

Book review

Morgan, Jeff (2015). *American Comic Poetry. History, Techniques and Modern Masters*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company.

The title of Jeff Morgan's book is, to say the least, somewhat misleading. One would expect from the book entitled *American Comic Poetry* a much more comprehensive treatment of both the history and the present condition of American comic verse, whereas, as Morgan writes in the conclusion,

[t]his book has been all about how [three] contemporary American poets [Billy Collins, Thomas Lux and Tony Hoagland] gets [*sic*] laughs and how they appear to be following an American comic tradition, and how they create comedy within the three-pronged approach espoused by Marcel Gutwirth (p. 176).

Hence a more accurate title would be *Marcel Gutwirth's Three-Pronged Approach to Humour in the Poetry of Billy Collins, Thomas Lux and Tony Hoagland*.

The discussion of the humour (or comedy, to use the term preferred by the author) of the three poets in question is preceded by a brief presentation of Gutwirth's (1993) theory (an intellectual, functional and psychological approach to comedy), and a short history of American comic literature (both poetry and prose) with a special emphasis on James Russell Lowell's *A Fable for Critics* (1994) and "The Courtin'" (1959), Dorothy Parker (1994), and Ogden Nash (1995). Morgan shows that he has an eye for humour when he reveals the comic dimension of texts which are not normally deemed funny, such as Smith's (2007) *The General History of Virginia* (p. 18), but it is not exactly clear what criteria he uses while deciding which authors to include and which to omit. If the purpose of this historical introduction is to establish the literary tradition to which Collins (2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012), Lux (1997, 2004, 2012) and Hoagland (1992, 1998, 2003, 2005, 2010) refer, one might ask why Morgan decides to leave Whitman out, even though, as he himself subsequently notices, Collins' and Lux's ironic lists are reminiscent of the Whitmanesque catalogue (p. 146). One might also wonder why he decides to devote so much space to Lowell's (1994) *A Fable for Critics*, even though this type of satire is not discussed later. Strangely enough, the second half of the twentieth century is not covered at all. The author merely mentions Hamby & Kirby's *Seriously Funny* anthology (2010), without even saying which authors are included there and how they have contributed to the development of American comic poetry.

In his "Brief History of American Comic Literature", Morgan refers to the works of Edgar Allan Poe, but only to his Gothic tales and detective fiction, ignoring his satires and comic pieces, such as the story "How to Write a *Blackwood* Article" (1983), in which Poe makes fun, among other things, of American transcendentalism. In the said story, Mr. Blackwood offers the following advice to the young writer Miss Psyche Zenobia:

Put in something about the Supernal Oneness. Don't say a syllable about the Infernal Twoness. Above all, study innuendo. Hint everything – assert nothing. If you feel inclined to say "bread and butter," do not by any means say it outright. You may say any thing and every thing approaching to "bread and butter." You may hint at buck-wheat cake, or you may even go so far as to insinuate oat-meal porridge, but if bread and butter be your real meaning, be cautious, my dear Miss Psyche, not on any account to say "bread and butter!" (Poe 1983: 66)

Morgan suggests that Collins' poem "Bread and Butter" might deal with issues connected with American transcendentalism (p. 122). If he is right, the poem's title could be a direct reference to this particular passage.

Despite its numerous drawbacks, Morgan's brief history of American comic literature does succeed in showing the continuity of the Trickster and the "homespun" voices in American comic poetry. And he will later demonstrate that these indeed are the voices used by Collins, Lux and Hoagland.

But before Morgan moves to the contemporary masters, he discusses two lesser-known poets, Denise Duhamel (2009), "the scholarly analytical work of [whose] work is virtually non-existent" in spite of the fact that "her comic poetry reveals a fullness of artistry not often seen in comic poetry until the rise of this generation of comic poets" (p. 92), and Campbell McGrath (2009, or to be more precise his "Ode to Bureaucrats"), who is introduced as an "all-too neglected voice" and Duhamel's fellow professor at Florida International University. Morgan argues that the comedy of Duhamel and McGrath deserves better critical recognition, which indeed may be the case, but the lavish praise that he bestows upon the works of these authors may be the kiss of death. His analyses of Duhamel's ten prose "money" poems ("\$100,000," "\$200,000," "\$300,000," "\$400,000," "\$500,000," "\$600,000," "\$700,000," "\$800,000," "\$900,000," "\$100,000,000") do not really support, in my view, Morgan's initial claim:

Her poetry shall be the first glimpse of contemporary American comic poetry that not only hits on all comic cylinders but has a wealth of formal elements from the writer's toolbox, and in [her] comic poetry, these elements often address the kind of universal themes that help take her poetry beyond the likes of Dorothy Parker and Ogden Nash (p. 92).

Since Morgan chooses to focus on poems which are thematically and formally very similar, we do not learn much about this wealth of formal elements and the alleged diversity of her work.

Interestingly enough, he criticises Dorothy Parker for being too repetitive (according to him, she keeps writing about suicide). Therefore, when in "Cherry White" the speaker thinks of the title cherry tree "as a good tree on which to hang oneself" (p. 70), Morgan opines that "the joke begins to wear a little thin" (p. 69). On the other hand, he believes that repetition only enriches Duhamel's work: "[As] we move into poems that are higher denominations of money, Duhamel's comedy becomes increasingly more intriguing to analyse" (p. 97). Apart from humour, he also finds profound existentialist tragedy there. While commenting on "\$700,000," he writes:

Duhamel's treatment of money in this poem seems to take a different tack here because money is seen as something truly valuable, something needed so the speaker and her companion can, for example, get basic health insurance, not having been to doctors or dentists in years. It is hard for me to laugh the laughter of denigration here (p. 97).

In other words, if I understand it correctly, hanging on a tree could be very funny, if it were not such a cliché, but not having been to the dentist's in years is no laughing matter.

Indeed, it is extremely difficult to predict when Morgan will laugh. While discussing Duhamel's money poems, he makes the following remark: "We expect our national currency to have value and are surprised to the point of laughter when it is devalued" (p. 93). As a matter of fact, devaluation is a relatively standard monetary policy used to make a national economy more competitive in the global market, but, for the argument's sake, let us assume

that devaluation is really something unequivocally bad, that it denotes a complete loss of value. Then, following this line of thinking, one might say, “We expect our national economy to prosper and are surprised to the point of laughter when it goes bankrupt”.

This indicates a more general problem with Gutwirth and Morgan’s intellectual approach to comedy. The gap between expectations and reality is not always a sufficient reason to laugh. It might also produce reactions such as shock, disbelief and horror. A good theory of humour should account for it. To Morgan, the drop from the ideal to the real seems to be invariably funny. This mechanical approach to humour frequently mars his literary analyses.

Another problem with Morgan’s book is that it is not entirely clear to what kind of reader it is addressed. Even though it looks like an academic publication, at times it is strikingly non-academic. Such passages in which Morgan explains that poems are about people even if they seem to be about grass or animals do not seem very academic: “Just as Carl Sandburg’s ‘Grass’ is not about grass wanting to work rather than going to war but about people wanting to work instead of going to war, Collins’ poem is not about a duck [...] but about people” (p. 113). On another occasion, Morgan decides to elucidate for his readers such a fairly simple concept as authorial intrusion: “This term refers to a point at which the author interrupts the flow of the words, the words no longer being those of the previous speaker, or narrator as the case may be”. Curiously enough, this definition is complemented by the following comment: “the device may be more common with women than with men but that’s another book” (p. 116). Such jokes further confuse the readers and they might start to suspect Morgan’s book is an elaborate hoax rather than genuine scholarship.

On the whole, I cannot but think that Morgan’s book is an endeavour to avoid the dull academic discourse and to speak about humour in a humorous and entertaining way. To a certain extent this might explain the apparent inconsistency of Morgan’s approach. After all, humour feeds on incongruity. Unfortunately, I cannot say that this is a completely successful endeavour.

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