

Humour in a Psychoanalytical Perspective

Carlo Cristini

Department of Experimental and Clinical Sciences, University of Brescia, Brescia, Italy

Valeria Camporese

Institute of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy, Brescia, Italy

Giovannantonio Forabosco

Director, Centro Ricerca Umorismo, Ravenna, Italy

Abstract. Sigmund Freud paid great attention to humour (1905, 1928), in particular examining the economic, topic, and dynamic components involved. He acknowledged humour as one of the highest psychic functions. This work is aimed in clarifying some points of the Freudian meta-psychology, with special focus on two main aspects: the role of the super-ego, and the function of the humorous expression, which is at the same time defensive and creative. The discovery of a super-ego that from being a strict censor may also become loving and protecting towards the ego, is discussed. On the one hand the centrality of the maternal role in the psychogenesis of humour is underlined in identifying the precursors stemming from mother-child relationship, on the other hand a conceptual frame is proposed which integrates the aggressive and sadistic aspects of the super-ego with those more benevolent and comforting. In addition, some features in common between humour and melancholy are suggested, and this leads to the definition of humour as a creative alternative in coping with one's own suffering, without threatening psychic integrity. Two main functions are to be attributed to humour, the defence of the psychic apparatus and the promotion of well-being, in the perspective of living in a creative way.

Keywords: Logic; Humour; Psychoanalysis; Super-ego; Melancholy; Defence mechanism; Maternal role.

1. Introduction
 2. On the Maternal Role
 - 2.1. Maternal Function, Play and Humour
 - 2.2. Mother-Child Relationship and Humour Expression
 - 2.3. The Loving Super-Ego and the Maternal Role
 3. The Ambivalence of the Humorous Mask
 4. A Defence from Anxiety
 5. Conclusions
- References

1. Introduction

In the final part of his book "Jokes and their relation to the unconscious" (1905), Freud dedicated a paragraph to humour, describing the pleasure coming from the saving of an emotional expenditure. In the subsequent essay "Humour" (1928), his attention is on the topic and dynamic aspects involved in humour process (this article was actually published for the first time in 1927, in the *Almanach 1928* of the Society of Psychoanalysis, in German, but it is the English edition which is customarily referenced). To be noted that here the term "humour" will be employed both as a general term, as it is nowadays commonly used, and in the specific sense Freud intended, when distinguishing it from "wit", and from "comic". The context will disambiguate the two options; see for instance Attardo (1994), for the semantic field of "humour").

In the present article we will take into consideration the components and factors implied in humour experience, a central role being played by the Super Ego. We will examine the importance of the maternal function and of the early "mother-child" relationship in humour formation, and the discovery of a Super Ego which, from a rigid and strict censor, may reveal itself as being also loving and protective towards the Ego. Finally, moving from the intrapsychic analogies between the mechanisms of humour process and of melancholy, we will define humour in terms of a creative expression aimed to control one's own suffering, and hence a way of eluding, or containing psychic pain. In humour we can find two functions: the defence of the psychic apparatus, and, on the other hand, the promotion of well-being and of psychic integrity, in the frame of a positive and creative way of life.

Humour is a mind resource to alleviate suffering. Differently from other defence mechanisms in which the escape from reality occurs at a cost to the integrity of mental health, humour does not lose contact even with the most painful experiences of life. To allow oneself moments of spontaneous, genuine irony, is to be considered an advanced condition of psychic functioning, one the highest psychological functions (Freud 1905).

In his short essay "Humor" (1928), Freud returns to the subject. More than twenty years have elapsed from the 1905 book, and knowledge in the psychoanalytic field has developed, with enlargements, revisions, and new concepts.

In the 1928 essay, the economic advantage remains in the background, and allows space for a dynamic interpretation, modifying the meta-psychological perspective: from the point of view of the object to that of the subject (Assoun 1992).

Freud (1905) pointed out that in order to obtain an effective wit one cannot set aside another person who gets the witty line. The enjoyment of the joke is more apparent in the hearer than in the initiator: the first laughs, whereas the second is somehow detached. The hearer's laughter is associated with the possibility of releasing an investment expenditure, differently from that which happens to the initiator who instead experiences an inhibition to the release. It is as if the initiator would delegate the hearer to laugh instead of him. On the contrary, an audience is not required in the humor process that "may involve just one person, while the other is listening (even when the target of the joke is the subject himself), or two people of whom one does not take part in the process whereas the other makes fun of the first" (Querini and Lubrano 2004, p. 105, present authors' translation). That represents a turning point, and an initial differentiation between wit and humour, since in the latter the deriving pleasure belongs both to the initiator and to the responder, even if the second is not an active part. Freud (1928) then advances the question: "What is the dynamic process underlying the 'humorous attitude'?" (*ibid.*, p. 2), moving the attention to the internal processes of the humorist. For sure, there are analogies in the ways of obtaining humorous pleasure by the initiator of a joke, and by that of the hearer, but those of the latter appear to represent "an echo, a copy of this unknown process" (*ibid.*, p. 2), which initiates in the humorist. Freud seems to be more attracted with the possibility of investigating the subject-humorist, and the dynamic involved in humour.

An example reported by Freud both in the 1905 book on jokes and in the essay *Humour* (Freud 1928) is that of the criminal who is being led to the gallows on a Monday. The criminal observes: "Well, this is a good beginning to the week" (Freud 1928, p. 1). He might have also said: "It doesn't worry me. What does it matter, after all, if a fellow like me is hanged? The world won't come to an end" (1928: 2). But in this case he would not have achieved the same humorous success of the previous utterance, where a certain amount of grandiosity may be detected: a specific element proper of humour, not noticeable in the comic and in the wit. In the alternative expression a superior attitude towards reality may also be observed, but there are no traces of humour; on the contrary, there seems to be an evaluation of reality which is clearly clashing with that generated by the humour effect. Freud (1905) underlines the greatness of the soul of the humorist, who does not repress unpleasant feelings,

but, detaching himself from them, is able to exploit them to obtain pleasure. One may note that humour acts in a contrary sense to repression. In other words, instead of relegating painful contents to the unconscious, it subtracts from what is unpleasant, ready to burst out, its energy transforming it into pleasure through discharge. The grandiose and ennobling element, traceable in humour, is based on "the triumph of narcissism, the ego's victorious assertion of its own invulnerability" (Freud 1928, p. 2). The ego refuses to be upset by the reasons of reality, to be compelled to suffering. It insists claiming that traumas of the external world cannot affect itself, rather, that they are nothing more than opportunities to obtain pleasure. This last element is absolutely essential to humour.

The humorist then takes a defensive stance. Towards reality, it is not resignation which emerges but the principle of pleasure and the setting aside of reality and of its reasons. A feeling of challenge towards concrete difficulties is expressed. That represents a way of moving away from suffering, of avoiding psychic pain, and somehow having fun with it. The humorist benefits from a certain degree of superiority, assuming a role similar to that of the adult who smiles at what a child perceives as dramatic and ruinous. However, here we mainly refer to a person who assumes a humorous attitude towards his or her own misfortune; to a kind of game played with oneself through the double role of "superior father" and of the 'frightened child'; a hand-to-hand struggle between psychic agencies, the super-ego and the ego.

"We obtain a dynamic explanation of the humorous attitude, therefore, if we conclude that it consists in the subject's removing the accent from his own ego and transferring it on to his super-ego. To the super-ego, thus inflated, the ego can appear tiny and all its interests trivial, and with this fresh distribution of energy it may be an easy matter for it to suppress the potential reactions of the ego" (Freud 1928: 4).

The result of the investment which is transferred from one agency to another does not seem to produce the effect of a severe and rigid warning, as it would be expected from the parental agency. It appears that the super-ego/parent allows the ego/child a little achievement of pleasure. Freud states that "humour would be the contribution of the comic made through the agency of the super-ego" (Freud 1928: 5), but of a non typical super-ego which removes the mask of a strict and rigid censor to wear that of an amiable and soothing parent who comforts sorrows.

2. On the Maternal Role

2.1. Maternal Function, Play and Humour

Freud (1928) claims that there is still a lot to be learnt about the nature of the super-ego. We were used to considering it as a rigid and strict censor, with a moral function to be respected with no delay, but now we acknowledge it also as having a benevolent and comforting role. In this protective view, it is better associated with the maternal function of taking care of the child in difficult and painful situations. Freud never proposed a final theory about these "new" super-ego aspects, leaving to posterity the task of solving the paradox. "A paradox that many authors use to skip, maintaining the idea of the super-ego as a punisher, and attributing to the ego's ideal, as a separate agency, the function of a good guide protective and encouraging" (Fara and Lambruschi 1987: 24 present authors' translation).

Literature investigating the benevolent function of the super-ego has mainly focused on the role of maternal function, with special attention to the theoretical propositions on the pre-Oedipus mother. The super-ego is generally taken into consideration as a punishing and warning agency, giving little attention to the comforting and encouraging role. That appears to reflect a difficulty in integrating punitive and protective aspects. It is Freud himself who

outlines the consolatory role performed by the super-ego when the individual faces trouble and suffering. The super-ego allows the ego to preserve its integrity and serenity, as previously the loving support by the parents had allowed the child to bear frustrations (Freud 1928).

In the psychoanalytic literature there is a strong tendency to neglect the positive aspect of the child's relationship to his own super-ego, which can also be a source of love and well-being, of approval besides disapproval (Sandler 1960). Developing a structural theory which within the same agency includes both the punishing and the comforting functions is not immediate. Even though it clearly appears that in the super-ego different internalized love objects are integrated, and their first core is certainly formed by the introjected mother, although Freud attributes to the introjected father far more importance in the final forming of the super-ego (Weiss 1950).

2.2. Mother-Child Relationship and Humour Expression

In order to understand the relevance of maternal function in the development of the child, and of his abilities, we should refer to theories mainly dealing with the first mother-child interactions, as a prototype for future relationships.

Winnicott (1947) observes that there is not such thing as a "breast-fed baby", meaning that while trying to describe him we realize that we are actually describing a *breast-fed baby with someone*. A small child cannot exist by himself, being essentially part of a relationship.

It is within a privileged relationship of this kind that the child will be able to start a maturational process and the development of the ego, provided he is adequately supported by the care of a sufficiently good mother. From the beginning, the child forms and develops from the matrix of a dual mother-child unity (Mahler et al. 1975). Winnicott dubs this very first mother-child interaction an *egoic relationship* because it is through this maternal function that the mother strengthens the weak ego of the child into a strong ego. She is there to make everything stronger, similar to the power steering of a bus (Winnicott 1965).

To the newborn the environment is formed by just one individual: the mother or her substitute (Spitz 1965). The mother is the environment par excellence, where affections play a decisive role in order to establish a dynamic relationship between needs and fulfillments, pleasure and displeasure, gratifying and frustrating experiences which form and characterize mnemonic traces. According to Spitz, the mother represents the most significant environmental 'strength' as for the shaping of the child's defences. The nature and quality of the primary relationship will provide the child with the context which allows the selection of specific behaviors having a defensive and adaptive aim.

A sufficiently good mother actively adapts herself to the child's needs; an active adaptation which gradually diminishes, as long as the ability of the child to accept boundaries and to tolerate the results of frustration increases (Spitz 1965). However, to this purpose the child needs to be equipped with the tools and good experiences which may help him to face suffering.

A privileged mother-child interactive space is that represented by the play area. Play activity, no doubt, influences to a great extent the child's development, and also in adult life very similar psychological processes may be observed. Winnicott (1971) notes that whatever may be said about children's play it would apply to adults as well. Only, that is more difficult to be described when the patient's material mainly expresses itself in the form of verbal communication. Winnicott also states that we should expect to find play in a clear-cut way also in adults, humour being one evident case. That leads us to think that the root, the original core of ironic and self-ironic expressions is to be traced back to play between mother and her child.

In the experience of play, Winnicott (1971) describes the mother as swinging between two positions: from being the one whom the child is capable of finding, to being the one waiting to be found. Putting herself in a position of "going and coming", she allows the child to experience an omnipotent alliance based on primary process functions, together with the beginning of secondary process functions, dictated by the reality principle (Christie 1994). While developing, the child becomes more and more competent as regards his relationship with the surrounding environment, and with the objects which constitute it. For instance, he will be able to reach and grasp the object which attracts his attention more, among them also maternal objects (hair, nose, tongue, eyes, etc.). These episodes, and all the actions the mother promotes to attract the child's attention, gradually develop into what Trevarthen (1980) dubs *person-person games*, in which mother and child reciprocally take the role of "making fun" of one another, which will become an essential part of play experience and of its humorous traits.

"Mothers are the first *clowns* when it comes to impersonating characters with human exaggerated traits in order to provoke a child's smile, and even laughter" (Fasolo 2005, p. 168, present authors' translation).

When the mother does something which frightens the child, she provides him with two signals: one says "I am your protective mother, you have nothing to fear", whereas the other means "Be aware, there is something fearful", in other words, "Seemingly, there is some danger, but as you come near to me there is no need to take it too seriously". As a result, the child shows a reaction half of which is weeping, and half is a kind of mumbling while acknowledging his mother. This magical combination can determine laughter (Morris 1967).

It is a common experience for those who are in contact with small children, that the first forms of hilarity manifest themselves because of stimuli that previously had been sources of fear and danger. Since when the child acknowledges his mother as separate from himself, the whole reality, for good and bad, is assimilated in her. It is her face, her protective look that the child refers to when in need for reassurance. In this way the child learns that fear, pain and psychic suffering can be overcome, if not laughed at.

These developmental steps, stemming from the maternal relationship, may be defined as rudimentary but important precursors for those who in adult age are laughing at their own misfortunes, and are capable of defending themselves from fear and suffering by means of a good joke, and of laughter, recalling the pre-Oedipus mother who with her look was reassuring the child that no danger was in sight.

The dialogue between a child and his mother Morris (1967) suggests, seems to actually occur among three interlocutors: threatening mother, child, and reassuring mother. It is a just sketched triangle, which anyway seems to be the forerunner of the Oedipus one, where it may be supposed there are some residuals of the first interactions. Although many authors maintain that there is an Oedipus symbolism in humour process, Morris observes that only few appreciate the maternal role in this triangle, with reference to the ironic dimension. Yet, "it seems that in the absence of the mother, the child, temerarious as he may be, would hardly dare to move an attack" (Fara and Lambruschi 1987, p. 122; present authors' translation).

2.3. The Loving Super-Ego and the Maternal Role

Oedipal events are to be considered fundamental in the dynamic of humour with a triadic structure which is entirely internal (Joseph 2003). From the intra-psychic point of view, it is a game played between the ego and the super-ego.

According to Dooley (1934), the first larval clue of humour in psychic development is to be attributed to the stage when the super-ego begins. Stilmann and Balter (2002) also state that without a well formed super-ego functioning one cannot speak of 'true' humour.

Humour, as an attitude constantly employed to protect from suffering, does not imply consciously setting aside contents, but re-evaluating them, making them less dramatic. Dooley (1941) traces humorous play among psychic agencies back to Oedipus vicissitudes. The humorist deals with his own ego as if it were a child, representing his drives as something very small. It is well known that a great part of amusement comes from littleness, and from a contrast of dimension. The ego, made smaller, feels free from responsibilities and from sense of guilt, and the adult super-ego is amused from littleness and irresponsibility of the ego.

This way, the possibility is outlined that the super-ego would not only be strict and inflexible. It rather seems to be a parent rigid in his requests, but as much tender and benevolent, being loved by the child for both his characteristics (Dooley 1941). These tender and protective aspects of the super-ego, according to Winterstein (1934) and Schafer (1960), are to be attributed to the importance of the maternal role in the formation of the super-ego, as an intrinsic function in humour competence during adult age. Introjection of maternal function will constitute the benevolent section of the super-ego, which the adult will refer to, as if becoming a child again, in order to find comfort and relief from injuries and anxieties, hence favoring a temporary illusion: "Look here! This is all that this seemingly dangerous world amounts to. Child's play — the very thing to jest about!" (Freud 1928: 5).

The gift of laughter regards the mature ability of acknowledging requests and frustrations, hopes and disappointments, with a sense of humour whose bitterness is tamed but not denied (Poland 1990). What is expected to produce suffering, in humour turns into a pleasant experience. On the other hand, humour is at the same time a defence and a form of communication, amongst the most advanced human abilities, which allow the holding together of different and often opposing feelings, and the communication of them (Pasquali 1987).

Humour is the expression of a fusion of optimism and sorrow, seriousness and amusement, an uncertainty with the promise of a gratification that acknowledges as its basis a dual mother-child relationship of an excellent quality. According to Chasseguet-Smirgel (1988) the humorist is the one who always tries to represent his loving mother.

3. The Ambivalence of the Humorous Mask

Freud (1928) identified a dynamic origin of humour mechanisms, which could be recognized in the conflict between ego and super-ego. There is a shift of the psychic stress from ego to super-ego that allows a saving of unpleasant feelings in addition to a narcissistic gratification.

Who dealt with processes involved in humour has been fascinated particularly by the conciliatory and reassuring aspect of its ironic effect, controlled by a super-ego benevolent function, analyzing its merciful side, rather than the punishing one. Bergler However, as Bergler (1937) states, humour is among the most complex psychical products, and it demands an exceptional work by the ego. The point is that other partial issues regarding humour were neglected.

It is reasonable to take into consideration the ambivalent aspect that permeates every humour production, and that appears whenever a joke is told. It may be assumed that the super-ego would play a mediation function in the production of humour, and that pleasure would be derived from a mitigation of the super-ego and from the possibility to express in a veiled and controlled way some unconscious forms of aggressiveness, in a combination of suffering and subsequent release (Dooley 1941). Within this conflict between ego and super-ego, the ego is treated with tenderness, in spite of punishment, and in this dynamic it is allowed not only to 'play', but also to express in a masked way some attacks against the super-ego. From this assumption, it may be derived that humour reaction offers the opportunity to express aggressive and sexual drives free from sense of guilt (Bergler 1937).

Bergler also outlines a kind of relationship between the ego and the super-ego, which includes the rigidity and strictness components of parental agency. In his vision, the super-ego of the humorist has created, or contributed to, a desperate situation to the ego, such as the tolerance of Id drives, at the cost of a punishment whose executor is in the external world. The ego then addresses the superego with a sort of help and love prayer after being punished. Without denying its own nature, the Id reply is that of offering comfort and protection as a way of masking attacks against ego itself. The ego falls back on to the narcissistic omnipotence deceiving itself, and it enjoys this kind of intoxication where the escape from suffering is just an illusion. The super-ego is the agency which is formed at the sunset of Oedipus complex, and it is the result of child identification with parental figures. Its strictness does not depend on the real rigidity and strictness of the parents, but on the strength and intensity of Oedipus conflicts. Parents, while exercising their functions, do not restrict themselves to forbidding and punishing, sometimes they also try to comfort (Resta 1959).

The mitigation of punishing and repressive aspects performed by the benevolent component of the super-ego, as Bergler (1937) suggests, allows an integration of parental functions referable both to the comforting and to the punishing factors. In this way, when the child is in an unhappy condition, when the pain is too deep, after suffering an humiliation, he appeals to the benevolent super-ego, which on the one hand reassures the ego about the banality of the event, that seemed to be so threatening to him, and, on the other hand, it mitigates the censorious and punishing action, offering to the ego a narcissistic victory that, even though temporary and illusory, it is under the heading of the principle of pleasure. Hence, aggressive tendencies can be expressed in a humorous form without the threat of the sense of guilt.

As a conclusion, the super-ego wears the mask of benevolence offering the little ego comfort and protection; doing so, a balance is re-established preserving the narcissistic aspect, and at the same time, a portion of aggressiveness is creatively expressed, by means of a joke, which would not be permissible in any other way. It is the tendentiousness Freud mentions when talking about the wit, which determines the characteristic of psychic ambivalence and of semantic ambiguity of humorous expressions, which seduces and fascinates to a great extent.

4. A Defence from Anxiety

It has been repeatedly underlined the humorist's ability to detach himself from suffering and psychic pain provoked by reality, internal or external, as a defence to escape, or to remove danger. When facing danger, internal or external, the ego elaborates the same defensive organization (Freud 1925).

The defence is perceived as a global, suitable, and healthy way that a mature adult employs to adapt himself to reality. These are necessary and creative adaptations which are performed in order to avoid, or to cope with, intense and threatening feelings, often anxiety, sometimes an unbearable pain, and other disorganizing emotional experiences, or to maintain self-esteem (McWilliams 1994). Humour, together with altruism, sublimation, anticipation, and regression, is to be considered a *mature defence* that allows to functionally handle conflicts which may arise among the four main domains of human experience: conscience, reality, relationships, primary needs (Vaillant 1977).

Humour is to be perceived as a defensive reaction that an evolved ego activates in order to fly from a situation considered to be dangerous and a potential source of pain. Each of us reacts to eliminate sorrow, or to alleviate it, and every effort directed to this goal is part of what we call a defence.

Humour is a defence mechanism which allows to step away from suffering assuming a detached, superiority attitude towards painful events. It is a kind of a waiver of reality, but

this rejection is assured without compromising psychic integrity because there is not a withdrawal of the actual painful contents from awareness (Dooley 1934). In mania there is an unconscious denial of the hated and painful aspects of reality, whereas in humour such a denial is well controlled and circumscribed. Drives involved are either sublimated or neutralized. Differently from mania, humour does not lead to an overturning of psychic balance, instead it works in favor of its maintenance (Chasseguet-Smirgel 1988).

If specific defences for given anxieties do exist, it is allowed to ask whether humour, as a defence from suffering, wouldn't be connected to some particular anxiety, and hence to some stage of libidinal- affective development. According to Winterstein (1934) humour has its roots in the first oral stage. The rejection of reality automatically implies a regression to mother-child unity, provided that the humorist appears to have a fixation to the first oral stage. Humour might then be considered a contribution of oral eroticism to character formation (Abraham 1925). An excessive gratification, or frustration, in a psycho-sexual stage leads the child to a fixation to the characteristics of that stage, and character is nothing else but a manifestation, in adult age, of that fixation. In oral character formation the relationship the child has established with maternal breast is decisive. If the child was adequately satisfied he will identify himself with a milk dispensing, loving and sociable mother. In case of premature frustration, or of excessive gratification, a difficulty may arise to separate oneself from oral ways of satisfaction, and fixation points will work as points of regressive attraction, as for the experiences of disappointment in later stages and in adult age (Abraham 1925).

We may presume that the humorist experimented a particularly gratifying oral stage, to which he resorts while developing what we may dub an "optimistic approach towards life", and which we find in a super-ego capable of assuming a mild and reassuring attitude.

Humour seems to stem as a defensive reaction to death anxiety – not regarding the real event of death, but as a possibility that the ego would lose its narcissistic investment, its abilities for thinking, feeling and establishing relationships (Algini 2009).

Assoun (1992) notes that there is a meta-psychological bond between humour and death anxiety. This intra-psychic situation bases their affinity, and it is to get away from this anxiety that the individual escapes into humour. The common root between these two frames is at stake, which consists of a certain relationship between ego and super-ego.

It is not only by chance that Freud (1922) proposes some considerations about death anxiety, which is played between the ego and the super-ego, the most representative example being the development of anxiety as a reaction to an external threat, or to an internal process, as it happens in melancholy. It seems there exists a close bond between humour and a given attitude towards death. A look at melancholy seems then to be necessary in order to clarify what it is at stake in humour. Freud (1915) suggests an interesting observation about the self-accusations the melancholic individual addresses to himself, from which a higher degree of introspection emerges, and a greater self awareness than others'. However, it is not only a question of self-awareness, as in melancholy introspection and self criticism are oriented towards self-derogation and self-punishment. The originality of melancholy consists in its singular tendency to transform itself into its opposite: mania. Melancholy and mania are the two faces of a coin, opposite manifestations of the same process; the difference being that in melancholy the ego succumbs to the problem, whereas in mania it eludes and sets it aside. Freud (1915), writing about the depressed individual, highlights that we may notice that one part of the ego clashes with the other, critically evaluating it, and assuming it, so to say, as its own object. The suspicion that the critical agency, stemming from the ego's split, may prove its autonomy also in other circumstances, will be confirmed by all further observations. There really are valid reasons to separate this agency from the rest of the ego. The narcissistic split of the ego produces the alternation of melancholy and mania, but it is the swinging of such an investment that should be taken into account to clarify a whole series of phenomena in normal psychic life (Freud 1928). The Freudian legacy on the super-ego's function proposes an

unexpected development in the internal logic of narcissism in which a positive role is attributed to the super-ego.

Humour works in a close contact to death anxiety, eluding it and keeping it far from the melancholic 'fall', in the attempt of controlling a painful situation; which is to some extent what the child does when learning to laugh at aspects of reality believed to be threatening, reassured as he is by his mother presence and protection.

Humour takes the shape of the possible "third route". Although presenting the same formal structure of depression it goes against the mainstream, it employs its strength not to succumb, as a kind of endogenous, psychic anti-depressant. The individual looks at himself as a worthless object, but instead of complaining he laughs at himself finding in this way a form of consolation (Critchley 2004).

In this sense, humour process represents the creative reaction to relieve suffering. It is a defence that guarantees and promotes psycho-physical well-being, as it does not imply negation or denial of a threat (internal or external), and of the associated displeasure. On the contrary, the humorist makes oneself responsible of it. As Schon (1997) notes, true humour do lightens, but it also increases importance, highlighting an introspective ability, and an unusual awareness.

According to Chasseguet-Smirgel (1971) the creative one, independently from his field of activity, would be an individual who is capable, by means of his creative process based on harmony and rhythm, and victorious against aggressiveness and anxiety, to autonomously fill up his own narcissistic deficiencies, without the need of an external intervention. We know that creativity is not a prerogative just of the artist, but is an ability whose *function is repairing the subject himself* (Chasseguet-Smirgel 1971), and potentially everyone has it at his own disposal (Cesa-Bianchi 1998, 1999, 2002; Cristini et al. 2011; Cesa-Bianchi et al. 2013).

The creative and symbolic impulse (Imbasciati 2001) is inborn in human being nature, and it adequately develops when in a favorable environment. Living creatively implies a specific relationship with reality, especially when experimenting one's sense of being an individual, and when realizing that life is worth living.

Including humour in the wider frame of creative processes, it is possible - in the presence of an hope or in the persistence of an illusion — to find the "art" of triumphing over aggressive and self-destructive forces that we know there are in each of us (Chasseguet-Smirgel 1971).

5. Conclusions

Some believe that in modern society the medium of humour has disappeared, and only a bloodstained seriousness, the truth included, would be left (Sacerdoti 1987). A disturbing aspect is that an increasing number of people is getting used to laugh just out of kindness (Fara and Lambruschi 1987).

It appears to be necessary to recover that area of seduction and humorous play (Sacerdoti 1987), particularly for those who lost it, or relegated it to the childhood world believing not to need that any longer. Limiting or avoiding humour experience, one waives also the possibility of expanding thought perspectives, and of using the protective and creative function humour is able to provide. When pain and psychic suffering are intense, when misfortunes impend and a threat lies in wait, the humorist detaches himself, he allows himself the alternative of laughing at, of mocking adversities, being pleased for his (narcissistic) success, for escaping unhurt once time more.

How would it be possible to translate all that in intra-psychic terms? The process involves the Oedipus triangle, and above all the presence of a mother who, since the first interaction

with the child, wisely built up a 'safe basis' (Bowlby 1988) where the child may feel protected, comforted and loved. It is within these privileged interactions that the mother may promote in the child a sense of humour.

The introjection of this maternal function will form that component of the super-ego to which the adult, as if becoming a child again, resorts to be able of limiting and processing difficulties, and frustrations connected to the environment, in the relationship with reality. Exploiting humour competence, a new role of the super-ego is discovered, in which its proverbial rigidity and censorial strictness is mitigated from what has been defined its maternal component, allowing the ego-child not only to get a revenge on the super-ego's retaliations, but also to express in a veiled way those very aggressive feelings, which would not otherwise be manifested, free from a sense of guilt. In humour process a liberation function may be hence recognized: aggressive drives, that are responsible of ambiguity in any joke, may express themselves, finding a way out through words and communication, losing their destructive potential.

Humour fully places itself among the ego's defences employed in order to manage and control psychic discomfort connected to one's inner conflicts, without irreparably falling into depression, or in its maniacal counterpart.

The individual, instead of regretting his own situation and of succumbing the super-ego's demands, secures himself, by means of humorous creativity, an alternative strategy, that, even though leaving a bitter taste in one's mouth, it allows him to redeem himself, to overcome, to remove a difficult, problematic situation, without compromising psychic integrity.

In all probability, this is the essence of humour, its capability of unmasking and clarifying the most hidden and unknown aspects of life, enabling one, in a creative way, to better understand, and to smile at what life sends one's way.

References

- Abraham, Karl. 1925. *Psychoanalytische Studien zur Charakterbildung*. Zurich: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag.
- Algini, Maria Luisa. 2009. "Elaborare il lutto": alle strette con Freud". *Rivista di Psicoanalisi*, 155, pp. 705–724.
- Assoun, Paul Laurent. 1992. *L'humour. Un état d'esprit*. Paris: Autrement.
- Attardo, Salvatore 1994. *Linguistic Theories of Humor*. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter
- Bergler, Edmund. 1937. "A Clinical Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Humour". *Psychoanalytic Review*. 24A, pp. 34–53.
- Bowlby, John. 1988. *A Secure Base: Clinical Applications of Attachment Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Cesa-Bianchi, Marcello. 1998. *Giovani per sempre? L'arte di invecchiare*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- . 1999. "Cultura e condizione anziana". *Vita e Pensiero, Rivista Culturale dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore*, 3, year 82, pp. 273–286.
- . 2002. "Comunicazione, creatività, invecchiamento". *Ricerche di Psicologia*, 25(3), pp. 175–188.
- , Forabosco, Giovannantonio, Cristini, Carlo, Cesa-Bianchi, Giovanni and Porro, Alessandro. 2013. *Umorismo, creatività e invecchiamento*. Rome: Aracne.
- Chasseguet-Smirgel, Janine. 1971. *Pour une psychanalyse de l'art et de la créativité*. Paris: Payot-Rivages.
- Chasseguet-Smirgel, Janine. 1988. "The Triumph of Humour". In her *Fantasy, Myth and Reality*. New York: International Universities Press, pp. 197–213.

- Christie, George L. 1994. "Some Psychoanalytic Aspects of Humour". *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 75, pp. 479–489.
- Cristini, Carlo, Cesa-Bianchi, Marcello, Cesa-Bianchi, Giovanni and Porro, Alessandro. 2011. *L'ultima creatività. Luci nella vecchiaia*. Milan: Springer.
- Critchley, Simon. 2004. *Humour*. Genoa: Il nuovo melangolo.
- Dooley, Lucile. 1934. "A Note on Humour". *Psychoanalytic Review*, 21, pp. 49–58.
- . 1941. "The Relation of Humour to Masochism". *Psychoanalytic Review*, 28, pp. 37–46.
- Fara, Giuseppe and Lambruschi, Furio. 1987. *Lo spirito del riso. Saggio sull'umorismo*. Milan: Raffaello Cortina.
- Fasolo, Franco. 2005. *Psichiatria senza rete. Un trattatello comico redatto per aree tematiche su una distopia dei nostri tempi*. Padua: Cleup.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1960 [1905]. *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* [Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious]. New York: Norton.
- . 1917 [1915]. *Mourning and Melancholia*. Standard Edition, 14, pp. 237–258.
- . 1923 [1922]. *The Ego and the Id*. Standard Edition, 19, pp. 12–66.
- . 1926 [1925]. *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*. Standard Edition, 20, pp. 75–176.
- . 1928 [1927]. *Humor*. *International Journal of Psycho-analysis*, 9, pp. 1–5.
- Imbasciati, Antonio. 2001. "The Unconscious as Symbolopoiesis". *Psychoanalytic Review*, 88(6), pp. 837–873.
- Josephs, Lawrence. 2003. "The Observing Ego as Voyeur". *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 84, pp. 879–890.
- Mahler, Margaret S., Pine, Fred, and Bergman, Anni. 1975. *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant*. New York: Basic Books.
- McWilliams, Nancy. 1994. *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis: Understanding Personality Structure in the Clinical Process*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Morris, Desmond. 1967. *The Naked Ape*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Pasquali, Gabriele. 1987. "Some Notes on Humour in Psychoanalysis". *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 14, pp. 231–236.
- Poland, Warren S. 1990. "The Gift of Laughter: On the Development of a Sense of Humour in Clinical Analysis". *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 49, pp. 197–225.
- Querini, Patrizia and Lubrani, Franco. 2004. *Ironia, umorismo e disagio psichico*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Resta, Giorgio. 1959. "René A. Spitz. Sulla genesi dei componenti del Super-io". *Rivista di Psicoanalisi*, 5, pp. 192–193
- Sacerdoti, Giorgio. 1987. *L'ironia attraverso la psicoanalisi*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina.
- Sandler, Joseph. 1960. On the concept of Superego. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 15, pp. 128–162.
- Schafer, Roy. 1960. "The Loving and Beloved Super-Ego in Freud's Structural Theory". *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*. 15, pp. 163–188.
- Schon, Alberto. 1997. *Vuol dire. Dal diario di uno psicoanalista*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Spitz, René A. 1965. *The First Year of Life: A Psychoanalytic study of normal and deviant development of object relations*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Stilmann, Naemi and Balter, Leon. 2002. "Humour, Narcissism and the Superego: Observation on a Humourless Patient". *Journal of Clinical Psychoanalysis*. 11, pp. 459–476.
- Trevarthen, Colwyn. 1980. *The Social Foundations of Language and Thought*. New York: Alson.
- Vaillant, George. 1977. *Adaptation to Life*. Boston: Little Brown.
- Weiss, Edoardo. 1950. *Principles of Psychodynamics*. New York: Grune Statton.

- Winnicott, Donald W. 1947. "Further Thoughts on Babies as Persons". In: M. Davis, D.C. Wallbridge (eds.), *Introduzione all'opera di D.W. Winnicott*. Florence: Martinelli, 1984.
- . 1965. *Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development*. London: Hogarth Press.
- . 1971. *Playing and Reality*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Winterstein, Alfred. 1934. "Contributions to the Problems of Humour". *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 3, pp. 303–316.

Carlo Cristini is associate professor of General Psychology at the University of Brescia. He is the author of many books and scientific articles in the fields of psychology.

Valeria Camporese is a psychologist, and a psychotherapist in training, at the Institute of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy, as well as the author of scientific articles in the fields of psychology.

Giovannantonio Forabosco is the director of the Centro Ricerca Umore (Centre for Humour Research, www.ricercaumorismo.it). He has an experience as a clinical psychologist at the Department of Mental Health in Ravenna, Italy. The author of many publications on humour, in English and in Italian, he is a long-term member of the International Society for Humour Studies.

Address correspondence to Carlo Cristini, at carlo.cristini@unibs.it