

## Reflecting back, or What can the French tell the English about humour?

Will Noonan

► **To cite this version:**

Will Noonan. Reflecting back, or What can the French tell the English about humour?. Sydney  
Studies in English, 2011, pp.92-115. hal-01018823

**HAL Id: hal-01018823**

**<https://hal-univ-bourgogne.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01018823>**

Submitted on 5 Jul 2014

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Reflecting Back, or What Can the French Tell The English About Humour?

WILL NOONAN

L'humour anglais souligne avec amertume et désespoir l'absurdité du monde. L'humour français rit de ma belle-mère.

(English humour highlights with bitterness and despair the absurdity of the world. French humour makes fun of my mother-in-law.)

(Pierre Desproges, *Les étrangers sont nuls*)<sup>1</sup>

Leaving aside the inevitable jokes about incompatible national styles of humour, the gulf between what speakers of French and English mean by the term 'humour' has attracted surprisingly little critical attention. Henriette Walter's comparative study of French and English etymology classifies 'humour' and '*humour*' as 'partially friendly homographs': words with the same spelling whose broadly related meanings can mask important differences in usage.<sup>2</sup> By and large, speakers of English tend to treat humour as a broad and nebulous category covering any and all notions related to laughter and the comic, a category that is not restricted to a particular time or place. This umbrella view is mirrored in the emerging academic field of 'Humour Studies', which brings together research in fields as diverse as literature, philosophy, sociology and psychology, and that divides attempts at explaining the mechanisms of humour into broad

---

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Desproges, *Les Etrangers sont nuls* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p.14. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from French in this article are my own. For reasons of clarity, translations will precede the original text; the original text of translated quotations in the body of the article will be given in footnotes.

<sup>2</sup> Henriette Walter, *Honni soit qui mal y pense: L'incroyable histoire d'amour entre le français et l'anglais* (Paris: Laffont, 2001), p.136.

categories such as ‘superiority’, ‘incongruity’ or ‘relief’ theories.<sup>3</sup> The French word *humour* is used occasionally in this broad sense (particularly in contemporary popular usage, more tolerant of casual anglicisms than literary or scholarly French usage), however it has traditionally denoted a restricted subset of a conceptual category for which the usual umbrella terms are *le rire* (laughter) and *le comique*. The phrase *avoir de l’humour* implies not simply the capacity to laugh, but the reflexive capacity to laugh back at oneself, as in the English phrase ‘sense of humour’. In contrast to its older cognate *humeur* (-eur), used to refer to the ancient theory of bodily humours (and which in modern French usage denotes personal mood), *humour* (-our) is marked as an eighteenth-century borrowing from English. This has led to peculiarities in usage that, paradoxically, are unlikely to be recognised by most Anglophones: not only is *humour* often understood as a particular type of comic discourse restricted to texts that postdate the entry of the word into the French language, but it is also traditionally associated with quintessentially ‘English’ forms of behaviour. While an increasing number of French commentators have called this highly circumscribed view into question, it still retains a degree of critical and popular currency. As Georges Minois comments:

On sait par exemple les débats ubuesques auxquels se sont livrés certains spécialistes dénués d’humour à propos de l’usage du mot « humour ». A-t-on le droit de s’en servir à propos des Grecs? Cicéron a-t-il de l’humour? Ou faut-il réserver le mot et la chose, comme une appellation contrôlée, à l’Angleterre depuis le XVIIIe siècle?

(We can take as an example the ubuesque debates that certain specialists with no sense of humour have engaged in about the usage of the term ‘humour’. Do we have the right to use it to talk about the Greeks? Did Cicero have a sense of humour? Or must we restrict the word and the concept, like an appellation of origin, to England since the eighteenth century?)<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> These three groups represent probably the most widely accepted typology of humour theories in English. For one useful discussion with examples, see John Morreall, ed., *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987). Information on current interdisciplinary research in humour can be found at the websites of the International Society for Humor Studies ([www.hnu.edu/ishs/](http://www.hnu.edu/ishs/)) and the Australasian Humour Studies Network ([sydney.edu.au/humourstudies/](http://sydney.edu.au/humourstudies/)), among others.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Minois, *Histoire du rire et de la dérision* (Paris: Fayard, 2000), p.11–12.

Without attempting a direct answer to Minois' question, the present essay will explore the conceptual and historical differences between Francophone and Anglophone understandings of humour. This comparative approach suggests a means to circumvent the age-old trap of trying to define humour: as Paul Gifford notes, in a 1981 article that has remained a seminal work in English on the French understanding of humour, the notorious resistance of humour to definition means that it 'also has the interesting property of defining its would-be definers'.<sup>5</sup> While Gifford argues that successive attempts by French scholars to classify and define the imported concept of humour offer a basis for a 'reciprocal definition' of the French scholarly mind, this essay aims in a different direction, seeking to show how the more specific French understanding of humour offers a useful foil for thinking about the broader English concept, and particularly how the reflexive dimension associated with *humour* has particular applications for the study of self-conscious literature. Given the relative paucity of Anglophone scholarship on the topic, it will outline the debates surrounding the notion of *humour* in the French critical tradition, set against the historical development of humour as a concept in both languages. While the purported cultural and historical specificity of humour remains problematic to an Anglophone readership, the essay will end by considering how the reflexive dimension of French *humour* is echoed in other theories relating both to humour and to literary self-consciousness.

Written in English but from a French perspective, Louis Cazamian's classic *The Development of English Humor* sets out what is still an orthodox position in France: while, 'for many, no doubt, humor is simply what causes laughter', his introduction places humour firmly as a 'province' within the broader 'empire' of the comic.<sup>6</sup> Writing in the 1980s, Henri Baudin emphatically rejects what he perceives as a growing tendency to conflate the meanings of *l'humour* and *le comique*, arguing instead that the former should be understood as a specific type of the latter characterised by its relationship to affect.<sup>7</sup> Jean Emelina ascribes the

---

<sup>5</sup> Paul Gifford, 'Humour and the French Mind: Towards a Reciprocal Definition', *MLR* 76 (1981): 538.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Cazamian, *The Development of English Humor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1952), pp.4–5.

<sup>7</sup> Henri Baudin, 'Comique et affectivité : l'humour', *Cahiers du comique et de la communication* 3 (1985), 133–50. For a more recent and somewhat more nuanced position, see Henri Baudin's 'Deux modalités de métissage culturel en Europe au XXe siècle', *Humoresques* 18 (2003), 38–53.

difficulty of defining *l'humour* to 'a perpetual drift between a narrow and a broad sense, between a disposition of character particular to the speaker or receiver, and the comic "material" itself'.<sup>8</sup> However, both of these senses are much narrower than the usual understanding of humour in English, which Emelina places in rough equivalence to the culturally untranslatable French notion of *le comique*. Criticising the growing use of *humour* as a '*plus chic*' alternative to *le comique* to describe the general quality of phenomena like burlesque, satire, parody, caricature, dirty jokes and puns, Emelina casts his own view of the distinction in both linguistic and cultural terms: 'Is English, less rigorous and less Cartesian [than French], responsible for this assimilation of *humour* to the comic in general?'<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, a trend in French literary scholarship towards critical anthologies of humour suggests a degree of uncertainty about the term sufficient to require demonstration by example.<sup>10</sup> Anticipating Gifford, who ascribes the French propensity for rigidly Cartesian definitions of humour to 'a culture of highly rationalized intelligence [which] does not find in humour the most natural mode of perception or accommodation to the world', Escarpit contrasts the relative lack of anxiety about defining humour amongst Anglophone scholars with the practice of many French anglicists, 'for whom these speculations play roughly the same role as squaring the circle for mediaeval mathematicians'.<sup>11</sup> As Escarpit notes, French is unique amongst European languages in distinguishing between

---

<sup>8</sup> Jean Emelina, *Le comique : essai d'interprétation générale* (Liège: SEDES, 1996), p.126: 'La difficulté vient d'abord, dans l'acception française et contemporaine du terme, d'un *flottement perpétuel entre un sens étroit et un sens étendu*, entre une disposition d'esprit propre au locuteur ou au récepteur et la « matière » comique elle-même'. Emphasis in original.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Emelina, *Le comique*, pp.129–30: 'L'anglais, moins rigoriste et moins cartésien, est-il responsable de cette assimilation de l'humour au comique en général?'

<sup>10</sup> On the French tradition of critical anthologies of humorous literature, see the introduction to Daniel Grojnowski and Bernard Sarrazin's collection *L'esprit fumiste et les rires fin de siècle* (Paris: Corti, 1990), p.39. Other prominent examples include André Breton's *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (Paris: Pauvert, 1966), Albert Laffay's *Anthologie de l'humour et du nonsense* (Paris: Masson, 1970) and more recently Jacques Rouvière's *Dix siècles d'humour dans la littérature française* (Paris: Plon, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Paul Gifford, 'Humour and the French Mind', 538; Robert Escarpit, *L'humour*, p.8: 'On comprend pourquoi les Anglais n'aiment guère disserter sur l'humour, alors que c'est le péché mignon des anglicistes français pour qui ces spéculations jouent un peu le même rôle que la quadrature du cercle pour les mathématiciens du Moyen Age'.

*humour* and *humeur*, resulting in a tendency to historicise the concept of humour in parallel with historical developments in the usage of the word.<sup>12</sup> Cazamian argues that *humour* (as opposed to the generic, ahistorical *rire* or *comique*) can represent a valid category for analysing ancient or mediaeval literature, although this is tempered by his claim that ‘Modern humor hardly came into its own until the Renaissance; prior to that the mental complexity which it requires was not very much diffused’.<sup>13</sup> Arguing that ‘any investigation of humour should be grounded in Elizabethan culture’, Jonathan Pollock follows a French critical tradition that emphasises the evolution of ‘humour’ in early modern English, from its medical origins to something resembling modern usage.<sup>14</sup> Most often cited in this regard is a passage from the prologue to Ben Jonson’s 1600 play *Every Man Out of His Humor*:

So in every human body,  
 The choler, melancholy, phlegm, and blood,  
 By reason that they flow continually  
 In some one part, and are not continent,  
 Receive the name of humours. Now thus far  
 It may, by metaphor, apply itself  
 Unto the general disposition:  
 As when some one peculiar quality  
 Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw  
 All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,  
 In their confluents, all to run one way,  
 This may be truly be said to be a humour  
 But that a rook, by wearing a pyed feather,  
 The cable hat-band, or the three-piled ruff,  
 A yard of shoe-tye, or the Switzer’s knot  
 On his French garters, should affect a humour!  
 O, it is more than most ridiculous.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Robert Escarpit, *L’humour*, p.10.

<sup>13</sup> Louis Cazamian (1952: 4). Part of the contrast with the previous example can be attributed to the gap between the original publication of the first part of Cazamian’s monograph in 1930, and the second part in 1952.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathon Pollock (2001: 38): ‘toute investigation de la nature de l’humour doit s’ancrer dans la culture élisabéthaine’.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Jonson, *Every Man Out of his Humour*, ed. Helen Ostocitch (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), Prologue, ll.96–112.

These lines can, in effect, be read as mapping a conceptual transition from the four ‘humours’ (choleric, melancholic, phlegmatic and sanguine) that were thought in ancient medical theory to define temperament, to a more ‘metaphorical’ understanding in which an imbalance of humours serves to describe an involuntary and eccentric disposition of character which can, in turn, become a form of voluntary affectation. This shift reflects the evolution of the French term ‘*humeur*’ from its older medical sense to its more recent, psychological one. However, it is the last five lines, describing not an involuntary but a deliberate eccentricity, which correspond more accurately to the usual French understanding of *humour*. While the final description ‘more than most ridiculous’ suggests that such behaviour is to be laughed at, the shift from passive affliction to deliberate affectation implies a form of self-conscious laughter that knowingly anticipates its observers’ reactions.<sup>16</sup>

A similar movement can be observed in other English commentaries charting the coalescence of humour as a concept through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Conceived as a response to Thomas Hobbes’ account of laughter in his 1651 treatise *Human Nature* as

nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own selves formerly,

Shaftesbury’s 1709 *Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* argues that an essentially gentle and tolerant practice of ‘true raillery’ should replace aggressive ridicule as a mode of interaction and when necessary as a social corrective.<sup>17</sup> While Shaftesbury uses the term ‘humour’ to denote both an eccentric disposition and a particular form of discourse, or ‘airy way of

---

<sup>16</sup> On this point see Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), p.62, who notes that the term ‘ridiculous’ preserved a broader and more neutral connotation than its present sense until at least the eighteenth century.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Hobbes, ‘Human Nature’, in *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic: Human Nature and de Corpore Politico* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), Ch. 9, sect. 13, pp.54–55. On Shaftesbury’s recasting of Hobbesian laughter as a means to correct moral deformities, see Werner von Koppenfels, ‘Nothing Is Ridiculous but What Is Deformed: Laughter as a Test of Truth in Enlightenment Satire,’ in *A History of English Laughter*, ed. Manfred Pfister (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp.58–59: ‘Ridicule, seen in Shaftesbury’s way, is the consensus of a mature and tolerant society as to what constitutes social abnormality; and laughter is the means of exposing and thereby dismissing it’.

Conversation and Writing',<sup>18</sup> Corbyn Morris' 1744 *Essay towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire and Ridicule*, distinguishes the involuntary humorist, 'obstinately attached to sensible peculiar Oddities of his own genuine Growth, which appear in his Temper and Conduct' and the consciously laughing 'Man of Humour', whose role is to 'happily exhibit and expose the Oddities and Foibles of an Humourist, or of other Characters'.<sup>19</sup> This transition from essentially passive humorist to essentially active Man of Humour points forward to the modern English usage of 'humour'.

French commentators seem to have developed an interest in humour at about the same time as the word developed its modern sense in English. A letter by Voltaire, dated August 20, 1761, describes 'humour' as one of the many originally French words 'which have become outdated in France, or are even entirely forgotten, but which our neighbours the English make joyful use of'.<sup>20</sup> Voltaire explains that:

Ils ont un terme pour signifier cette plaisanterie, ce vrai comique, cette gaieté, cette urbanité, ces saillies qui échappent à un homme sans qu'il s'en doute ; et ils rendent cette idée par le mot *humeur*, *humour*, qu'ils prononcent *yumor* ; et ils croient qu'ils ont seuls cette humeur ; que les autres nations n'ont point de terme pour désigner ce caractère d'esprit. Cependant c'est un ancien mot de notre langue, employé en ce sens dans plusieurs comédies de Corneille.

([The English] have a term for this type of joking, this true form of the comic, this gaiety, this urbanity, these remarks which escape from a man without him realising it; and they express this idea by the word *humeur*, 'humour', which they pronounce *yumor*; and they believe that they are the only ones

---

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Ashley Cooper Shaftesbury (Earl of), *Sensus Communis: an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* (London, 1709; New York, Garland Publishing reprint, 1969), p.61.

<sup>19</sup> Corbyn Morris, *An Essay Towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire and Ridicule* (London, 1744; New York: Augustan Reprint Society, 1947), p.15.

<sup>20</sup> Voltaire, 'Lettre à M. L'Abbé d'Olivet, Chancelier de l'Académie Française', in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 9 (Paris, 1853), p.219: 'Je trouve, par exemple, plusieurs mots qui ont vieilli parmi nous, mais dont nos voisins les Anglais se servent heureusement'.



to possess this *humeur*; and that other nations have no word for expressing this type of wit. However it is an old word from our own language, which is used in this sense in several comedies by Corneille.<sup>21</sup>)

This passage offers an early example of the terminological confusion between the English term ‘humour’, and the related but distinct French doublet of *humeur* and *humour*. One oddity of Voltaire’s account is the suggestion that *humour* consists of ‘remarks which escape from a man without him realising it’: this corresponds to the connotations of *humeur* as represented in the character-based comedy of humours, but appears to contradict the sense of wit and gay urbanity presented elsewhere in the same passage. Minois suggests that Voltaire is mistaken in his characterisation of *humour*:<sup>22</sup> an alternative reading of Voltaire’s letter as implying ‘remarks which *appear to* escape from a man without him realising it’ would offer something closer to the modern French understanding of *humour* as related to (the perceived ‘English’ qualities of) whimsy and cultivated eccentricity. Arguing that Voltaire seems to be ‘clearly behind the times in thinking of humour as an involuntary and passive manifestation of natural dispositions’,<sup>23</sup> Gifford goes on to cite a letter by the Abbé Le Blanc written some twenty years earlier, which ‘already shows a developed awareness of the distinction between ‘humour’ and *humeur*’:

C’est quelque habitude, quelque passion ou quelque affectation particulière à une seule personne. Mais ce n’est pas là le seul sens que ce mot [...] ait dans leur langue ; il se dit aussi bien d’un ouvrage d’esprit [...] et signifie dans ce cas un certain tour de plaisanterie qui ne soit pas trop près du ton naturel et qui cependant n’y est pas totalement opposé.

([Humour] is a type of habit, passion or affectation which is particular to a given person. But this is not the only sense of the word in English; it can also refer to a witty work of literature, and in this case signifies a certain manner of joking that is not

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.219.

<sup>22</sup> Georges Minois, *Histoire du rire et de la dérision*, p.388: ‘Voltaire fait erreur sur la marchandise : l’humour n’est pas du tout la plaisanterie involontaire, bien au contraire’.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Gifford, ‘Humour and the French Mind’, 536.

too close to natural speech but at the same time is not totally removed from it.<sup>24</sup>)

As Gifford notes, Le Blanc offers a glimpse of ‘the humorist’s reflexive *sense* of humour [...] even though its importance is not fully elucidated’.<sup>25</sup> Importantly, this account also describes humour as a quality of works of literature as well as of people: Le Blanc’s description of a ‘manner of joking’ resembles a form of marked discourse, set apart but not totally removed from ‘natural speech’, that not only underpins typical Anglophone characterisations of humour as a form of incongruity but also many Francophone characterisations of *humour* as something more subtle than farce or slapstick.<sup>26</sup>

Roughly contemporary with Voltaire’s letter, Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* shows considerably more enthusiasm about the growing French acceptance of humour. *Humour* is given an entry separate to that for *humeur*, and is defined as a term of ethics (*morale*) which denotes both originality and eccentricity, and a distinctly seriocomic potential for practical effect:

les Anglois se servent de ce mot pour désigner une plaisanterie originale, peu commune & d’un tour singulier. Parmi les auteurs de cette nation, personne n’a eu de l’*humour*, ou de cette plaisanterie originale, à un plus haut point que Swift, qui, par le tour qu’il savoit donner à ses plaisanteries, produisit quelque fois, parmi ses compatriotes, des effets qu’on n’auroit jamais pû attendre des ouvrages les plus sérieux et les mieux raisonnés, *ridiculum acri*, &c.

(the English use this word to designate an original form of joking, which is not common and has a particular turn to it. Among the authors of this nation, nobody has possessed *humour*, or this original joking, to a greater degree than Swift, who, by the turn he was able to give to his jokes, was sometimes able to produce effects among his compatriots, which one could never

---

<sup>24</sup> Jean-Bernard Le Blanc, *Lettres d’un Français* (Le Hague, 1741), quoted in Paul Gifford, 536. My translation.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Gifford, 536, emphasis in original.

<sup>26</sup> For one discussion opposing the refinement of humour to the grossness of farce, see Henri Baudin, ‘Comique et affectivité : l’humour’, 133.

have expected from the most serious or reasoned works, *ridiculum acri*, etc.<sup>27)</sup>

Like Le Blanc's text, this account presents humour both as a personal quality which individuals may possess to varying degrees (corresponding roughly to the English expression 'sense of humour') and as a distinctive form of comic discourse, which is particularly associated with English culture. The entry goes on to cite Swift's *A Modest Proposal* as an archetypal example of literary humour: while its claim that Swift's text had a measurable effect on British policy in Ireland is unfounded, *A Modest Proposal* has remained a stock example of humour for French lexicographers, and occupies pride of place in André Breton's *Anthologie de l'humour noir*. However, the *Encyclopédie* also flags what has become a recurring tension between the French notions of *humour* and *comique*: originality and understatement are acknowledged as 'English' cultural traits, yet the unnamed contributor suggests that humour should, by rights, be 'better suited to the light-hearted spirit of the French, than to the serious and reasonable turn of mind of the English'.<sup>28</sup>

Something closer to the modern French usage of *humour* appears in Madame de Staël's short essay "De la plaisanterie anglaise" (On English joking: 1800), in which lugubrious English humour is opposed to the more exuberantly French 'true spirit of gaiety'.<sup>29</sup> De Staël claims that

Il existe, cependant, une sorte de gaîté dans quelques écrits anglais, qui a tous les caractères de l'originalité et du naturel. La langue anglaise a créé un mot, *humour*, pour exprimer cette gaîté qui est une disposition du sang presque autant que de l'esprit ; elle tient à la nature du climat et aux moeurs nationales ; elle

---

<sup>27</sup> *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (Neuchâtel: 1751–72; reprint, Paris and New York: Pergamon Press, 1969), s.v. The full Latin tag (*ridiculum acri fortius et melius magnas plerumque secat res*, from Horace, *Satires*, Book 1, Ch. 10, l.14) can be translated as 'A joke often decides weighty matters better and more forcibly than can bitterness'.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*: 'même en général cette sorte de plaisanterie paroît plus propre au génie léger et folâtre du François, qu'à la tournure d'esprit, sérieuse et raisonnée, des Anglois'.

<sup>29</sup> Madame de Staël, 'De la plaisanterie anglaise', in *De la littérature, considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (Paris: Garnier, 1998), p.206: 'vrai génie de gaîté'.

seroit tout-à-fait inimitable là où les mêmes causes ne développeroient pas. Quelques écrits de Fielding et de Swift, Peregrin Pickle, Roderick Random, mais sur-tout les ouvrages de Sterne, donnent l'idée complète du genre appelé *humour*.

(There exists, however, a sort of gaiety in some English writing, which displays every appearance of being original and natural. The English language has created a word, *humour*, to express this gaiety which is a disposition of blood as much as it is of spirit [*esprit*, potentially also signifying 'wit']; it derives from the nature of the climate and from the nation's manners; it would be impossible to imitate in the absence of the same causes. Some of Fielding's and Swift's writings, *Peregrine Pickle*, *Roderick Random*, but especially the works of Sterne give a complete idea of the genre termed *humour*.<sup>30</sup>)

This passage reiterates the view of humour as an English national characteristic, whether deliberate or otherwise, but also highlights a connection with the eighteenth-century tradition of the self-conscious novel, represented to a greater or lesser extent by 'humorists' like Fielding, Swift, Smollett and Sterne. Significantly, the essay concludes with a near quotation from the blackly humorous gravediggers' scene in Act V of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: 'The English depict odd characters with a great deal of talent, since they have many of them in their country'.<sup>31</sup> Gifford credits de Staël with providing 'albeit embryonically and in some disorder, a veritable theory of English humour ... as a mode uniting natural disposition and conscious invention', which involves (among other characteristics) an 'essential link with oddity of character as cherished by a nation uniquely tolerant of eccentrics'.<sup>32</sup> Gifford's claim that this equates to a 'substantial and penetrating account of humour as it had come to be understood in England' offers pause for thought: while de Staël is writing in French for a French audience, her position as an astute external observer of English culture allows an acute sense of the distinctiveness of humour that has influenced French commentators in her wake.

For over a century following de Staël's essay, French lexicographers and encyclopaedists tended to emphasise the status of *humour* as an

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.210.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.211: 'Ce que les Anglais peignent avec un grand talent, ce sont les caractères bizarres, parce qu'il en existe beaucoup parmi eux'.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Gifford, 'Humour and the French Mind', 537.

English word and concept. Pierre Larousse's encyclopaedic *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIXe siècle* (1866–70) includes an entry for *humour*, identified as 'an English word formed from the Latin root *humor*, [meaning] *humeur*'.<sup>33</sup> Humour is defined as a 'turn of wit which is most original and more or less particular to the English; and it is this quality which gives many of their writers the greater part of their savour'.<sup>34</sup> Expressing both a lexicographer's and an encyclopaedist's frustration at the problem of defining humour, Larousse goes on in the same entry to ask whether:

Quand nous aurons dit que l'humour est tantôt une gaieté sérieuse et flegmatique, tantôt une raillerie pleine d'amertume, mais cachée sous la forme du panégyrique, tantôt une mélancolie qui tourne au sourire ironique, aurons-nous bien défini ce charme qui s'attache à la lecture de Sterne, de Steele, de Macaulay, de Charles Lamb, de Butler et de Dickens ? Pas le moins du monde, et il faudra encore les lire pour avoir une idée.

(After saying that humour is sometimes a serious and phlegmatic form of gaiety, sometimes a bitter raillery dissimulated in the form of a panegyric, sometimes a form of melancholy turning on an ironic smile, will we have properly defined the charm of reading Sterne, Steele, Macaulay, Charles Lamb, Butler and Dickens? Not in the least, and we will still need to read them to get an idea.)

The list of examples cited is fairly typical for the period: Sterne has remained (along with Swift) a mainstay of French definitions of humour since the eighteenth century, while the focus on nineteenth-century authors can be understood both as contemporary reference and as a reflection of a broader French enthusiasm for English literature at the time Larousse's dictionary was compiled. Anticipating Gifford's argument that understanding the French conception of humour may lead to an understanding of the French scholarly mind, this passage also suggests – in a manner that seems to demonstrate the concept under consideration – that

---

<sup>33</sup> *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*, ed. Pierre Larousse (Paris: Administration du Grand Dictionnaire Universel, 1873), s.v.: '(u-mour – mot angl. formé du lat. *humor*, *humeur*)'.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*: '*L'humour* est une tournure d'esprit très-originale et à peu près particulière aux Anglais ; c'est cette qualité qui donne presque toute leur saveur à un grand nombre de leurs écrivains'.

the key to the otherwise unsolvable problem of defining humour might be found in an understanding of the English, and vice versa.

Contemporary with Larousse, the influential dictionary of Emile Littré (1863–77) defines *humour* as an ‘English word which signifies a gaiety of imagination or comic verve’. Littré first gives an approximation of the English pronunciation (*iou-meur*), but notes that ‘some people pronounce it in the French manner, *u-mour*’.<sup>35</sup> Citing the letter by Voltaire quoted above as well as Corneille’s 1645 comedy *La suite du menteur*, Littré highlights the word’s parentage with the older term *humeur*, which he claims ‘used to be used in this sense and has now come back into use’.<sup>36</sup> The much longer entry for *humeur* gives as its eighth and final sense a ‘penchant for joking or facetious originality, more or less in the sense of the English “humour”, which is itself a borrowing from French’.<sup>37</sup> Compared with Larousse’s more modern usage, Littré’s attempt to draw the notion of *humour* back towards the earlier sense of *humeur* seems a retrograde step that has drawn criticism as an exercise in linguistic nationalism and imaginative etymology: as Jean-Jacques Mayoux dryly observes, ‘the quotations from Corneille invoked by Littré certainly do not have the sense he gives them’.<sup>38</sup>

Reflecting both the foreign origins of the word and the linguistic conservatism of the French Academy, the term *humour* did not appear in the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française* until its most recent complete edition, published in 1932–35. This edition defines *humour* as:

Mot emprunté de l’anglais. Forme d’ironie à la fois plaisante et sérieuse, sentimentale et satirique, qui paraît appartenir particulièrement à l’esprit anglais.

---

<sup>35</sup> *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, ed. Emile Littré (Paris: Hachette, 1961), s.v.: ‘Mot anglais qui signifie gaieté d’imagination, veine comique’; ‘(*iou-meur*; quelques-uns le prononcent à la française : *u-mour*)’.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, s.v. *humour*: ‘pris anciennement en ce sens et revenu aujourd’hui en usage’.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, s.v. *humeur*: ‘Penchant à la plaisanterie, originalité facétieuse, à peu près dans le sens de l’anglais *humour* (voy. ce mot), qui est d’ailleurs un emprunt fait à la langue française’.

<sup>38</sup> Jean-Jacques Mayoux, ‘L’humour anglais’, *Critique* 67 (1952), 1011: ‘Les citations de Corneille invoquées par Littré n’ont certainement pas le sens qu’il leur donne’.

(Word borrowed from English. A form of irony that is both playful and serious, sentimental and satirical, which seems to belong particularly to the English spirit.<sup>39</sup>)

Again, this definition emphasises the ‘English’ identity of both the word humour and the object to which it refers. The characterisation of humour as a ‘form of irony’ – and thus as a sub-subcategory of *le comique* – highlights the relatively narrow scope of the French term. The entry for *humorisme* cites Swift and Sterne as ‘celebrated English humorists’. Again, this choice of examples demonstrates a particular focus on English literature in French definitions of humour, while the choice of authors also hints at an association with literary self-consciousness.

The currently incomplete ninth edition of the *Dictionnaire* offers a definition somewhat closer to that of Littré. *Humour* is described as an eighteenth-century borrowing from the English term ‘humour’, itself ultimately borrowed from the old French *humeur*, and defined as an ‘Original form of wit, simultaneously joking and serious, which tends to highlight, with detachment but without bitterness, the ridiculous, absurd or unexpected aspects of reality’.<sup>40</sup> While the Academy’s definition does not directly describe humour as a specifically English concept, the phrase ‘*L’humour britannique*’ is given as the first of a list of examples of suggested uses. In a further shift, the definition of *humoriste* replaces the examples of Swift and Sterne with those of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French humorists Alphonse Allais and Tristan Bernard, suggesting a late canonisation of indigenous French literary humour. However, the cultural position of these *humoristes* is subject to some debate: while Allais and Bernard belong to a broadly Anglophile tradition that is linked to another linguistic and conceptual borrowing, *le nonsense*,

---

<sup>39</sup> *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*, 1932–25 ed., s.v. On the late entry of *humour* into the dictionary, see Robert Escarpit, *L’humour*, pp.66–67.

<sup>40</sup> *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*, 9th ed., s.v. Entry originally published in section ‘*homérique à idyllique*’ in the French *Journal Officiel* no. 13 (1997); available online at [www.academie-francaise.fr/dictionnaire/](http://www.academie-francaise.fr/dictionnaire/) (accessed 2 March, 2011):

HUMOUR n. m. XVIIIe siècle, *houmour*. Emprunté de l’anglais *humour*, de même sens, lui-même emprunté de l’ancien français *humeur*, au sens de ‘penchant à la plaisanterie, originalité facétieuse’.

Forme originale d’esprit, à la fois plaisante et sérieuse, qui s’attache à souligner, avec détachement mais sans amertume, les aspects ridicules, absurdes ou insolites de la réalité.

Pollock argues that the limited importance of these writers in the canons of French literary history serves to demonstrate the relatively marginal position of humour in indigenous French culture.<sup>41</sup>

Amongst the most influential theoretical works on laughter in both French and English, Henri Bergson's *Le rire* (1900) serves to highlight the cultural and linguistic gap between French and English humour scholarship. The title literally translates as 'laughter'; and the book begins by arguing for a shift away from abstract definitions of *le comique* (along the lines of 'intellectual contrast' or 'absurdity in feeling') towards a more concrete examination of 'why the comic makes us laugh'.<sup>42</sup> Among the most influential aspects of Bergson's work is his focus on the 'social function' of laughter, although William Howarth, one of Bergson's more sympathetic recent Anglophone critics, has slightly narrowed this view, suggesting that *Le rire* is at its most valuable as an analysis of 'that form of comic drama which requires a response of laughter from its spectator or reader'.<sup>43</sup> Bergson's often-quoted formulation of laughter as caused by 'the mechanical encrusted on the living' can be thought of in terms of an incongruity between mechanical or unadaptable actions – such as a man slipping on a banana skin – and the '*élan vital*' which characterises Bergson's vitalist understanding of conscious, living beings.<sup>44</sup> Bergson's theory also implies a type of social corrective directed against mechanical or otherwise eccentric behaviour; and his argument that 'inflexibility is [the source of] the comic, and laughter its punishment' points to a view of laughter as an expression of superiority in the tradition of Thomas

---

<sup>41</sup> See Jonathon Pollock, *Qu'est-ce que l'humour*, pp.91–93

<sup>42</sup> Henri Bergson, *Le rire* (1900; Paris: PUF, 1962), p.6: 'De là ces définitions qui tendent à faire du comique une relation abstraite aperçue par l'esprit entre des idées, 'contraste intellectuel', 'absurdité sensible', etc., définitions qui, même si elles convenaient réellement à toutes les formes du comique, n'expliqueraient pas le moins du monde pourquoi le comique nous fait rire'.

<sup>43</sup> William D. Howarth, 'Bergson Revisited: *Le Rire* a Hundred Years On', in *French Humour*, ed. John Parkin (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999), p.139.

<sup>44</sup> Henri Bergson, *Le rire*, p.29: 'Du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant'. Many scholars have argued that Bergson's formulation is most convincing when applied to 'mechanical' comic performers like Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin: for recent discussions, see Noël Carroll, *Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humor, and Bodily Coping* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p.45–48, and Lisa Trahair, *The Comedy of Philosophy: Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick* (Albany, SUNY Press, 2007), p.125–45.



Hobbes.<sup>45</sup> Echoing Baudelaire's 1855 essay 'On the essence of laughter', Bergson suggests that a 'comical character is generally comical in the exact measure that he lacks self-knowledge'.<sup>46</sup> This effectively reinforces the distinction between the mechanical unconsciousness befitting an object of derision and the more self-consciously whimsical quality usually associated with *humour*, leading Howarth to argue that the view of laughter set out in *Le rire* is mainly concerned with the externally directed tendencies of the French *comique* (as encapsulated in the English phrase 'laughing at') at the expense of the gentler, more sentimental laughter of British *humour*.<sup>47</sup>

The second chapter of *Le rire* offers a brief discussion of *humour*, classified, along with its close conceptual relative irony, as a form of satire. Bergson describes the characteristic movement of *humour* as 'minutely and meticulously describing things as they are, while pretending to believe that that is how they should be'; irony involves describing things as they should be, while pretending to believe that that is how they are.<sup>48</sup> In this typology, the combination of a simulated belief (that Irish overpopulation represents a culinary and economic opportunity, and that the proponent of this scheme is essentially civic-minded) with a representational style rooted in realist detail identifies Swift's *A Modest Proposal* as an example of *humour*.<sup>49</sup> Bergson's distinction between *humour* and irony has recently been revisited by Gérard Genette, who offers the contrasting examples of an ironic statement, 'I can see you're not oppressing the natives', and a humorous statement 'you're perfectly right to oppress the natives'.<sup>50</sup> Genette suggests that irony involves a 'discourse which is obviously, and thus insolently, untrue', and thus a degree of contention directed towards the reader or listener, while *humour* operates on the more subtle level of

---

<sup>45</sup> Henri Bergson, *Le rire*, p.16: 'Cette raideur est le comique, le rire en est le châtement'.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13: 'un personnage est généralement comique dans l'exacte mesure où il s'ignore lui-même'.

<sup>47</sup> William Howarth, 'Un étranger devant le comique français', *Le français dans le monde* 151 (1980): 31.

<sup>48</sup> Henri Bergson, *Le rire*, p.97: 'Tantôt [...] on décrira minutieusement et méticuleusement ce qui est, en affectant de croire que c'est bien là que les choses devraient être : ainsi procède souvent l'*humour*'.

<sup>49</sup> For a useful commentary, see Robert Phiddian, 'Have You Eaten Yet? The Reader in *A Modest Proposal*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 36, no.3 (1996), 603–21.

<sup>50</sup> Gérard Genette, 'Morts de rire', in *Figures V* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), p.196.

false meta-statements about attitudes towards reality.<sup>51</sup> Genette argues that this type of humour tends ‘towards forms that are less and less satirical and more and more playful, of which the typical example is what in English is termed *nonsense*’.<sup>52</sup> However, this analysis fits less well with the overriding moralism of *Le rire*: as Bergson himself implies, the concluding argument of his discussion of humour, that ‘the humorist is a moralist disguised as a scientist, something like an anatomist who only dissects bodies in order to disgust us’, is predicated on the classification of humour as a subset of satire.<sup>53</sup> Howarth argues that Bergson’s apparent failure to distinguish between corrective and more generous forms of laughter ‘does help to emphasise the precise nature of [his] subject, namely the aesthetics of a certain type of French dramatic comedy represented above all by Molière and his successors’.<sup>54</sup> However, this has the effect of limiting the scope of Bergson’s argument to a specific social and literary context in which humour, and especially the purportedly ‘English’ phenomenon of *humour*, play only a minor part. Parkin argues that the comic tradition of Molière represents ‘safer ground’ for Bergson’s theory than his attempts to read corrective laughter into ‘the more often ambiguous humour of Renaissance texts like Rabelais and Cervantes’.<sup>55</sup> This is arguably even more true of later works in the same tradition such as Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759–69), in which poker-faced self-mockery and delight in eccentricity seem to highlight the ways in which Bergson’s prescriptive account of humour recreates the same automatisms identified elsewhere in *Le rire* as a source of ridicule.<sup>56</sup> As Sterne’s narrator suggests, in what can

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.196: ‘l’ironie [...] persifle l’interlocuteur en lui adressant (ou à l’adversaire en lui consacrant) un discours manifestement, et donc insolemment, contraire à la vérité’.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.196: ‘Le cas de l’humour est plus subtil [et] peut s’évader progressivement vers des formes de moins en moins ‘satiriques’ et de plus en plus *ludiques*, dont le cas typique est ce que l’anglais appelle *nonsense*’.

<sup>53</sup> Henri Bergson, *Le rire*, p.99: ‘L’humoriste est ici un moraliste qui se déguise en savant, quelque chose comme un anatomiste qui ne ferait de la dissection que pour nous déguster’.

<sup>54</sup> William Howarth, ‘Bergson revisited’, p.154.

<sup>55</sup> John Parkin, *Humour Theorists of the Twentieth Century* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellon Press, 1997), p.18. Parkin goes on to argue that Molière’s comedy is itself considerably more complex than Bergson’s analysis seems to allow.

<sup>56</sup> This position has been developed by a number of mainly Anglophone scholars including Parkin: ‘Bergson’s declared aim is to determine with a scientific rigour and precision the production processes of humour, which declaration, redolent of a nineteenth-century positivism which he in fact rejected, begs the question that such

be read both as an homage to the older theory of humours and as an account of the benefits of gentle, non-aggressive humour:

True *Shandeism*, think what you will against it, opens the heart and lungs, and like all those affections which partake of its nature, it forces the blood and other vital fluids of the body to run freely through its channels, and makes the wheel of life run long and cheerfully round.<sup>57</sup>

*Tristram Shandy* has been cited by numerous French commentators as evidence of a nexus between *humour* (encapsulating the qualities of whimsy and self-conscious eccentricity, and usually excluding the notion of comic aggression) and Englishness: Cazamian's 1906 essay on the impossibility of defining humour sums up the book as representing 'a temperament, a sensibility, a type of intelligence, a philosophy, that we will characterise, for want of a better word, by the word *humour*'.<sup>58</sup> In a later essay, Cazamian characterises *l'humour anglais* less as a method of discourse than as a national mindset (*esprit*), and goes on to identify the self-conscious, self-deprecating sense of humour with a non-Cartesian, culturally non-French mindset:

C'est un attribut de l'humoriste, que la faculté de rire de soi. La souplesse, le détachement que suppose la victoire du jugement sur l'amour-propre, est un aspect de cette liberté intellectuelle qui est, nous le verrons, le climat nécessaire de l'humour.

(The faculty of laughing at oneself is an attribute of the humorist. The flexibility and detachment implied in the victory of judgement over self-love is an aspect of this intellectual liberty which, we will see, is a necessary condition for humour.<sup>59</sup>)

---

an aim is achievable in the first place: others have seen Bergson as closer than he realised to the positivists he attacked' (*Humour theorists*, p.8).

<sup>57</sup> Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (London: Penguin, 2003): Book IV, Ch. 32, p.303.

<sup>58</sup> Louis Cazamian, 'Pourquoi nous ne pouvons définir l'humour', *Revue Germanique* 2 (1906), 608: 'Analysons *Tristram Shandy* ; c'est un tempérament, une sensibilité, une intelligence, une philosophie, que nous y caractérisons, faute de mieux, par le mot « humour »'.

<sup>59</sup> Louis Cazamian, *L'humour anglais* (Paris: Didier, 1942), p.16.

This statement recalls the comments of earlier writers like de Staël and the Encyclopaedists on English social and intellectual freedom: as Mayoux remarks, ‘England is populated in the eyes of the French by people proud of their own originality’.<sup>60</sup> In the same vein, Cazamian remarks that the French are often perceived to lack a true sense of humour, since the ‘conspicuous’ nature of French ‘wit, drollery, satire and all the brilliant manners of raising a laugh’ do not sit easily with a talent for whimsical, self-deprecating understatement.<sup>61</sup> Escarpit’s short monograph, first published in 1960 but still in wide circulation in France, largely concurs with these analyses, and concludes that *humour* can best be understood as a self-conscious existential attitude or ‘*art d’exister*’.<sup>62</sup> Like Cazamian, Escarpit notes the drift in meaning of the English term from its medical origins, as charted through writers like Jonson, Morris and Shaftesbury, but he also offers a contemporary definition of the ‘*sense of humour*’ (left untranslated in the French text) as being:

avant tout, la conscience de son propre personnage. C’est donc une expression qui est sémantiquement très voisine de cet autre maître-mot de l’âme anglaise : *self-consciousness*.... En réalité, c’est la conscience de soi, ou plus exactement cette conscience particulièrement aiguë de soi qu’on a sous le regard des autres, et qui pourrait passer pour de la timidité, alors qu’en réalité elle est une pudeur.

(above all, the consciousness of one’s own character. It is thus an expression which is semantically very close to that other watchword of the English soul: *self-consciousness*.... In reality, it is the consciousness of one’s own self, or more accurately that particularly acute consciousness of oneself that one possesses when in the view of others, and which could pass for shyness, whereas in reality it is a form of modesty.<sup>63</sup>)

This account draws on both common senses of the English term ‘self-consciousness’ (left untranslated in Escarpit’s text, though not in common

---

<sup>60</sup> Jean-Jacques Mayoux, *L’humour et l’absurde : Attitudes anglo-saxonnes, attitudes françaises* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p.5: ‘l’Angleterre se peuple sous nos yeux d’originaux fiers de l’être’.

<sup>61</sup> Louis Cazamian, *The Development of English Humor*, pp.21–22; for a more recent discussion along similar lines, see Jean Emelina, *Le comique*, pp.126–27.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Escarpit, *L’humour*, pp.126–27.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.26–27.

use in France), associating humour both with the reflexive capacity to conceptualise the self, and with the concern about potential embarrassment that is a consequence of the extra-subjective replication of the public gaze. As Albert Laffay suggests, commenting on Escarpit's position, the humourist

joue volontairement de son personnage; il accentue le saugrenu ... se donne volontairement en ridicule précisément pour ne pas l'être; il se compose et se *représente* pour lui-même et pour autrui.

(voluntarily plays on his character; he accentuates the absurd ... makes himself appear ridiculous precisely in order to avoid being so; he invents and *represents* himself both for his own sake and for others.<sup>64</sup>)

Laffay's formulation here offers an interesting parallel with Sigmund Freud's 1927 essay 'On Humour', which represents humour through the image of the superego stepping outside the rest of the ego in order to laugh back at, and therefore put into perspective, its anxieties or misfortunes. In Freud's terms, humour represents a case in which 'The ego [...] insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure'.<sup>65</sup> The conception of humour in terms of a self-conscious being stepping outside its own subjectivity offers an apt parallel with the implied subjectivity of self-conscious literary texts, which tend to display both an acute awareness of their status as textual objects, and a marked concern for the process of reader reception. Mavrocordato characterises the humorist as a figure who 'takes pleasure in smashing the famous fourth wall, this fictitious and transparent divide that artists erect between the participants in a drama and the audience', citing a sentence from *Tristram Shandy* that incongruously describes the time elapsed within the narrator's story in terms of the time required for an implied external reader to read it: 'It is about an hour and a half's tolerable good reading since my uncle Toby rang the bell'.<sup>66</sup> With its

---

<sup>64</sup> Albert Laffay, *L'anatomie de l'humour et du nonsense*, p.46.

<sup>65</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'On Humour', trans. James Strachey, in *Art and Literature*, The Pelican Freud Library Vol. 14 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p.429.

<sup>66</sup> Alexandre Mavrocordato, *L'humour en Angleterre: du moyen âge au début de l'ère classique* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1967), pp.62–63: 'l'humoriste [...] s'amuse à crever le fameux quatrième mur, cette cloison fictive et transparente que

plethora of typographical games and reader-figures incorporated into the narrative, *Tristram Shandy* offers a ready example of self-conscious 'English' humour as perceived by a long tradition of French scholarship.

While the role of self-consciousness is more obvious in the French conception of *humour* than in the much broader Anglophone understanding of humour, theorists of reflexivity in both languages have tended to highlight the importance of humour, play and related concepts to the texts they describe. Genette's formalist account of hypertextuality sets out a complex scheme of relations between pastiche, parody, satire, irony, play, humour and other concepts, while he also describes the figure of metalepsis, defined as the 'deliberate transgression of a narrative frame', as producing results that are either humorous or fantastical.<sup>67</sup> While such transgressions can take the relatively mild form of a narrative intrusion, there is more obvious humour to be found in more extreme cases, as when the narrator of *Tristram Shandy* requests that his reader shut the door or help Mr. Shandy to bed, or when the narrator of Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste et son maître* – a novel that ends by breaking its narrative sequence entirely in order to flag its close intertextual relationship with Sterne's novel – asks 'What would stop me from *marrying off* the Master and *turning him into a cuckold*?'<sup>68</sup> Robert Alter's classic work on the self-conscious novel describes the genre as one that 'expresses its seriousness through playfulness', while more recent Anglophone theorists of what has come to be termed 'metafiction' have highlighted its connections with parody, irony and other concepts that can be classified broadly within the Anglophone understanding of humour.<sup>69</sup> While scholars like Rose and

---

les artistes dressent entre le public et les acteurs du drame'. Cf. *Tristram Shandy*, Book II, Ch.8, p.92.

<sup>67</sup> For Gérard Genette's account of hypertextuality, see *Palimpsestes : la littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), especially pp.7–96. Genette has revisited his formulation of metalepsis as a 'transgression délibérée d'un seuil d'enlèvement' in various works, including 'Discours du récit', in *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp.239–464, *Nouveau discours du récit* (Paris, Seuil, 1983), pp.58–59, and more recently *Métalepse : de la figure à la fiction* (Paris : Seuil, 2004), pp.14–25.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in 'Discours du récit', p.244: 'Qu'est-ce qui m'empêcherait de *marier* le Maître et de le *faire cocu* ?' Emphasis in Genette's text.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p.ix. This connection can be observed in instructive titles such as Susan Stewart's *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), Margaret Rose's *Parody//Metafiction* (London: Croom Helm, 1979) and *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-Modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993)

Stewart have tended to emphasise the transcultural and transhistorical aspects of parody and nonsense, respectively, others, like Hutcheon, have tended to restrict the nexus between parody and metafiction to ‘what we seem determined to call postmodernism’.<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, Hutcheon’s claims that ‘there are probably no transhistorical definitions of parody possible’ and that ‘it is modern parodic usage that is forcing us to decide what it is that we shall call parody today’ suggest a position not far removed from the historicising tendency in French scholarship on humour.<sup>71</sup> In a similar manner, Hutcheon’s description of irony, as ‘this strange mode of discourse, when you say something you don’t actually mean and expect people to understand not only what you do mean, but also your attitude towards it’, seems to emphasise the relationship between irony and reflexivity at the same time as distancing irony from humour.<sup>72</sup> This echoes the much earlier position of Vladimir Jankélévitch, who argues that

while misanthropic irony retains a polemical attitude towards people, humour displays compassion for the object of ridicule: it is secretly complicit with the ridiculous person and shares an attitude of connivance with him.<sup>73</sup>

In terms of Hutcheon’s interest in theorising postmodernity, often associated with a death of affect, it is tempting to speculate on whether humour may operate as more of a historicised concept than many Anglophone commentators would be likely to recognise.

As the preceding discussion has shown, trying to impose a coherent terminological hierarchy on humour, *humour* and other related concepts is a hazardous exercise, in which even relatively specific associations, such as

---

and Linda Hutcheon’s *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (London: Meuthen, 1984) and *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (London: Meuthen, 1985). For a useful recent synthesis from a French perspective, see Daniel Sangsue, *La relation parodique* (Paris: Corti, 2007), pp.75–90.

<sup>70</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, p.xi.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10. For commentary, see Daniel Sangsue, *La relation parodique*, pp.84–85.

<sup>72</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.2.

<sup>73</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L’Ironie* (Paris: Flammarion, 1964), p.171: ‘Alors que l’ironie misanthrope garde par rapport aux hommes l’attitude polémique, l’humour compatit avec la chose plaisantée; il est secrètement complice du ridicule, se sent de connivance avec lui’.

between *humour*, reflexivity and eccentricity, can prove problematic. Introducing his study of a group of early nineteenth-century French authors writing loosely in the wake of Sterne, Daniel Sangsue explains his choice of ‘*excentrique*’ over ‘*humoristique*’ as an analytical category:

C’est que cette catégorie a le désavantage de rester incertaine. Hormis que le mot ‘*humour*’ est une invention du dix-huitième siècle, comment le ‘roman humoristique’ se distingue-t-il du ‘roman comique’, à la tradition duquel on peut rattacher Fielding, Smollett et Sterne?

(It is because the latter category presents the problem of being uncertain. Other than the fact that the word ‘*humour*’ is an eighteenth-century invention, how can the ‘humorous novel’ be distinguished from the ‘comic novel’, a tradition to which we can attach Fielding, Smollett and Sterne?<sup>74</sup>)

Sangsue acknowledges ‘*excentricité*’ as another borrowing from English, but argues that its slightly later entry into the French language, combined with its relative obscurity as a critical term, allow it to be used in a more specific context than the related term *humour*.<sup>75</sup> While French usage tends to historicise concepts far more than English usage, the slippery nature of *humour* makes this process difficult. In practice, *humour* overlaps with the more general term *le comique* as well as with the French literary category of the ‘parodic novel’ that is also often associated with the eighteenth-century tradition of Sterne and Diderot: later in the same work, Sangsue uses these writers as examples in his catalogue of ‘parodic narrative figures’, which amounts to a typology of self-conscious literary techniques.<sup>76</sup> A similar critical debate centres on the vogue for *humour* amongst late nineteenth-century French writers, which Grojnowski and Sarrazin characterise as a specifically modern and affective form of laughter.<sup>77</sup> Again, however, this argument highlights the confusion between

---

<sup>74</sup> Daniel Sangsue, *Le récit excentrique : Gautier, de Maistre, Nerval, Nodier* (Paris : Corti, 1987), p.39.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.36–39.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.83–129; for commentary, see Pierre Jourde, *Empailler le toréador: l’incongru dans la littérature française de Charles Noder à Eric Chevillard* (Paris: Corti, 1999), pp.71–72.

<sup>77</sup> Daniel Grojnowski and Bernard Sarrazin, *L’esprit fumiste et les rires fin de siècle*, pp.34–35. See also Daniel Grojnowski, *Aux commencements du rire moderne : l’esprit fumiste* (Paris: Corti, 1997), pp.183–85.



the functional or affective properties of humour and its association with particular literary contexts: as Emelina comments, Grojnowski and Sarrazin's category of '*l'humour 1900*' could as easily be termed '*le comique 1900*', since the most salient common feature across the broad range of texts and authors they discuss is not a single, identifiable form of laughter but a historical moment.<sup>78</sup> In one sense, the concept of incongruity, used by many Anglophone theorists to describe the mechanisms of humour, offers a suitably reflexive basis for the classification of types of humour: in a response to Sangsue's discussion of eccentricity and humour, Pierre Jourde offers a catalogue of humorous and non-humorous forms of incongruity while acknowledging the 'simultaneously essential and absurd nature of such a typology'.<sup>79</sup> With a wryly self-conscious wink at the evolving and unstable French understanding of humour, Jourde also goes on to note that it 'used to denote a very particular form of the comic, but has come to signify something very general'.<sup>80</sup>

Will Noonan received his PhD, on the interactions between humour and reflexivity in French and English literature, in early 2011. His current research focuses on the areas of humour, French-English relations, ludic and seriocomic cultural movements and on the literary history of the bicycle. He currently teaches in the Department of English at the Université de Paris III - Sorbonne Nouvelle.

---

<sup>78</sup> Jean Emelina, *Le comique*, p.128.

<sup>79</sup> Pierre Jourde, *Empailler le toréador*, p.10: 'caractère à la fois indispensable et absurde de cette typologie'.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18: 'L'humour, qui désignait une forme du comique très particulière, a fini par prendre une valeur très générale'.