically satirical, and it results from a radical incongruity between the textual event and the contextual world in which the textual event produces a certain kind of comic diversion. Generally speaking, her humour is a transgressive type of utterance, most often invective, which directly attacks and, in the process, violates good customs, challenges social norms, and turns common-sense attitudes upside down.

The Rhetoric of Rebellion

What is funny about the story in which the starling Čviki, the hero of the poetic satire *The Tongue Cut Off* (*Odrezani jezik*) from the book *The Apoc-*

alyptic Fables (Apokaliptičke basne) (1976), flew to the psychiatrist Čvak Čvakanović's birch grove and asked him to cut off his tongue because he spoke only the truth while everyone around him was lying? "I don't want to tell the truth anymore while everyone around me is lying. / Skilled merchants make their *packaging* out of truth!"³ (Parun 1976: 20), said the starling, confirming the decision to cut off his tongue. Those who are familiar with Bergson's study *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* might at least for a moment consider the possibility that starling Čviki had read it as well. According to the French philosopher, the comic is "something mechanical encrusted upon the living" (Bergson 2008: 17). One might assume the starling realized that the source of his unbearable anxiety was precisely the mechanical chattering of the tongue that was constantly making him look stupid. Like any fool, Čviki always spoke the truth, so it is not unusual that he wanted to get rid of that burden at any cost. Ultimate truthfulness is comical; if we are prone to it, it makes us look ridiculous, gets us into trouble, and puts others in the awkward position of having to restrain an irresistible urge to make fun of us. Let's imagine a truthful professor of literature who is asked by a passing neighbour how he/she is doing. And he/she, suffering from diarrhoea, begins to describe his/her condition in detail: frequent trips to the toilet, uncontrolled passing of wind, stomach cramps, excessive consumption of toilet paper. Bergsonian linguistic automatism combined with his/her intimate life makes him/her hilariously funny. Vesna Parun's poetic satire *The Tongue Cut Off* is funny for several reasons, one of which is that by trying to expose the truth about the relationship between truth and lies, it mocks itself. It is a satire that presents the striving for an uncompromising confrontation with the truth as a contradictory and therefore ridiculous endeavour; satire's language is literally cut off,⁴ separated from its own purpose. The desire inscribed in the satire to expose the general social lie cannot escape from the lie: "Whoever has acquired a dangerous skill / to see your *lie* even in the lining of your coat / silence will not help him / because from now on he will have to swallow your lies!"⁵ (Parun 1976: 21). The satirical poem,

³ "Neću da više govorim istinu dok svi oko mene lažu. / Od istine vješti trgovci prave svoju *ambalažu!*"

⁴ In Croatian, *language* and *tongue* are homonyms (*jezik*).

⁵ "Tko je stekao opasno umijeće / da vam vidi *laž* i u postavi kaputa / tome ni šutnja pomoći neće / jer vaše će laži odsad morati da – guta!"

structured as the oral literary genre of the fable,⁶ makes fun of people's immersion in untruth, and at the same time, presents the effort to maintain itself as a truthful mode of expression as a silly stumble. Čviki's death, after swallowing a bag of lies, is a funny twist in the story of the truthful starling, but it is also a funny satire that, mocking the liars, confirms that its language does not reach the truth. "The message is clear: operation is pointless if it comes too late"⁷ (Ibid.) – a surgical move that separates the language from the truth will not prevent us from being overwhelmed by lies. It is undoubtedly an absurdity similar to the unforgettable sayings from the famous *Alan Ford* comic book: *if you want to win, you must not lose or he who sleeps is not awake. The Tongue Cut Off* literally asserts: *if you want to avoid the truth, you must not not avoid a lie*. But it is precisely the articulation of that absurdity that achieves a comic effect because it establishes "an immediate connection between heterogeneous orders" (Zupančić 2008: 8). In Vesna Parun's poetic satire there is a paradox at work; the rhetoric of the text works in such a way as to defy all our expectations. Instead of sharp condemnation and disdain for untruth, the reader is confronted with a self-deprecating utterance whose wit springs from the short circuit of truth and lies. As in some senseless joke, to the reader's question – *may I have a piece of truth?* – satirical text answers – *of course, shall I slice it from the lie or from the tongue/language*.

However, there is a certain sense of ethical superiority in this absurd self-mockery. Such humour is "a prime expression of this inauthenticity [...], a more minimal, less heroic form of sublimation that allows the subject to bear the excessive, indeed hyperbolic, burden of the ethical demand turning into obsessive self-hatred and cruelty" (Critchley 2007: 78–79). Self-mockery prompts *laughter stronger than death*, which is also the title of Vesna Parun's later book from 1997. It leads to a sobering self-awareness in

⁶ In *The Apocalyptic Fables*, anthropomorphized animals are hybrid linguistic entities, they are "figures that transgress borders". The fable can therefore call into question the stability of the distinction between the human on the one hand, and the animal and non-human on the other, in which the genre's "potential subversiveness" and "obscurity" manifest (Flynn 2004: 433). In this sense, the fable is not only an allegorical presentation of a moral message, but it raises a series of questions about human identity, the supremacy of human culture over nature, the relationship to otherness and foreignness, which is also burdened by the otherness and foreignness of language, and the organization of humanistic ideas with strategies of exclusion or hierarchization.

⁷ "Poruka je jasna: operacija ne vrijedi ako je prekasna."

which our own “laughable inauthenticity” emerges (Critchley 2004: 102). However, the wit does not cause an intense burst of laughter – carnivalesque or farcical jokes are in fact rare – but solicits a discreet smile as a sign of the “eccentricity of the human situation” (Ibid.: 109). Reading Freud's essay *Humour*, Critchley finds in self-mockery the potential for liberating self-knowledge. Self-mockery can lead to “anarchic meta-politics” (Critchley 2007: 130), which instead of smooth social consensus incites feelings of anger, awakens “intellectual and moral rage” (Parun 1993: 6), and opens the door to social dissent. In the poetic satire *The Congress of Pelicans* (*Kongres pelikana*) from the book *The Apocalyptic Fables*, the object of mockery is the literary guild and the cultural scene in general. It is literature that makes fun of itself – “that ugly itch under the skin called *literature*, that mange and scab”⁸ (Parun 1976: 118) – and this, according to Critchley, can trigger social dissensus as a powerful political force. Using the act of writing to make a mockery of the writing profession and the context in which the act of writing was accomplished means refusing to conform to the existing order of things and its depoliticization. Self-mockery becomes a method of political struggle that leads to satirical pressure on power systems in order to demonstrate “that other forms of life are possible” (Critchley 2007: 124). I claim that Vesna Parun's humorous literature – part of the author's oeuvre, which includes several other books⁹ in addition to *The Apocalyptic Fables* – while mocking itself, among other things, strives to provoke laughter or ridicule which inspire a certain will to change the way we perceive the existing world of social relations and roles, and even to change the very circumstances that make them possible.¹⁰ The author's hu-

⁸ “to ružno svrbljenje potkožno koje se naziva *literatura*, ta šuga i svrab”

⁹ These books include: *Salto mortale* (1981), *Tronožac koji hoda* (1993), *Pelin basne* (1998), *Političko valentinovo* (2000), *Grieh smrti: satira* (2000), *Džepni kurcomlatić* (2000), *Mozak u torbi* (2001), *Vaš afrodizijak* (2001), *Đoko i Đokonda* (2002), *Prošireni kurcomlatić* (2005), *Topuzina* (2006), *Blagoslov kukolja* (2007), *Taj divni divlji kapitalizam I* (2009), *Taj divni divlji kapitalizam II* (2010).

¹⁰ This is consistent with Rancière's ideas about the politics of literature, according to which it is not a matter of whether “writers should engage in politics or rather devote themselves to the purity of their art, but the assumption that this very purity is connected to politics” (Rancière 2007: 11). I try to show that Vesna Parun's humorous literature can act as a force to redistribute relationships in the community by influencing “the distribution of objects that make up the common world, the subjects that inhabit it and the power they have to see the world, name it and act on it” (Ibid.: 15). Rancière points out that the politics of literature “reconfigures the distribution of the sensible” by “introducing new objects and

mour is basically satirical, and it results from a radical incongruity between the textual event and the contextual world in which the textual event produces a certain kind of comic diversion.¹¹

Generally speaking, it is a transgressive type of utterance, most often invective, which directly attacks and, in the process, violates good customs, challenges social norms, and turns common-sense attitudes upside down. Vesna Parun's humorous texts are undoubtedly such a form of linguistic action. But since we are dealing with an art form – lyric poem, epigraph, fable, allegory, aphorism, joke – its “imagination and wit render the object of attack amusing or ridiculous” (Greenberg 2019: 7), not rejected, invalidated or simply worthless. I believe that this is precisely what makes the author's satire, and her humorous discourse in general, a socially relevant act. It is a textual event that joins what seems completely ordinary or natural to an unusual and *unnatural* otherness, so that in this short circuit, which causes uncontrollable laughter or affable giggles, our view of the world and life is overturned. Such is the poem *The Benefit of the draught* (*Blagodot propuha*) from the collection *The Mortal Sin: a Satire* (*Grijež smrtni: satira*) (2000): “How is it that the draught / harms a man? // It hurts him, because it is /like freedom. // And isn't freedom /

subjects to the scene of the common [*scène du commun*], [...] making visible what was invisible, [...] those that were heard only as noisy animals it transforms into those who are heard as speaking beings” (Ibid.: 12). Vesna Parun's humorous literature works in exactly that way. Forming new subjects, objects and utterances, it is not only a representation of certain meanings, but primarily the production of linguistic acts whose power can suspend established orders, declassify regulated relationships, and transgress boundaries drawn both in the field of literature and in the fields of culture and society. It is writing that, using Rancière's words, “marks the reign of the inappropriate” (Ibid.: 22). The politics of Vesna Parun's humorous literature is therefore not located “in what it represents, but in what it does: the situations it constructs, the populations it summons, the relations of inclusion or exclusion it institutes, the frontiers that it traces or erases between perception and action, between the state of things and movements of thought; the connections it establishes or suspends between situations and their significations, between juxtapositions or sequences and chains of causal relations” (Rancière 2014: 112–113, cited in Hollinshead-Strick, 2017: 84).

¹¹ Similar arguments can be found in Tin Lemac. Namely, the author believes that Vesna Parun's satirical poetry is “a reaction to non-literary social, political and cultural reality” (2015: 225). Since the satire is “directed at a harsh critique of society and human flaws, which serves to eliminate those flaws” (Ibid.), Lemac reads the collection of *The Apocalyptic Fables* with Bakhtin as a type of carnivalesque humour that turns “Yugoslavian political and cultural everyday life” (ibid.: 235) upside down.

good for man? // Yes, if he tunes its strings / in a draught!”¹² (Parun 2000: 30). Understood by common sense as a guaranteed human right, freedom is linked to the draught in the first two couplets through a witty language game. We know that draught can cause colds, headaches, sciatica, but also severe pneumonia with fatal consequences, so by analogy, the libertarian spirit can damage people’s health and even kill them. But twists do not end there. In the third and fourth couplets, it is claimed that freedom is good for man, but he can only reach it if it turns to its own opposite. Compared to tuned strings, freedom is freedom only if it is normed, aligned with rules and paradoxically *fine-tuned*, rather than spontaneous. One might conclude that taking freedom for granted, as an absolute value, means having a draught in one’s head. The reader is drawn into a situation where extremes, accidentally joined in an absurd embrace, produce wit, which prompts a shift in the established view of social reality as a logical order and freedom as an unquestionable and inalienable heritage of civilization. “By producing a consciousness of contingency, humour can change the situation in which we find ourselves, and can even have a *critical* function with respect to society” (Critchley 2004: 10). I believe that Vesna Parun’s humour rarely intends to devalue or hurt; it is most often furnished with a large dose of self-deprecation, directed towards general social and cultural anomalies, human vices and flaws. Whether it attacks the unscrupulousness of capitalism, patriotic hypocrisy, the vanity of the academic elite, the mindlessness of consumer culture, the illiteracy of the media, greed, vanity or avarice, Vesna Parun’s humour “calls on us to face the folly of the world and change the situation in which we find ourselves” (Ibid.: 18). This type of humour has a communal character; it addresses that which we all share and to which we are collectively exposed, but in such a way that it constantly encourages disagreement with the rules we unthinkingly accept or the authorities we blindly follow. It urges us to see beyond the numerous false values that we tacitly approve, to see the absurdity and to use it as a force that will trigger critical laughter. Something like that might happen while reading the poem *Congratulations! (Čestitamo!)* from the collection *The Mortal Sin: a Satire* – “All is well / that ends / well. / It is best / not to start / anything. // Then there is no fear / of failure. / Everyone worships you. / Your con-

¹² “Kako to da propuh / čovjeku škodi? // Škodi mu, jer je / nalik slobodi. // A zar sloboda / čovjeku ne godi? // Da, ako joj žice / na propuhu ugodni!”

science / is clear.”¹³ (Parun 2000: 32). I would argue that the text is not just an ironic praise of idleness, but a complex comic warning: about the deviations in the transitional business culture, about the general social climate characterized by the saying *a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*, or about an epidemic of opportunism and greediness. Be that as it may, by intertwining the saying about a job well done or some happily completed venture – *all is well that ends well* – and the verses that affirm idleness in the first stanza as well as the conclusion why idleness pays off in the second stanza, it is not simply a mockery of social processes or character traits listed above. An utterance about a job well done seamlessly affixed to a statement about reluctance to begin work in the first place produces a comedy of inseparable opposites. We laugh at the paradoxical activity of inaction, an act that does nothing and yet acts. Doing nothing is the best way to gain symbolic capital, risk avoidance and achieve psychological stability. The favourable outcome of the undertaking and the pragmatic spirit of non-participation in the undertaking, conjoined in an absurd linguistic mixture, can lead to critical ridicule, I am guessing, by numerous and unfathomable failures of the transition or simply by the universal misery of conformism.

Vesna Parun’s humorous poetry is a discourse that has nothing to do with the credible presentation of social reality: ants write political speeches, earthworms read newspapers, starlings visit a psychiatrist, work is idleness, freedom is a draught in the head. However, this still does not mean that this discourse does not tell the truth about the reality it *misses*. As we have seen, it is about the so-called rational aporias; the more distant these travesties are from everyday life, the closer they come to its universal laws. The effect of such humour may be described by Bakhtin’s concepts of “culture of humour” and “grotesque realism” (Bakhtin 1984: 8, 18): a world turned upside down and a life without hierarchies and divisions have a sobering effect and alarm us to social inequality and injustice. The communality of humour in this respect does not necessarily rely on linguistic referentiality.¹⁴ Rather, it is about the production of a linguistic event

¹³ “Sve je dobro / što se dobro / svrši. / Najbolje je / ne započet / ništa. // Straha tad / od promašaja / nema. / Svi te štiju. / Savjest ti je / čista.”

¹⁴ Although Greenberg interprets satire as an expressive mode that depends on referentiality, he questions the direct relationship between rhetorical strategies and representational models. Cf. 2019: 21–23.

that is made possible by a common context, by sharing habits, knowledge, feelings or prejudices. “Satire circulates through a culture, accruing new shades of meaning and eliciting new public responses” (Greenberg 2019: 11). Vesna Parun’s satire *happens* – in the sense that it is not a mere representation of the funny, but a comic act that is created by different tropological turns, transgressions and collisions. The wittiness that the reader encounters in the process necessarily confronts him/her with himself/herself; but not simply with faults or virtues that he/she has or could have, but with virtues that simultaneously appear as faults and with faults that can also be virtues. I am arguing that the author’s satirical world is full of such “impossible joint articulations” (Zupančič 2008: 59) and that their comical effect can make us doubt our standard beliefs and opinions and question the effects of our typical actions. The aphorism – “Never say never, except when never really happens”¹⁵ (Parun 2006: 136) – from the book *The Hammerhead (Topuzina)* (2006) summarizes this rhetorical strategy. It’s funny how futile our efforts to logically explain this statement are: does it make sense to talk about a situation in which something happened that never happened, can one never say never without saying never, does never ever happen except in the word never and so on until it makes our heads spin? But it is even more ridiculous that a certain *never*, as impossible and inexplicable as it may be, is exactly what is happening now in the statement before us. It’s as if the saying *now or never* has turned into a comic *now and never* with the intention of reminding us that the linguistic guarantees we give are as weak as our power to understand the entanglements that the use of language gets us into. The complete inconsistency is expressed here as a commonality, in order to humorously reinforce the feeling that our cognitive abilities often run into their own limits. The impression that our knowledge is mocked by our own ignorance can appear when reading *The Apocalyptic Fables* and Vesna Parun’s other satires in the same genre, among other things, due to the fact that they are permeated with numerous “ridiculous anthropomorphisms” (Bennett and Royle 2016: 109): the bear sends the snail to a shop, a lying earwig¹⁶ starts a club against lies, a geeky crab goes to a disco bar and the like. Regardless of our understanding that these are allegories that ironize social phenomena, it is precisely the gap between the trope and its possible real referents that incites laughter and makes us

¹⁵ “Nikad ne reci nikad, osim kad se to nikad zaista dogodi.”

¹⁶ Croatian name for *ear wig* is *uholaža*, containing the word “lie” (*laž*).

giggle and ask ourselves what we share or what kind of commonality we achieve when we are faced with the goose that reads fables in the goose community culture centre (Parun 1976: 36). In this respect, Vesna Parun's humorous literature is "some other *sensus communis*, that is, a *dissensus communis* different from the dominant common sense" (Critchley 2004: 90). Do we laugh at the "power of nonsense" (Parun 2006: 191) – such as this one: "If we didn't have intelligence, we would have to believe in it"¹⁷ (Ibid.: 155) – there is hope that our shared knowledge, beliefs and customs, in other words our communal intelligence, could become more advanced, fairer and more efficient.¹⁸

Vesna Parun's humour is realized through different modes of utterance, genres and rhetorical procedures. In the broadest sense, it is a witty use of language and the effort to produce certain effects with it. Satire, parody, irony, pun in the form of a lyric poem, cynical aphorism, caustic epigram, grotesque, caricature and black humour are basically tropological games that seek to be "subversive and disturbing" (Bennett and Royle 2016: 112). I believe that the author's humorous discourse builds upon the assumption that "literature is a matter of both linguistic and social scandal. It persistently challenges the realms of so-called 'good taste' and represents an insult to what could be called the ideology of seriousness" (Ibid.). Her erotic grotesques, jokes and provocations – the books *Dickson and Pussycat* (*Đoko i Đokonda*) (2002), *The Pocket Cockadoodle* (*Džepni kurcomlatic*) (2000) and *The Extended Cockadoodle* (*Prošireni kurcomlatic*) (2005) – are a social and aesthetic embarrassment that the author publishes in cheerful and funny language. To a lesser extent, it is a question of crude and excessive use of vulgarisms, although it is an expressive tactic on which these texts rely, and to a greater extent, it is about the *embarrassment* of the language game itself. Paronomasia: "We are all / for the global! Anal / and oral!"¹⁹

¹⁷ "Da nemamo pamet, morali bismo u nju vjerovati."

¹⁸ It seems that Maroević also had this in mind when he, referring to *The Apocalyptic Fables*, wrote that "animal relationships in Parun's poetic projection are human in nature, but extremely parodic and unsystematic, with a lot of poetic free spirit that does not preach ideal models or rely on the benefits of a negative utopia." At the same time, he concludes that "the poetess accepts 'animal farm' as an already established mask, as an undisguised literary convention that enables casual and clear expression, and by using play and combinatorics she sets herself free of the trauma and complexes and compensates for ephemeral preoccupations and pressures of the most diverse origins" (1979: 134).

¹⁹ "Svi smo mi / za globalno! Analno / i oralno!"

(Parun 2001: 40) – paradox and hyperbole: “Where nobody knows anything, scoundrels know everything.”²⁰ (Ibid.: 27) – litote/irony or ludic paraphrase: “Two plus two sometimes used to be four”²¹ (Ibid.) – epizeuxis and prosopopoeia: “Parrots repeat: / Tin, Tin, Tin... / And Tin / whispers to us: / if I were born again, / I would cork / the bottle / and uncork the gas.”²² (Ibid.: 64) – and numerous other figures of speech such as neologism or catachresis participate both in humorous mockery and shaming of society and human flaws, as well as in self-mockery and self-shaming of humorous literature or literature and culture in general. The author’s lyrical message – “To write an epigram you have to / revive / the statics of an idea / in the dance of language”²³ (Ibid.: 31) – confirms that she understands humour primarily as a world-creating language game, trying to use it to disturb public opinion and unsettle those who supposedly know the difference between serious and frivolous literature, appropriate and inappropriate communication, proper and improper behaviour. Basically, Vesna Parun’s humorous literature is written with the aspiration to be the writing of transgression; writing that literally and figuratively transgresses the boundaries of good taste, acceptable topics and issues, and raises inappropriate questions. Socially and culturally confirmed lines of demarcation – for example between high and low literary forms, between political message and political satire, aesthetic expression and swearing – are rearranged, softened or annulled by comic discourse so that at least for a moment that what cannot be limited can come to life. I would say that Vesna Parun’s humour was created with the intention of being radically subversive towards social and cultural zoning, so that the reader would be encouraged to grapple with what is incomprehensible and undecidable, and basically can be embarrassing and mocking for himself/herself.

Critchley believes that humour brings us back to our own place, primarily to our ethos and our own physicality (2004: 68–73). “If humour tells you something about who you are, then it might be a reminder that you are perhaps not the person you would like to be” (Ibid.: 75). Vesna Parun’s animal and erotic humour, I argue, has that strength. Because it continually

²⁰ “Gdje nitko ništa ne zna, nitkovi znaju sve.”

²¹ “Dva više dva katkad je znalo biti četiri”

²² “Papige ponavljaju: / Tin, Tin, Tin... / A Tin nam / šapće: / da se opet rodim, / začepio bih / bocu / i odčepio plin.”

²³ “Za epigram moraš / statiku ideje / oživjeti / u ples jezika.”

disturbs the boundaries that we have drawn to mark the areas where we feel safe and important, it is aimed at our inveterate tendencies to anchor ourselves and urges us to think about what would happen to our knowledge and beliefs if we were displaced to where nothing is guaranteed. *The Apocalyptic Fables* and other animal satires are based on anthropomorphisms whose comic effect primarily weakens the limits of our humanity. The book *Dickson and Pussycat* – which gives sex organs the power of speech and human qualities – is built around the figure of prosopopoeia whose witty performances question the ways in which we fence off the taboo zones of the obscene and inappropriate. Making fun of the body and what is generally considered to be human nature is one of the ways to critically look at our relationship to the different, to others and to our own otherness. Vesna Parun's humorous discourse mocks our tendency to believe in the permanence of ethnic, gender, or professional identities by encouraging us to start viewing identity as a process, a construction, and an open question, that is, something that can go wrong and thus become hilariously funny. The poem *The Good Hosts (Dobri domaćini)* from the book *The Mortal Sin: a Satire* plays with the issue of ethnic and national demarcation, by linking it to the greed of the ruling elite, and at the same time, degrading the lofty idea of patriotism and dragging it into the mire of false benevolence and altruism. "They / sat at the / round table / for a long time. They divided the country / among themselves. // They / bestowed the homeland / on the people / after sifting it / through a sieve."²⁴ (Parun 2000: 41). At first, humour comes from the tension between the title and the text. Having one's own home, one's own homeland, means being housed, being a guest of some *good hosts*. However, the real comedy is staged by the conflict between the first and second stanzas. The first stanza talks about the state, a sovereign political and legal organization that guarantees equality to all its citizens. But what belongs to everyone does not belong to the people; the state is divided among those sitting at *the round table* – those who can divide it, them who are not us. The second stanza states that these same powerful people bestow the homeland on the people, more precisely its leftovers, what is left of it after careful sorting through the legacy. The humour is sharp and caustic, leaves a bitter aftertaste and encourages us to see that having a state does not mean having a homeland; that being at

²⁴ "Za stolom / okruglim / dugo su / sjedili. Među se su / državu razdijelili. // Domovinu / puku su / dodijelili / nakon što su je / kroz sito / procijedili."

home does not mean being in our own home, in our house; that our most intimate feelings like patriotism are not immune to the alienating influence of *parcelling out*; that our communal body is not shared either, but exploited in order to be easily privatized. It is a well-known transitional narrative, but this satire rubs in the reader's face what normally incites anger and urges opposition. The humour here is radically transgressive. The reader is brought to the edge of experience, at the limit of understanding, in the zone of indecision; the text prevents him/her from easily approaching the classification of meanings. Comical here appears as a whole series of contradictions: we all have a homeland, but only some are at home in it; there is no conflict between the thesis that everyone participates and that only some participate; the stability of our community necessarily depends on those who belong to the community only if they do not belong to it; being at home and being a stranger are the same thing. We are giddy with laughter, and at the same time we feel nauseated and resentful. The transgression of that humour is painfully sobering. Here comedy is inseparable from tragedy: lofty patriotism is lofty only if it is a farce for gullible fools, and the noble idea of community is consumed by the feeling of exclusion. We have the impression that our home is like Orwell's *Animal Farm*: all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.

The Apocalyptic Fables and animal satires from Vesna Parun's other books and her collections of carnal humour, more often erotic and less often scatological, such as *Dickson and Pussycat*, *The Pocket Cockadoodle* and *The Extended Cockadoodle*, are created as grotesque humour. Human traits and society are staged either by the absurd, bizarre and strange anthropomorphized world of animals or by the uncanny animation of sex organs. The function of the grotesque is to awaken in the reader a feeling of joyous insecurity and repulsion. In a rhetorical structure such as fable, in which the trope of personification puts the understanding of humanity in a quandary,²⁵ the grotesque intensifies the impression of discord in order to

²⁵ Readings that interpret the anthropomorphized, hybrid characters of the fables exclusively as representations of human characters point to the uneasiness we feel in the vicinity of the uncanny and unknown. Thus, in the name of reason and security, we strive to banish and explain the inexplicable. However, the texts themselves are hybrids, sometimes they are on one side, sometimes on the other side of understanding and representation, and they cannot be simply trained like animals, and these are the prerequisites that our readings must take into account. In other words, it is not possible to expel talking animals from a

encourage openness to different, even conflicting, directions of reading and using the text. At the same time, our normative and disciplinary power and systems of categorization, which we normally use to stabilize meaning, weaken or stop working so that our epistemological consciousness becomes a true comic object. The poetic satire *The Grotesque (Groteska)* from the book *The Apocalyptic Fables* is a nursery of grotesque creativity and indeterminacy, the effect of which is such that cognitive collapse necessarily creeps into our understanding. The text begins as a heterodiegetic account of a goose that writes fables and reads them in the goose community cultural centre, where the gathered animals, stimulated by the goose's performance, experience various incidents and accidents and recount their own experiences. From laughing so hard, the turkey's "ulcus on duodenum woke up – and his stomach ulcer split open"²⁶ (Parun 1976: 36), the snail in the fable about the "cabbage leaf and the four-leaf clover"²⁷ (Ibid.: 37) recognizes the castle of Count of Monte Cristo, and the pig remembers his Golden Anniversary. At the end of Goose's reading, the snail discerns the grotesque, the burlesque, and the absurd in the goose's fables and concludes that the average audience therefore refuses to accept them as literature worthy of attention. In the penultimate sequence of the text, the reader learns that the presented events are merely the result of "a somnambulistic monologue of a goose force-fed with grotesque".²⁸ Thus, the goose appears both as a character and as a homodiegetic narrator who swears that the versed narrative "is an accidental slip"²⁹ (Ibid.: 38) and that everything in it is invented "except – animals!" (Ibid.).³⁰ Therefore, the goose concludes: "That's why it's pointless / to put goose literacy through a sieve / of censorship. Animals – do not accept bribes!" (Ibid.).³¹

The literary procedures by which this poetic satire simultaneously refers to the social and cultural context and returns to its own textuality

reading, by interpreting them as metaphors for people and their relationships, without them returning to the reading in the form of wild tropological hybrids.

²⁶ "probudio *ulcus* na jedanaestercu – a na želucu puknuo mu čir"

²⁷ "listu kupusa i djetelini s četiri lista"

²⁸ "somnabulnog monologa jedne groteskom našopane guske"

²⁹ "omaknuće je slučajno"

³⁰ "osim – životinja!"

³¹ "Zato je besmisleno / guščjoj pismenosti postaviti sito / cenzure. Životinje – ne primaju mito!"

make it a multi-layered sign. Paratextual defining of the text via its title as a literary form of the grotesque is called into question in the text itself by paradoxically framing it within with other forms and modes such as fable, journalism, burlesque or myth. It is not at all clear which frame to take as determining and final. The speaker is sometimes identified as a goose, sometimes as the heterodiegetic subject of the utterance, sometimes as the authorial function that also appears as the homodiegetic subject of the utterance, so that it is not possible to unambiguously determine their purview. There are no unconditional answers to the questions: who is speaking, with what credibility and what power does he/she have over the meanings of the text. Literary, social and cultural quotations, paraphrases and allusions – *The Count of Monte Cristo*, community culture centre, *Cerberus*, *scherzo*, *Croatian Writers' Association*, *Forum* magazine, *Dverce* palace, censorship, corruption – lead to an abysmal immersion of the text in other literary and cultural texts and in the real context and vice versa. It is difficult to unambiguously separate the textuality of material reality from the real effects of textuality itself. In other words, a full understanding and interpretation of *The Grotesque* puts the reader in a position of exposing his/her cognitive power to comic stuttering. The humour here at least partly, if not entirely, stems from the experience of strong disorientation, confusion and perplexity that the text encourages. *The Grotesque* is “distortion, delineating the gap between imagined possibilities and reality” (Ruskin as cited in Edwards and Graulund 2013: 17). In the form of a grotesque, the disdainful mutation of identity – the subject of the utterance is presented as an author-geese with interdigital webbing – and numerous uncanny hybridizations – fiction and faction, animal and human, text and context, funny and cruel – lead to the reader’s attention being constantly redirected due to the effect of permanent oscillation. *The Grotesque* therefore introduces us to the zone of transgression, and thereby tends to refute the usual understanding of stability and normality. Perhaps it could be argued that in *The Grotesque*, the author’s self-mockery of her own authority resonates most strongly and critically when she describes her fingers as “joined by a membrane”³² (Parun 1976: 38), taking the words from the character of the goose. But it is not possible to say with certainty whether this “goose forced with grotesque”³³ is (also) self-deprecating, or ironic towards those who

³² “opnom spojene”

³³ “groteskom našopana guska”

see the writer of grotesque satires as a goose, or ironic towards grotesque satire as a literary form, or all of it at once. Since grotesque has the power to weaken or erase the lines of demarcation, the reader is encouraged to re-define his/her own relationship to ideas of fixed meaning and normal identities. *The Grotesque* humorously reminds us that in the space of culture there really are poetesses-geese and writers-pigs; culture is not a depoliticized zone devoid of low passions, insults, belittling and cruel discredit, it is therefore not purified and bereft of *fictional* linguistic acts whose effects are very real. That is why at its end the text states that everything in it is invented except for the animals: talking animals are all around us. Aren't we humans actually those talking animals? And isn't literature much more than beautiful human words; a grotesque language machine that emphasizes numerous shortcomings in the concept of humanity? I claim that *The Grotesque*, as well as the author's humorous literature in its entirety, embodies, literally gives textual body to the idea that the sphere of functioning of literature is not clearly separable from the sphere of functioning of politics. At the same time, it is not about political preferences or ideological divisions at all, but about linguistic activity that always redistributes the visible, the expressible, the normal, the fair, the permitted or the legal. Vesna Parun's humorous poems, her epigrams, aphorisms, satires and grotesques are an attempt to reshape the social and cultural distribution of positions and relationships, subjects and topics by introducing the reader to a zone where the rules collapse into their own comic perversity. Thus, he/she is encouraged to use critical laughter to create new rules for understanding, reading and using the text, no matter how ridiculous those rules may be. In this respect, the author's humorous discourse is world-creating; it participates in the ethical and political life of the community by redistributing literary, cultural and social signs and their meanings. In other words, comic textual performances give the abnormal, embarrassing, inappropriate, ridiculous, grotesque, bizarre or blasphemous the status of what is equivalent to normal and serious. *The Grotesque* is literally its own grotesque, a new linguistic event that has the power to expose itself to monstrous and caricatural transformation and derision and to persuade the reader to take responsibility for its interpretation the very moment he/she encounters transgression, which is basically a comic moment. Who should we laugh at and in what way is not the least bit a neutral question, neither in the aesthetic nor in the political sense.

The power of the grotesque is most strongly represented in the author's collections of erotic humour and appears as transgressive, obscene,

caricatured, non-normative physicality. These are texts that are saturated with vulgarisms to such an extent that they literally turn into a linguistic manifestation of sex organs and their various uses, from communicative to erotic and reproductive. In doing so, two dominant rhetorical strategies are represented. On the one hand, the human body, reduced to sex organs by endless synecdoches, becomes a signal of excessive obscenity that, embedded in our identity, threatens to completely disintegrate it. On the other hand, the trope of prosopopoeia enables inanimate genitals to live a monstrous life, a life of pure depravity, which calls into question the idea of humanity and its relationship to the power of language. In other words, the textual multiplication of dicksons and pussycats indicate, on the one hand, the ability of language to breathe life into an inanimate body, and on the other hand, the inadequacy of language to fully regulate this monstrosity. The humour occurs simultaneously with the awkwardness that results from the accumulation of inappropriate language and the images it produces. But it would be wrong to think that the reader is simply faced with blasphemous, immoral content. In the author's collections of erotic humour, the body of the text itself is a linguistic object created by the hypertrophy of cursing, lasciviousness, and vulgarity, which makes it impossible to grasp, possess, or understand anything that would exclude that shamefulness. The body of the text, *stuffed* with linguistic notions of human corporeality reduced to its own partiality, to the uncanny liveliness and even rationality of the sex organs, is primarily a grotesque, disabled, monstrous body that at the same time attracts attention with its distortion and causes nausea and repulsion. In an averted gaze, disdainfully turned away from the grotesque physicality of the text, the reader can encounter the power of normalization and discipline. Interpreting something as ugly, inappropriate, abnormal and undesirable in the field of literature is not an aesthetic problem at all, but a political problem. The extremely caricatured accumulation of dicksons and pussycats in Vesna Parun's humorous erotic poetry indicates exactly that, by challenging our tendency to make fun of what disgusts us, what we don't understand or relate to in some other way.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that Vesna Parun's humorous literature could act as a force to redistribute relationships in the community by influencing "the distribution of objects that make up the common world, the subjects

that inhabit it and the power they have to see the world, name it and act on it” (Rancière 2007: 15). Forming new subjects, objects and utterances, it is not only a representation of certain meanings, but primarily the production of linguistic acts whose power can suspend established orders, declassify regulated relationships, and transgress boundaries drawn both in the field of literature and in the fields of culture and society. It is writing that, using Rancière’s words, “marks the reign of the inappropriate” (Ibid.: 22).

Accordingly, one might say that Vesna Parun crosses all boundaries with her books of erotic humour and one would be right, but not in the usual sense of understanding the phrase *to cross all boundaries*. Too vulgar, perverted beyond measure, very deviant, extremely blasphemous – all that which could be attributed to her later texts confronts us with the ways in which we norm and normalize phenomena both in the field of aesthetics and in other fields in which our lives are realized. However, transgression is not only a suspension, it can also be a confirmation of borders or even their new construction. Jenks believes that “transgression is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation [...] To transgress is to go beyond the bounds or limits set by commandment or law or convention, it is to violate or infringe. But to transgress is also more than this, to announce and even laudate the commandment, the law or the convention” (Jenks 2003: 2). Although I could agree with that, in my opinion, for the excess and disorder that the author’s texts of erotic humour stage, there is no aesthetic or value guarantee that would come from a secure position, on the other side of the borders of literature. The excessiveness and scandal of her humorous texts distort and weaken the boundaries of literature from within without the guarantee that the act of transgression will not affect their ridicule. Transgression here is both a comical and politically risky event. On the one hand, these texts try to alert us to the ridiculous functioning of established models and evaluation mechanisms in the community, and on the other hand, they do not rule out derision and rejection by the literary and social community that evaluates them. By participating in the institution of literature, Vesna Parun’s humorous texts as a whole show an inclination to be its comic transgression; to acknowledge, but also to go beyond the limits of normal literary life and to reveal their own limitations. The author’s humour is world-creating, transgressive, but also contingent; we never know whether a comic coincidence will lead to relief, inflame anger, or arouse resigned scorn. An endlessly witty aphorism, endless in the sense of the limitlessness of its meaning – “Just sleep tight, dead pensioners! Your unpaid

pensions will be served at your wake.”³⁴ (Parun 2006: 16) – it is not particularly subversive, it is only mildly satirical with a tint of black humour, but it can, I believe, encourage the reader to imagine, and perhaps even bring about, a world in which a series of transgressions and redesigning of existing social restrictions takes place. Vesna Parun was undoubtedly convinced of this when she wrote: “Satire is an elegant rebellion, self-defence, new vitality. It erases in us emotions unfit for a fight” (Parun 2001a: 148).

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³⁴ “Samo spavajte mirno mrtvi umirovljenici! Vaše neisplaćene mirovine pojest će se na karminama.”

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SAŽETAK

Tvrtko Vuković

ODREZANI JEZIK – RETORIKA BUNTA U HUMORISTIČKIM PJESMAMA I DRUGIM HUMORISTIČKIM TEKSTOVIMA VESNE PARUN

U radu se analizira humoristička književnost Vesne Parun – satirična poezija i kratke forme poput aforizama i epigrama – iz perspektive recentnih teorijskih pristupa humoru i komičnom. Tumačenje se temelji na pretpostavci da je autoričin pjesnički humor svojevrsni politički događaj koji može izvršiti pritisak na sustave moći u različitim područjima ljudskog života. On čitatelje potiče da preispitaju navodno neupitne svjetonazore, vrijednosti, granice i autoritete. Budući da humoristična književnost Vesne Parun proizvodi i jezični i društveni skandal, ona se čita kao svjetotvorni jezični događaj koji za cilj ima, primjerice, reorganizirati javno mnijenje, poremetiti opće znanje ili takozvane ideologije ozbiljnosti.

Cljučne riječi: *pjesništvo; humor; satira; Vesna Parun; retorika pobune; politika književnosti*