



## God's Clown

*Márton Bársony*

Doctoral School of Literary Studies, Comparative Literary Studies  
Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

### Abstract

There was a time when priests started cracking jokes, telling anecdotes, speaking in an obscene manner to entertain their audience and raise a laugh. Their indecent buffooneries transformed Easter celebrations into carnivals – some of which took on quite extreme shapes. Later, the Church persecuted those involved in this practice, but traces of it still remain in Eastern Orthodox traditions. We cannot find a single link to *risus paschalis* in the Scriptures, nor in the writings of the Apostles, nor even a clue in the religious practices of the first Christian generations. We laugh at the transgression of the dying and rising Christ in the same way as we laugh at the clown thrown on the ground and jumping up again. Still, the cultural history of the clown rituals is an even more contested issue. What does Christ have to do with this tradition? What epistemological qualities bind them together?

**Keywords:** Jesus Christ, clown, laughter, *risus paschalis* – Easter laughter, mock kingdom, Mikhail Bakhtin, Maurice Lever, Ákos Szilágyi, Enid Welsford, Easter holidays, Passion

**Słowa kluczowe:** Jezus Chrystus, klaun, śmiech, *risus paschalis* – śmiech wielkanocny, fałszywe królestwo, Michał Bachtin, Maurice Lever, Ákos Szilágyi, Enid Welsford, Święta Wielkanocne, Pasja

I would like to start with some general questions. Is there a place for humour in the world of religion and faith? Is there any academic position in religious studies that highlights the importance of humour and pinpoints the significance of laughter in matters of piety? Of course, there are massive differences between the practices of various cultures and ages, but are there any similarities in terms of function and impact? It is usually considered to be, to say the least, “impolite” when somebody caricatures the conceptual hierarchy of a religion and its objects of faith. In fact, it is highly offensive. But what happens if the joke comes from within, rooted deep within the concept of religion? There are some books written about different religious

traditions approaching laughter and religious laughter. I would like here to discuss just one of them, concerning the old traditions of the Easter holidays of Christian churches. Some strange customs are connected to this usually depressing feast, which mediates cheer and serenity. Sometimes even loud laughter can be heard – for example in the Orthodox Church.<sup>1</sup> Joy is felt – as they say – because of the resurrection of Christ, although triggered by very rough acts. But when does the laughter become a murderous guffaw, when do jokes become blasphemy? Is there a way to make the indecent decent? In fact, we are already asking questions pertaining to the workings of the clown's performance.

The subject of my interest is the tradition of the *risus paschalis*. Psychology and sociology cannot give us satisfactory definitions, and no modern philosophies of laughter by Hobbes, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, or Bergson could resolve the forthcoming questions themselves. However, in the topic of the Easter laughter, with the help of anthropology and comparative religion, all the questions disentangle themselves and ritual laughter finds its proper place without contradicting any advanced, natural scientific solution. We will probably never be able to determine laughter under dry, laboratory conditions and without clarifying its function in the abyss of human religious consciousness.

The tradition of the *risus paschalis* greatly polarises scholarly opinion. This ritual form dates from the 14th to the 19th century, though some consider it much older. There was a time when priests started cracking jokes, telling anecdotes, and speaking in an obscene manner to entertain their audience and raise laughter during Easter masses. Humour and laughter organically belonged to the ritual, and the “art” spread and soon became an international practice. *Risus paschalis* is often linked with other phenomena related to Christian festivities. Even Saint Augustine mentions similar elements in his *De civitate dei*,<sup>2</sup> so he may have experienced something of this kind already in the 5th century. Overall, the genre of Easter laughter can only be circumscribed with great difficulty, especially because its rich “kinship” fills dozens of books. Mikhail Bakhtin lists<sup>3</sup> *festas stultorum*, *risus natalis* (Christmas laughter), *parodia sacra*, *feast of the Ass* and the *indulgentia* festivals, or *soties* – the latter very close to the performing arts. Habits differ by ages and countries, by domains and cities, combining features of the abovementioned types. It is hard to sustain a neat order of categories or build a proper chronology of events pertaining to Easter laughter.

A Polish example is attested by Jolanta Rzeżočka. In her article “Being Serious About Laughter: The Case of Early Modern Biblical Plays”,<sup>4</sup> she discusses late medieval religious drama, relying on laughter traditions and comedy conceptions with

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<sup>1</sup> Á. Szilágyi, *A temetés temetése* [The Burial of Burials] [in:] Á. Szilágyi, *Halálbarokk* [The Baroque of Death], Budapest 2007, pp. 401–402.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De civitate Dei*, CCSL 47–48.

<sup>3</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. H. Iswolsky, Bloomington 1984, p. 5 and further at pp. 13–14.

<sup>4</sup> J. Rzeżočka, *Being Serious about Laughter. The Case of Early Modern Biblical Plays* [in:] *Humour and Religion. Challenges and Ambiguities*, H. Geybels, W. van Herck (eds.), London–New York 2011, pp. 156–168.

unparalleled variety and quantity, and tries to negotiate its place from the point of view of the asceticism of late medieval thought and institutions. As she puts it,

A play that illustrates well late medieval approach to humour and laughter is a sixteenth-century vernacular Resurrection play *Hystoryja o chwalebnyim Zmartwychwstaniu pańskim* (The History of the Glorious Resurrection of the Lord) written by a Pauline monk Mikołaj z Wilkowiecka (Nicolaus from Wilkowiecko). [...] The *humour* in the play revolves around three episodes: the scene of the guards' awakening at the empty tomb of Christ at Easter morning and the two scenes that belong to the Harrowing of Hell episode, namely the scene in which the devils try to keep the door of Hell locked against the descending Christ and the scene of Christ sending the envoys to the Virgin.

[...] Jesus knocks at the door of hell three times and each time the devils respond with bawdy shouts and remarks. Christ eventually silences the commotion and thwarts the devils' clumsy attempts to hold the ground. As the devils cling to the door of hell, screaming and fighting till the last grasp, they excite bawdy laughter.<sup>5</sup>

The quotation must be supplemented: laughter is not only characteristic of striving devils, but laughter involves Christ himself, the target of indecent mocking and ridicule. Rzegocka's paper and the cited works are unfortunately great examples of the scholarly endeavour to find some logic in these unaccountable traditions. We cannot find a single link to *risus paschalis* in the Scriptures: neither in the writings of the Apostles, nor even a clue in the religious practices of the first Christian generations. The standard references – also followed by Rzegocka – are the conceptions of Karl-Josef Kuschel,<sup>6</sup> and Hans Fluck's article on *risus paschalis*.<sup>7</sup> They tend to attribute laughter to the joy felt while witnessing the scene when Jesus defeats the mocking devils; in this way supposedly teaching the audience how to help the victims of mockery and ridicule. But how should we account for the community united by the mockery heaped upon Christ himself? The act of “mass laughter” at Easter feasts is explained by recalling the joy felt because of the resurrection of Jesus, and – because of the particular timing of the feast – the resurrection of nature after the hard time of winter infertility. That is certain, but how does it work? How can that make the indecency acceptable?

Psychologists mostly understand laughter as an unconscious response to social and linguistic cues, but their literature fails to make any striking discoveries. Because of the almost countless different categories of laughter, it is no wonder that we can hardly find any theories that appear to hold generally true. Psychological science realised the relevance of laughter as a unifying act for the acting group against the ridiculed one, which can be present alive or in another form, e.g. as a “notion”. Psychologists commonly accept the conclusions of philosophers (Lessing, Hegel, Schopenhauer) about the essential contrast of “normal” and “abnormal”, or “the general” and “the exaggerated” as triggering elements. There are some – mostly quite

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 158, p. 164.

<sup>6</sup> K.J. Kuschel, *Laughter. A Theological Reflection*, trans. J. Bowden, London 1994.

<sup>7</sup> H. Fluck, *Der Risus Paschalis. Ein Beitrag zur religiösen Volkskunde*, “Archiv für Religionswissenschaft”, No. 31, 1934, pp. 188–212.

indefinite – views about the role of laughter as a valve. William McDougall wrote<sup>8</sup> about “anti-stress”, the releasing, resolving and – in this peculiar way – healing function of laughter. This is not a misguided approach, but it simplifies the question to a considerable extent. With respect to the *risus paschalis*, Vladimir Propp claimed<sup>9</sup> that the Easter laughter was insincere and dishonest, even extorted. He considered it to be a simple imitation of the happiness felt on the resurrection of Christ, a mere masquerade, clearly a *lack* of real pleasure. He was followed by a whole generation of scholars who were also socialised in the same society in which the masses had to clap their hands, laugh, weep and cheer on command. It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that their negative experiences had a considerable influence on their theories.<sup>10</sup>

If one turns to Easter itself to get closer to the question of the Easter laughter, efforts might again prove to be insufficient. The Jewish tradition of the Passover celebration had a fertile impact on the Christian holiday, but no practice of ritual laughter is anywhere to be found. The etymological study of Beda Venerabilis with Easter-Oster-Eostre/Ostara-Astaroth and the remembrance of the Teutonic goddess does not help, either. It is appropriate to extend the scope of research to an ancient, wild tradition.

The research addressing ritual clowns and clown rituals (i.e. the clown play) concerns the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and these rituals go back to two literary traditions. Anglo-Saxon “clown studies” in literary history base themselves on Enid Welsford’s book from 1935,<sup>11</sup> *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*.<sup>12</sup> This is a rich and diversified critical material ranging from Shakespeare studies to the *comedia dell’arte* and circus studies. Here, focusing on the clown figure is deeply influenced by the Frazerian anthropology,<sup>13</sup> and its ritual based thinking stems from the Cambridge school of scholars. As is well known, Frazer concentrated on the “eternal return” of gods and kings dying and resurrecting. This was connected with the tradition of “establishing” mock kingdoms, comic rituals and celebrations serving as a kind of critical distance, in a comic fashion, from the existing power. Ceremonies scheduled regularly came to life every year, related to important changes in climate conditions. These ceremonies were about “renewing” and maintaining the magical

<sup>8</sup> W. MacDougall, *Why Do We Laugh?*, “Scribners” 1922, No. 71, pp. 359–362.

<sup>9</sup> V. Propp, *Ritual Laughter in Folklore* (A Propos of the Tale of the Princess Who Would Not Laugh [Nesmejána]), trans. A. Y. Martin, A. Liberman (ed.), Manchester 1984, pp. 124–148.

<sup>10</sup> E. Kámán, *A karnevál paradigmája Vladimir Propp és Mihail Bahtyin munkáiban* [The Paradigm of the Carnival in the Works of Vladimir Propp and Mikhail Bakhtin] [in:] *Folklorisztika 2000-ben. Tanulmányok Voigt Vilmos 60. születésnapjára*, G. Balázs, Zs. Csoma, K. Jung, I. Nagy, K. Verebélyi (eds.), Budapest 2000, pp. 632–644.

<sup>11</sup> E. Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*, New York 1935.

<sup>12</sup> Like C.L. Barber (*Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and Its Relation to Social Custom*, Princeton, 1959), William Willeford (*The Fool and His Scepter: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and Their Audience*, Evanston 1969), Jean Starobinski (*Portrait de l’artiste en saltimbanque*, Genf 1970), John Townsen (*Clowns*, New York 1976), Sandra Billington (*A Social History of the Fool*, Sussex–New York 1984), Constantin von Barloewen (*Clowns. Versuch über das Stolpern*, München 2010) and many others.

<sup>13</sup> J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, New York 1922; E.K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2 vols, Oxford 1903.

contract: when the old king dies, there immediately must be a new and vigorous king. This was achieved in the complete unity of time and space: killing the taboo person and the inauguration of the new leader, death and life again happened like resurrection, but in the form of “returning-to-the-same-place”. The clown *par excellence* was born as the “Lord of these misrules”.

Another scholarly tradition based on the same ritualistic events, with Russian and Middle-Eastern European prevalence, is the carnivalesque tradition introduced by Bakhtin in 1940. The carnivalesque logic of the world and the spirit of topsyturviness were mainly based on Nietzsche’s concept of Dionysus<sup>14</sup> and the cult of the God of Wine and Intoxication in Greek culture, as well as on the works of Freud, who could be read as advocating the Dionysian side of the human being to be a part of the unconscious. The carnival, as “ideology”, formed itself from this unconscious part of the human being in society, as *communitas*.<sup>15</sup> This tradition was sadly pulled into the vortex of actual, contemporary problems of political science, forgetting where it came from: the ages of normative faith and religion. Bakhtin’s critics – like Bakhtin himself – were very quick to forget the medium in the centre of carnivalesque space, where Brueghel displayed him.<sup>16</sup> Still, both traditions were busy with the explanation of the same: the unearthly reality of the taboo-breaking carnivals. This attitude, with all its profanity and orgiastic components, is not unusual for “primitive” fertility rituals. Scientific research still overflows with examples<sup>17</sup> from the Roman Saturnalia, the dance traditions of Sri Lanka<sup>18</sup>, or the rituals of Indian tribes.<sup>19</sup> Ritual antics – in only the narrowest definition – are discovered in 40 cases in 136 communities around the world.<sup>20</sup>

In order to avoid false criticism, it is important to note that the tradition was quite widespread, although, contrary to Frazer’s belief, it is very unlikely that it was universal. The various clown traditions never went through the same development in different cultures: there can be certain segments that are left out, as well as rapid

<sup>14</sup> F.W. Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Music*, Leipzig 1872, noticed by L. Szilárd, *A karneválemélet. V. Ivanovtól M. Bahtyinig*, Budapest 1989 inter alia.

<sup>15</sup> Turner’s concept, for example from: V. Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, Ithaca–London 1974.

<sup>16</sup> I am referring to the picture *The Fight between Carnival and Lent* by Pieter Bruegel from 1559.

<sup>17</sup> While referring to these few examples, the impossibility of considering all related works in a single paper should be obvious. I have to ignore the whole question of folly and sacred madness to concentrate on the ritual clown par excellence, which is why I must skip the 1970s anthropological and sociological work by Károly Kerényi, C.G. Jung and Paul Radin (P. Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, New York 1956). My interest here is only directed at ritual clowning and clown play with the potential to infiltrate and transform the Christian festive sensation.

<sup>18</sup> R. Cheesmond, “Where the Antic sits” [in:] *Clowns, Fools and Picasos: Popular Forms in Theatre, Fiction and Film*, D. Robb (ed.), Amsterdam–New York 2007, pp. 9–24.

<sup>19</sup> To quote Constantin von Barloewen: “Dieser Mann war der Koshare – eine clowneske Figur, die sich breit gefächerter Ausgestaltung bei einer Vielzahl von Indianerkulturen fand. Seine Stellung glich der eines Mittlers, der fastet und sich kasteit, der betet, bis sich unter dem fahl bedeckten Himmel der fruchtbare Boden öffnet und die quittegelbe Blume wachsen lässt. Der Koshare stand zwischen den Welten: er lag im Kampf mit der irdischen Ordnung und legte zugleich für die Mitglieder des Stammes Fürsprache bei den Göttern ein.” C. von Barloewen, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Durwin, following Charles Lucille.

institutionalisation; clowns can be redefined in arts or quasi-art, or they can still be stuck in their ancient forms. One of the most common stages is the tradition of the fool kingdom. The *fool kings* or *kings of fools* were lords of one-week festivities: they were mostly chosen after their incapacity, their poverty, their senility, or deviant foolishness, and after their short, sometimes “Easter reign” they were free to be overthrown, or sacrificed. The real king could retake the throne and the balance of nature was again restored. So the protagonist – the clown – appears on the stage as the medium of this carnivalesque tradition. The “clown performance”, still holding the structural diagram of the clown-play, is to be seen in the burlesque movie, *Tom and Jerry* and the circus of our time. The clown is always smashed to the ground, ridden over, yet still always rising up rises up again. The clown is invulnerable. The perpetually repeating triumph of life over death and the destruction of death are the cause of our laughter. We observe the lead character of Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnival in the Middle Ages, when the clown falls down before the cheering audience and is resurrected, again “returning-to-the-same-place”. The clown unites the audience in laughter, and in laughter they exclude death itself. Only the living can laugh, so everybody who is laughing is alive. In most cultures death is silence itself.

Dealing with this community play about renewal at the end of winter and its infertility, the joyful games wherein death and the concept of extinction become defeated is a way to approach the Easter festivities as well. Christianity had a long struggle with the ancient tradition of religious buffoonery, but it finally found a compromise in the collective spirit, which leads us back to the understanding of *risus paschalis*. The answer is the actual body of Jesus Christ. The death and its defeat thereafter through the resurrection linked the clown tradition and the Passion of Christ together. Moreover, their encounter happens exactly at the usual time of the ancient tradition, the time of Easter. Christ does appear as a clown in Western literature. To quote the historian Maurice Lever:

From the moment when he declared himself the King of the Jews before Pontius Pilate, the mass took him for a fool. After the judgment was delivered and the soldiers stripped him of his clothes, they laid a crimson robe on his shoulder, they crowned him with a crown of thorns, put a reed in his right hand and cried out mockingly on their knees: “Hail, King of Jews” – they made him essentially a caricature of the Roman Emperor. Christ, therefore, at the final stage of his human existence, amid the jeer of the simple-minded crowd, took the image of the silently suffering, accidental clown.<sup>21</sup>

Quoting Foucault and his *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique*,

Christ did not merely choose to be surrounded by lunatics; he himself chose to pass in their eyes for a madman, thus experiencing, in his incarnation, all the sufferings of human misfortune. Madness thus became the ultimate form, the final degree of God in man’s image, before the fulfillment and deliverance of the Cross.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> My own translation from the Hungarian: M. Lever, *Korona és csörgősipka. Az udvari bolondok története* [The Crown and the Coxcomb. The History of the Court Fool], trans. I. Kamocsay, Budapest 1989, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London 2006, p. 75.

We may conclude that the laughter accompanying the Passion “functionally” corresponds to the archaic-ritual laughter of the clown-ceremonies; this is still laughing at “the death of death”, accentuating the temporality of annihilation. Christ “crushes death with his death, with this redeeming mankind from the slavery of death.”<sup>23</sup> So the death of Christ at Easter meets the archaic celebration of the ritual clowns and hence the heritage of *risus paschalis*, which seems to break the severe and sombre illusion of the Christian religion. As Ákos Szilágyi points out about the Easter tradition in the Orthodox Church, Eastern Christianity has always given particular emphasis to the death of Christ, which it interpreted as the death of death, a death saviour from death. In Easter week, they bury the dead following a unique ceremony. There is only very little reference to the deceased; the whole ceremony – from the beginning to the end – proclaims the Easter joy of the dying and resurrecting Christ, that is: there is no death, because death is defeated.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, this ceremony of death is always accompanied by honest laughter in the Orthodox world.

Of course, we cannot ignore the mistakes in identifying the old tradition as the particular root of early Christianity. Jesus Christ did not come to this world as a ritual clown; he was the depository of a totally different paradigm. The tradition of the clown ritual (especially the execution of the Dionysian mock king) was based on an entirely different view of time and space, especially because the theatre was an unknown institution in Ancient Israel. The clown play, with the act of death and resurrection, is always about the so-called “returning-to-the-same-place”, and the combination of the ritual of the Messiah with playacting became possible only after the early Church became open to the absorption of the Greek tradition as well. From generation to generation, from year to year always “returning-to-the-same-place”, into the same existence and to the same reality, in constant circularity and self-repetition. The Christian view of time (as the conception of time was in Ancient Israel) is based on the structure of salvation, thus it is linear. Christ’s one and only death and resurrection in Christianity trims human history into two pieces: it destroys death once and for all. It is non-recurrent; it does not announce the victory of “returning-to-the-same-place”, but opens the door to another form of existence in the “afterlife”. Thus, considering its theological basis, it is considerably different from the religious phenomena of the archaic-mythical world.

This is clearly shown in *apophatic*<sup>25</sup> criticism as well. The critical, taboo-breaking attitude and the contra-behaviour of the clown work in the *apophatic* way of the carnival. The primal feature of the carnival is its temporality, its sacred time being “in this gap between ordered worlds.”<sup>26</sup> As Bakhtin states, “We must stress, however, that the carnival is far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation

<sup>23</sup> Á. Szilágyi, *A megváltó nevetés* [The Laughter that Redeems Us] [in:] Á. Szilágyi, *op.cit.*, p. 492.

<sup>24</sup> *Idem*, *A temetés temetése* [The Burial of the Burial] [in:] Á. Szilágyi, *op.cit.*, pp. 401–402.

<sup>25</sup> This is of course the *apophatic* notion Keating supports. T. Keating, *Intimacy with God: The Christian Contemplative Tradition*, New York, 1996, chapter 4.

<sup>26</sup> V. Turner, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

is completely alien to folk culture.”<sup>27</sup> The clown’s repeated “returning-to-the-same-place” *apophatically* reaffirming “the-same-place” is comparable to the order of the seasons’ circular returns or to the order of the medieval social hierarchy. Christ’s apotheosis after defeating death is a turn to progressivity, to evolution, to the opening up of human ontological existence at its top. The establishment of the Christian ritual clown provoked a *reaction*, in the direction of the clown figure, transforming *apophatic* criticism into a negating, innovative but simultaneously demolishing criticism, from which the politician court fools of the later 17th century evolved.

There is also the important issue of the location of laughter in the ritual – which also differs in the Eastern and the Western Christian tradition. Exactly when do we laugh during the Easter story? What do we laugh at? Can we ridicule the torturing and the murdering of Christ? Following the archaic tradition, death itself is productive and seminal, and blasphemy – through breaking taboos – is laughable itself. The Orthodox tradition forgets the agony and only cares about resurrection. What about mocking Christ in the West, where suffering was put into focus? If we only have authorisation to laugh at the time of the resurrection and the overthrow of death, then when can we place the jeer, the obscenity? Is it the loss of our faith, the loss of faith in the resurrection of the soul that discourages our laughter? Can we laugh at the clown, tossed to the ground, but never getting up again? However, medieval Christian society and also a number of prominent thinkers felt close to the archaic tradition, and easily linked it to their Christianity – leaving the severe and sombre side of the religion on the margin. This is the urban culture of Bakhtin’s carnivals, testified to by numerous works of art, also displayed in *The Praise of Folly* by Desiderius Erasmus or in Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, mourned by William Shakespeare.

The expulsion and the discrediting of the clowns has its long story and was encouraged by several circumstances, such as the puritan sombreness and the even stricter counter-reformation, the aesthetics of the Enlightenment, or drama finding its way from the stage into marketable printed publications. Humour, clowning traditions and the *risus paschalis* became bothersome and uncomfortable in the Church. The higher clergy tried to prevent the spreading of such practices from the Synod of Toledo, often foreseeing penalties; several papal bulls were issued. Still, the popularity of the clowning tradition did not diminish for a long time. Lever searched for an explanation.<sup>28</sup> The lower clergy (young priests, deacons serving in parishes and sub-deacons) proved to be enthusiastic supporters of the tradition, but we may find an abundance of supporters even among the high dignitaries of the Church. The final argument, however, was still the audience, because the majority happily visited on the holidays and loved the performances in question. They quickly forgot most of the prohibitions. They rarely imposed serious penalties, and if they still did, these were rarely implemented. The real changes only came with the changes in Western knowledge: but this was truly a long process which would obviously take us too far beyond the scope of this paper.

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<sup>27</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> M. Lever, *op.cit.*, p. 8.



This interpretation wishes to point out how deeply humour is rooted in human nature; how important the role of laughter is for occasionally feeling victorious in our struggle against the cruel tyrants of our reasoning. In laughter we are able to defeat death again and again. To quote Ákos Szilágyi, “In laughter – for a moment – we can taste the joy of immortality.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Á. Szilágyi, *A megváltó nevetés [The Laughter that Redeems Us]* [in:] Á. Szilágyi, *op.cit.*, p. 486.