

Transgression and Tragedy, Laughter versus Death¹

Within cyberspace one can travel against the current of time. It makes no difference that several years have passed since this day in September 2009. On the Internet it remains present and at any given moment we may take a trip to that Scottish cemetery to take a look at a British soldier weeping at a funeral of his brother-in-arms killed in Afghanistan. The newspaper photographs show mourners dressed in black among gravestones. Only one young man, the closest friend of the deceased, is wearing an outrageous summer mini-dress: bright yellow in colour, with a low neckline, and as if this was not enough he is also sporting pink knee socks. A reader learns about a promise made on the battlefield – if one of them were to die then the other would dress in this way for the funeral. Those present appear to respect his behaviour – after all, they are British and no one demonstrates surprise, let alone mirth, although the young man was greeted with applause.²

Over a hundred English and Polish Internet commentaries provide a complex social commentary to this highly unusual behaviour. The majority of Internet users express approval for the gesture of friendship: the British comments used the word *respect*, the same as the Polish: *szacun*, a counterpart favoured by the young (mostly in its abridged form); here and there a homoerotic insinuation may emerge or someone foolishly ridicules a supposed misunderstanding (i.e. the Scot had in mind that his friend should put on a traditional kilt), another sums up the event with the word: *lans* (to launch oneself), and yet another finds a certain dose of comedy in the whole situation.

When reading those opinions an ethnologist has a chance, without even leaving home, to carry on ethnographic fieldwork; moreover, he is outright invited to provide suitable explanations. Some commentators evidently lack a clue on how to decipher the enigmatic situation and require its rationalisation. They express their *r e s p e c t* for a friend's loyalty but do not comprehend the *d i s r e s p e c t* through which it is expressed. Someone questions the very possibil-

ity of understanding such behaviour: *Generally speaking, I think that all those comments (including mine) are pointless and devoid of sense. Another opinion puts the blame on the editors of "Gazeta Wyborcza" for the absence of an authoritative explanation: We know nothing. They promised each other a funeral with a dress but we do not know whether it was to be of a subtle colour or whether they specially arranged unsuitable colours. The inappropriate character of the colour of his dress and socks is so striking that I am surprised that Gazeta Wybiórcza [a mock-spelling] published it without a more objective commentary, clarifying the facts.*³

Even "The Times" did not manage to meet such expectations and offered only a cut and dry account.

2.

Hence, if not the journalist then the anthropologist should embark upon an explanation of the cultural logic of this episode, hoping that he might understand it better – after all, we really comprehend something only when we have to explain it in a discursive mode, not just being content with a vague feeling of grasping it. May he only remember that being a scholar does not absolve him from fallacies and interpretation predicaments similar to those troubling other readers. After all, we are dealing here with fundamental existential dilemmas, for whose solution the academy does not have a patent.

Secondly, an even more important disclaimer: the described behaviour does not possess the features of a custom, an accepted cultural praxis, which the ethnologist could routinely explain against the backdrop of local convictions or beliefs, the rules of the language of a given culture, a search for analogies of similar ritual conduct, etc. This was, after all, an occasional individual act; moreover, it was an antinormative one. Even if in our shared and intuitive reception such "anti-behaviour" has some sort of enigmatic meaning, a concealed symbolic content, its communicative dimension was neither foreseen nor taken into account by our protagonist, or at least nothing is known about it. Will we, therefore, ascribe to him intentions that he did not harbour and assume the presence of reasons that he probably did not pursue? Obviously, a scholar must avoid interpretations-imputations, i.e. explanations that arbitrarily ascribe to the acting subject his own comprehension of (symbolic) behaviour and motives of activity. The ethnologist cannot perform the part of a psychologist nor does he wish to remain satisfied with psychological explanations, because he hopes to attain a rewarding cultural explanation. In other words, will he be forced to create a hypostasis (or fiction) of some sort of a supra-individual "symbolic sub-consciousness" that would justify the search for analogies between the examined individual behaviour and its assorted cultural analogies? How else can we



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respond to the reader's need for understanding, how to assist the spectator in discovering the human significance of an illegible albeit meaningful act?

A symbol is not some sort of a simple entry to be deciphered in a pocket dictionary. According to the philosopher, the symbol provides food for thought. That what it offers a concrete recipient, and the sort of reflections it inspires, depends on the cultural outfitting of that recipient, the expanse of his sphere of references to which he will match symbolic activity so as to create his own version of its sense against a more complete background.

Accordingly, I propose precisely this role of a researcher – by no means an interpreter offering ready-made answers but a supplier of suitable contexts. He is compelled to build a set of similar phenomena, and having placed every new case in an appropriate place and by referring to them he may propose a comprehension of its meaning. A thus perceived researcher will not make an announcement about meaning but rather provide elements of cultural competence necessary for an independent reception of a symbolic message.

At the onset, let us divide the whole event into two stages and add something obvious: the funeral grotesque at the cemetery was the consequence of an earlier act that we may describe as “adjuration of the improbable”. The promise given by two brothers-in-arms was a *sui generis* bet made with fate: THAT will certainly never take place, you shall not die just as I, a

British soldier, will never have to come to your funeral dressed like that. But since it did happen

At this point, I interrupt my reflections so as to add a single thing before act two starts: at the time of making this arrangement, i.e. in a situation of wartime stress, it possessed a certain psychological value – a comical relief effect helpful in a confrontation with omnipresent threat. After all, the image of “a man dressed as woman” is a fundamental form of popular humour, the simplest way of producing soothing laughter next only to the “man slips on a banana peel” motif.

We do not know whether the young soldiers intentionally referred to some sort of cultural models and imagery. Their joke was certainly aimed against death lurking all around – it excluded it or at the very least deprived it of its sting by immersing the menace in an atmosphere of the absurd.

An English commentary adds:

I can imagine those two pals, drunk in a bar and joking: “Look, if one of us gets killed then the other will have to wear a dress to the funeral, so we can't get e shot because we do not want to put on this f...cking dress and wear it in public”. I bet when one of them left for a mission the other always said: “Don't do anything to make me wear that dress”, in other words, this was their version of: “don't get killed”. They must have made this joke a lot. It was their way of making light of the threat.

The same holds true for the Polish comment: *In my opinion this bet was a declaration of sorts: "Listen, pal, we're at war, things are tough, but you can't die because otherwise I shall come to your funeral in a garish frock".*⁴

And now, when THAT did happen after all The grotesque is transferred into the public space of the cemetery and within this altered context it assumes different meanings. It not only fulfils a promise - it is a provocation, impropriety, and disrespect since this is the way the reversal of suitable gender roles demonstrated for all the world to see should be comprehended. At the same time, note that the reversal in question was accentuated in a special, exaggerated way - one is tempted to use the slang word: *draczny* (wacky), and thus it too should be deciphered.

3.

A man in a woman's dress - this must make an impression. We all agree that it might be amusing only during a carnival, in a comedy or a cabaret, but outside this context it appears to be rather tragic (there is no need to recall an embarrassing and by no means funny story that took place a year ago and involved a certain Polish political-media authority).⁵ In order to fully understand our case consider, to begin with, the simplest associations that are always the first to appear and offer something different than an explanation. After all, it does not suffice to reduce the whole episode to the otherwise meaningful tradition of British eccentricity, although its records include the case of a lord who 150 years ago expanded the ancient praxis of funeral reversals to such a degree that he wished to be buried upside down, vertically, and on a horse, a feat that obviously involved considerable logistic problems. He acted in this way convinced that just as death is the reversal of life so resurrection will consist of turning the world upside down (here Jonathan Swift and his *Gulliver's Travels* seem to be to blame: the same conviction was, after all, harboured by the residents of the land of Lilliput; for details see: Wasilewski 1987, p. 180).

In this manner, we find ourselves in the first *cul de sac* of an uncertain interpretation: the attractive analogy between cross-dressing, i.e. exchanging clothes, and assorted forms of behaviour reversed in various cultures. Inversion - a physical reversal, applied not only in the case of clothes but also different ritual props and manners of performing ritual gestures, comprises, after all, standard symbolic activity for the sake of expressing or feigning the state of death envisaged as the opposite of life. It was applied probably in all traditional cultures at different stages of burial, from watching over the corpse to the end of mourning, in acts of remembering the deceased and visions of the netherworld as a land of reversed spatial order. Regardless whether this denotes the mourners wearing



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clothes inside out, arranging utensils upside down and mirrors back to front, or performing ritual acts with the left hand - all are a unanimous symbolic system serving the expression/communication of the state of death.

Reversal often assumes forms exceeding spatial inversion and encompasses even the category of gender by exchanging attire. Ethnological studies inform that mourners resorted to reversal; such reports mentioned men putting on women's clothes more frequently than *vice versa*, but it would be difficult to find pertinent statistics (several inevitably Frazer-like examples are cited by Nola 1995, pp. 194-195).

Gender reversal perceived from this perspective would thus signify a reversal of the order of life applied for expressing the emergent state of death. Each reversal takes on the features of transgression in connection with sexual issues, strongly regulated by norms or outright surrounded with taboo. In all social systems such behaviour is immediately assessed as transgression or subversion. On the margin, let us note that it is for this reason that it approaches the comic; after all, humour consists of undermining (in a non-threatening and far from serious manner) some sort of reality. Transgressions in the domain of sex can have far-reaching consequences.

4.

At Hawaii the death of a chief was marked by violent manifestations of mourning. The participants wore their loincloths around their neck instead of loins. This vestimentary inversion of high and low was accompanied by (and no doubt also signified) sexual license.

The great Claude Lévi-Strauss, from whose *The Savage Mind* (1969, p. 216) I chose the above quotation, thus merely observed that violation-inversion served the purpose of communication about the state

of death by reversing the up and the down as elementary values; in local culture their permanent place in daily life is rigorously observed in accordance with the local admonition: *What belongs above should stay above and what belongs below should stay below* (*Ko luna, no luna no ia; Ko lalo no lalo no ia*)" (p. 217).

Ko luna, no luna... and everything is clear: death, the antithesis of life, is expressed in symbolical language by means of inversions - spatial and others. Nonetheless, we are compelled to ask about the "meaning" of the sexual license and whether it merely "means" something. After all, we are dealing with a violation of daily rigours and fundamental taboos, with transgression, which at that particular moment is permissible but still possesses the character of a misdemeanour.

May the reader forgive me for repeating in this, after all, funeral context, an old joke, an anthropological variant of a known American formula, in which assorted sciences propose a wise answer to a simple question: "Why did the chicken cross the street?". Years ago, when anthropology defined culture as a system of signs and when dominating comprehension used the categories of communication, academic semioticians responded: "In order to communicate that it wants to cross to the other side ...". Told by



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semioticians, this joke from Bloomington is obviously self-ironic, because the meaning of each activity, also that of a sign or one possessing a sign aspect, is not exclusively communicative – it is also operational and causal. Symbols do not serve the purpose of reading – they create a situation even if they must be deciphered by the recipients. Although such signs comprise whole abstract systems whose disentanglement – in analyses of texts and symbolic behaviour – is sheer pleasure for an adept dealing with symbolic anthropology, they still serve some sort of an objective and possess an instrumental, practical, and social value.

Instead of deciphering inverted behaviour as a "symbolic communiqué about death" perhaps it would be correct to recognise that the death of a chieftain actually exists as (or rather becomes precisely *via* such behaviour) a period of anarchy and social disorder, when instincts come to the fore and a-social and drive-oriented behaviour is permitted.

Ethnographic material from exotic cultures, European antiquity, and pre-modern times confirms such an interpretation. Sources inform about customary and radical archaic activity: the devastation of homes sanctioned by tradition, group thefts or outright plunder, rituals of rebellion, and more or less ritualised violence – all this was part of the order of the day not only on the islands of the Pacific but even in Europe during the time of mourning for rulers, popes, and bishops (Nola 1995, pp. 204-208).

It would be short-sighted to explain these practices by referring to circumstances in which licensed anarchy appeared in periods of a temporary lack of authorities and was to make use of this absence and, simultaneously, to express or communicate it. Such debauchery was recorded by ethnographers also in the case of burials not solely of chieftains and commanders – a fact that forces to consider a different explanation. Within this content a reference to the carnival may not sound like the best suggestion, even in the wide meaning given by Mikhail Bakhtin, although one certainly may use the terms "anti-behaviour" or "ritual debauchery", accepted in ethnology. In reference to behaviour at funerals we come across both phenomena in the not so distant past and in regions quite close to us.

Stanisław Vincenz described his Hutsuls as they earnestly played the games prescribed by custom right next to the deceased. First, they played *žužukało* ["droning"] with such great zeal that the cottage shook; heard from afar it resembled the sound of an organ. They also pretended to be a mill, and boys under a bench made noise imitating the rattle of a real mill. Just as noisy was the make-belief bargaining of a farmer and Jewish traders, and even more clamorous - brawls involving Jews, as is customary in this game. [...] Tides of powerful laughter came from the cottage over and over again.

Not a single game was forgotten. A magpie squeaked and a goat nibbled the girls, an Armenian galloped inside the cottage on a frisky horse, making the windowpanes rattle, women assaulted a beggar, while a jealous old woman beat their sheepskin coats producing noise as loud as pistol shots. [...] In this Christian way they celebrated watching over the body (1980, pp. 99-100).

Zwżukanie and loud laughter were by no means all. Vincenz monumentalised the Hutsuls and his descriptions are devoid of elements of open obscenities, ludic transgression, and even outright brutality among the Eastern and Southern Slavs documented by ethnographers. These elements were mentioned by the classic of empiric research into folk culture, Pierre Bogatyrev (Bogatyrev 1926), as well as several other researchers. Their interpretations mention: *ritual merrymaking at the funeral and the wake, including assorted jokes concerning the deceased* (Uspienski 1998, p. 84; *ibid.* older literature on the subject).

What would have been the purpose of such merriment? It was probably treated as an antidote against death, a method for compensating the deficit of life forces and extracting the community from depression and apathy. For an author looking from a semiotic point of view a more correct perspective would entail placing such acts within the widest context and referring them to a general dichotomous model of the world.

Having compared assorted behaviour, including the one demonstrated by the *yurodivy* - "the fools of God", Boris Uspienski, an eminent expert on the culture of Old Rus', supplemented the last quotation with the following, probably somewhat incomplete commentary: *Apparently, it was assumed that in the other world this type of behaviour would change into its opposite.*

In other words, all sorts of anti-behaviour inversions, even those focused on fun, are to be explained by referring to visions of inversed netherworlds. The meaning of burial jokes was to consist of the fact that they were deciphered "on the other side" as an expression of respect. In this fashion, disrespect would change into respect, performing a turnabout of 180 degrees, the same as the one in which life becomes death.

I am unable to assess the above conclusion otherwise than in categories of naive literalness. Acting as a wall it closes the interpretation *cul de sac* along which it was worth walking, although only for a certain time. Transgression is much too serious for a community to perceive it solely as abstract, conceptual markers in a purely intellectual operation of inversion. When we deal with spontaneous behavioural dissipation all explanations claiming that it is a symbolic derivative of speculative vision simply sound artificial; it is not worth treating powerful social violation and ethical subversion as behaviour secondary *vis a vis* a text

(beliefs, visions) about reversed netherworlds, even if at different times this image possesses the significant force of a system modelling ritual behaviour (e.g. the above-mentioned spatial inversions). In such an elucidation the researcher rather associates than proves: he satisfies his need for order and logic in material rather than establishing authentic profound relations essential for its comprehension.

5.

Take a closer look to those transgressions, if we wish to take the trouble of interpreting them. The ethnographic penetrations of Transcarpathian Ukrainian villages carried out in recent years by my colleagues from the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at Warsaw University (the Bojko region examined by Tadeusz Baraniuk and a group of students) ⁶ furnished information about the retention of practices described by Bogatyrev more than a decade ago and sporadically occurring probably even today. They indicate the durability of two particularly transgressive motifs.

First, the sexual element: in the course of a group watch over the deceased those present imitate sexual intercourse involving couples with intertwined legs and performed in all possible age combinations (man-woman, man-girl, woman-boy, boy-girl); girls also start kissing the boys, i.e. once again contrary to the social norm. Together with lesser erotic provocations (an old man accosted by young women, and girls by a goat) this is an extensive range of transgression against mores, especially considering the unusual occasion.



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Second, the frequency and intensity of assault in games of skill – it is said, with some embarrassment, that the loser was beaten so hard than he was almost killed. We may interpret this as a high degree of aggression present in fun, and thus once again as transgression. Let us add the noisemaking strongly accentuated in descriptions, here appearing as the mildest form of violating order.

Can all this only “symbolize”, “denote” or “communicate” the state of death? Or, on the contrary, is it supposed to balance the dramatic situation and turn it towards life? Why, then, does it take place already at the time of the watch over the dead and not after the burial?

Asking the Bojko performers and participants of the events about their reasons and motivations is rather futile. Today, they appear to be, and sometimes are embarrassed. Any sort of offered explanation seems to be distinctly secondary: the prohibition to fall asleep during the watch, to which they referred and motivated with magic-religious reasons, would not, after all, call for such drastic entertainment.

Looking from a comparative viewpoint one could find burial excesses much further going than those committed by the Hutsul or Bojko peoples.

The following statements should not be treated as an attempt at shocking the reader with exotica, which, to make matters worse, is taken out of its context and thus is not interpreted in a suitably integral fashion – recall the Indian potlatch, which involved destroying the entire property of the deceased, or games of chance – once again played next to the corpse – when all the livestock was lost and the widow bedded the last animal, a pig or a ram, and *caressed it like her husband* (Jensen 1960, p. 73; this quotation was borrowed from Karsten describing the Indians of Ecuador).

Ignoring all possible additional meanings, not revealed in an extractive approach, it would be difficult to find a more powerful example of posthumous practices as a violation of the basic taboo: this one is simply atrocious. The cited example demonstrated that reducing posthumous transgressions to an intention of anarchic “making use of an opportunity” is useless. If we concur that such extreme behaviour can become a component of burial customs precisely owing to their transgressive character then this is obviously because they somehow correspond to the unusual nature of death *vis a vis* the order of life. “Somehow” – this means: how? After all, it is impossible to maintain that they only “express” it *via* symbolic operations – inversion, the reversal of order, the violation of decency. It could be rather that they evoke its horror and scandalousness. Quite possibly, although they operate with formally similar acts, their meaning is totally contradictory: are they supposed to protest against death and sometimes ridicule and challenge it?

It should be kept in mind that only in analytical-interpretation bookkeeping we must separately decipher and record such contradictory senses as, in our case, the expression of death and, at the same time, its negation and undermining. In culture they function inseparably: it is the economy of the symbol, its “referential economising”, not to mention the variability of cultural texts and contexts that go back to prehistory, that is the reason why the same act may express various and even contradictory intentions. Incursion and disorder may both articulate and overcome death. Forms of culture did not come into being in order to smoothly enter our academic interpretation compartments.

6.

Back to the Scottish cemetery. As I mentioned, the female costume of the soldier features a striking exaggeration: we are dealing not only with the keeping of a promise but with some sort of excessive demonstration. There appears something that could be colloquially described as wacky, an intentional provocation, also of the aesthetic kind. The “inappropriate colours” that irritated the commentators so much, those childish knee socks as an accessory – the very act of their selection and the preparation of the attire in this most grating version must have been accompanied by intending to attain maximum enhancement of the absurd. Everything appeared to signal: “don’t take this literally”, “I’m not pretending to be a woman – I’m pretending to pretend in order to express something else”.

At this point one could apply such semiotic formulae as “quotation mark expressions” or, in the language of the Russian formalists: *ostranieniye*, or the Brechtian

Verfremdungseffekt. I, however, opt for “wackiness”, because the soldier did this for fun, for show. Why? Only within the context of the above-cited ethnographic material could we hazard the following assumption: he did so in order to go the whole way in expressing his protest, to put on a wacky show for the whole world to see. After all, there has to be a way of reacting against the absurdity of death, and this can be achieved only with equally absurd activity. The *scandalum* of death can be exceeded or repulsed exclusively by means of the scandal of one’s indecency.

Or could it be that this solitary soldier resembled yet another protagonist demonstrating a similar form of anti-behaviour – the mentioned Old Russian “God’s fool”, the *yurodivy*? He too behaved scandalously in the face of the sacred: he threw stones at a church and genuflected in front of a tavern. In a polemic with explanations of such acts as a parody Uspienski wrote correctly that conduct of this sort was a form of indicating the devilish sinfulness of the world: for the

yurodivy the world ceased being the work of God and became a world reversed by the devil, and this is why one should behave *à rebours*. One could say that in his individual episodic behaviour man can allow himself to disagree, to dramatically protest against the painfulness of the world, in contrast to ritualised social acts compelled to accentuate normalcy and inevitability (even death) in order to offer comfort or the process of coming to terms. This is why the anthropologist can decipher the symbolic content of funeral transgression in different ways: in an individual case he should perceive in it depravation and rebellion, and in a group act – the extension of the state of death, its acceptance and overcoming. Such strictly ritual behaviour may be described as “ridiculing death” (see: *Todesverlachen*, e.g. Wolff 2009; “ridiculing the world” in: Tadeusz Baraniuk, 1999). In the case of our point of departure it would be difficult to speak about laughter, although the applied form brings to mind derision. Reversal and undermining, the grotesque and the unsuitable, all are a cry of protest against the ontical absurdity of death, which itself is the most terrible transgression. If joking sometimes possesses a vector precisely and personally directed against someone then in this instance we know who this was joke aimed at with all its force: this is a joke directed against death.⁷

One last glance at the young man in the florescent dress, kneeling and sobbing next to his friend’s grave, and we shall no longer have any doubts that his clothes say: “Here I am at Your funeral and demonstrate with my behaviour that Your death is totally absurd and unacceptable and that I too act in a manner as absurd and unsuitable as possible”.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The author is working on *Non Seriousness*, a study on comical transgressions..
- ² Internet editions of “The Times”, 16 September 2009, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 15 September 2009, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article6836190.ece#none>; http://wyborcza.pl/duzy_kadr/1,97904,7042324,Przyjacielu_gdy_zgine_przyjdz_na_moj_pogrzeb_w_sukience.html.
- ³ See: www.wykop.pl/link/236222/przyjacielu-gdy-zgine-przyjdz-na-moj-pogrzeb-w-sukience.
- ⁴ Resp.: <http://www.drudge.com/archive/125177/best-friend-dresses-up-soldiers-funeral> and <http://www.wykop.pl/link/236222/przyjacielu-gdy-zgine-przyjdz-na-moj-pogrzeb-w-sukience>. I would like to thank Daniel Brzeszcz for finding both quotations.
- ⁵ Actually, we should also ask whether we are not progressing towards reactions totally indifferent to such ostentatious sexual-costume manipulations, to coin a term. This is the conclusion one may reach while observing in the world media *No Pants Day*, when members of both sexes walk around only in their underwear, without producing (the probably) intended shock. Underwear is also accentuated as part of the fashion for *sagging* – the wearing of radically drooping trousers
- ⁶ I owe the below presented details to Katarzyna Kościeszka.
- ⁷ At this point, while associating an ostensibly distant fact, albeit belonging to a similar register or tone, recall the famous letter B turned upside down in the inscription: *Arbeit macht frei*, which, as we know from the explanations offered by its maker, a concentration camp locksmith, was supposed to be a jest, the only sort that he could make to oppose the machinery of the Auschwitz gehenna.