

“Who’s kidding who”: Humor in Poetry

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Abstract

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Why do some poems make us laugh? Is there something unique about the way humor works in poetry? While poetry may not be the medium typically associated with humor, humor is certainly abundant in poetry. As other authors have discussed at great length, humor can be a tool for expressing the distance between the individual and the group, the familiar and the strange, the personal and the political. The close readings of contemporary authors in this thesis will discuss methods and motivations of humorous poems.

To a joke, then, I owed my first gleam of complete consciousness – which again has recapitulatory implications, since the first creatures on earth to become aware of time were also the first creatures to smile.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory* (19)¹

“The new poems / are poems of / healing. / But first I’ll / be funny.

Eileen Myles, *Snowflake / Different Streets* (10)

On October 23, 2016, the stand-up comic Louis C.K. wrote an email to his fans. The email was a pitch for a new show, and it happened to include an informal comedic manifesto. C.K. argued that “...there was a smart, profound integrity to be mined in comedy – that you could speak truth and be funny. That Standup was an art, that it was a form of literature and political and social insurgence.”² In her essay, “Alarms and Excursions,” Rosmarie Waldrop asserts that poetry “can make the culture aware of itself, unveil hidden structures.”³ Waldrop probably won’t appear on anyone’s list of “funny poets,” (though she can, at times, be very funny), and C.K. probably won’t ever publish a book of verse (though he probably writes as much as any working poet). Despite the difference in mediums, I’ll argue that Waldrop’s poetic “awareness of culture” frequently overlaps with C.K.’s “political and social insurgence.”

This thesis considers certain theories of humor and their intersections in poetry. As other authors have discussed at great length, humor and poetry are both tools for expressing the distance between the individual and the group, the familiar and the strange, the personal and the political. While poetry may not be the medium typically associated with humor in American culture, the mechanics of poetry and humor share a great deal. The close readings of contemporary authors in this thesis will discuss these exchanges.

¹ Ryan Bishop, “American Film Comedy and Cultural Critique: Glitches in the Smooth Running of the Social Machine.”

² Louis C.K., “Barry Crimmins: Whatever Threatens You”

³ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Dissonance (if you want to know)*.

To narrow my discussion, I'll begin in the first section by trying to arrive at a working definition of "humor in poetry" by analyzing some common and uncommon usages of the word "humor". In the second section, I'll address James Cody Walker's thesis, *O Ho Alas Alas: Poetry and Difficult Laughter*, an essential text that deals with the subject of humor and poetry. In the third section, I'll discuss some linguistic and sociological theories of humor (intersubjectivity, cohesion building, reality-play) and their correlations to poetry, using examples from a small community of poets: Joe Wenderoth (omitting examples from *Letters to Wendy's*, which Walker has already written about at length), Michael Earl Craig, Eileen Myles, Rachel Zucker, and Mary Ruefle.

Throughout, I'll pay homage and draw examples from my patron comic-saint, Louis C.K. In "Taking Sin Seriously," Jonathan Malesic compares C.K. to St. Augustine, the "original comic genius" ("Is there a funnier one-liner in all of theology than [St. Augustine's] prayer in the Confessions, 'Lord, give me chastity but not yet'"). Malesic notes most poetically that the main argument of C.K.'s comedy might be summarized as the idea that "Our ideals can be sublime, but our fat, failing bodies betray us; and this condition begins at birth." I state here, on the record, that my ideals for this thesis were sublime, no matter how it's various failures betray me.

What is “humor in poetry?” How do we recognize it?

“I’m always out there looking at life and thinking about it, so I guess that’s just observation. But it’s – it’s being able to have people understand an observation even if it’s really from a strange place, or even if it’s very personal.”

Louis C.K.⁴

“Where then are the private turns of event / Destined to boom later like the golden chimes / Released quietly over a city from a highest tower? / The quirky things that happen to me, and I tell you, / And you instantly know what I mean?”

John Ashbery, “The One Thing That Can Save America”

The birth of my inquiry in this essay could be attributed to, as Walker puts it, the fact that poems with moments of humor “seem to me more permanent than others.”⁵ There is a quality to the “funny poem” that makes it feel especially insightful, palatable, and enduring. At its best, humor seems to come, as it does in C.K.’s observation, from a refined attention to the surrounding world, and an ability to articulate that attention outwards. However, I’ve been perturbed by the idea that there must be something particular to humor in *poetry*, something which differentiates it from humor in any other medium or context. To begin discussing the “humorous poem,” let me begin with a preliminary question: What is a moment of humor?

It turns out that recognizing and describing any kind of humor is notoriously difficult.⁶ For instance, the vagueness of William O. Beeman’s opening definition in his 1999 article, “Humor,” is cause for concern: “Humor is a performative pragmatic accomplishment involving a wide range of communication skills including, but not exclusively involving, language, gesture, the presentation of visual imagery, and situation management”⁷ (103). Aside from acknowledging

⁴ Interview on Charlie Rose.

⁵ James Cody Walker, *O Ho Alas Alas: Poetry and Difficult Laughter*

⁶ “Like beauty, most people believe they know [humor] when they see it, yet find it difficult to define” (Robinson and Smith-Lovin).

⁷ William O. Beeman, “Humor.”

the involvement of language and image, Beeman's definition of humor fails to provide anything concrete enough to use as a guide for locating humor in a poem.

In its most obvious modern sense, humor is "The ability of a person to appreciate or express what is funny or comical; a sense of what is amusing or ludicrous."⁸ This definition, in the way that it separates the roles of "person who appreciates" and "person who expresses," highlights the first and most persistent problem for locating humor in poetry. Humor requires "equal cooperative participation of actor and audience" (Beeman). In other words, to qualify as humor, an expression must 1) be considered amusing by the person expressing, and 2) elicit a reciprocal feeling of enjoyment in the audience. This definition poses a significant barrier to defining humor in poetry.

An example might illustrate the problem. Imagine that you are in the audience at a live comedy show, and the comedian, about to begin, says, "Don't text or twitter during the show... it lights up your big dumb face."⁹ Turning to your neighbor, who is nervously giggling and concealing his or her cellphone, you have evidence that, "Yes, this must be funny." Throughout the show, you see the comedian make audience members laugh again and again, each instance of laughter representing an immediate proof of "enjoyment." At that point, feeling sure that you're witnessing humor, you might be able to start categorizing the techniques of the comedian.

Even without a live audience, most of the humor we consume is public or shared. In a television show, like C.K.'s *Louie*, you could look to the person on the couch next to you and do the same kind of immediate assessment (for instance, I have yet to witness a stoic face during the scene where Louie, out grocery shopping with his young daughters, suddenly realizes he needs to poop – so urgently, in fact, that he ends up tossing the groceries he's just purchased in the

⁸ OED, "Humor".

⁹ Louis C.K., *Live at the Beacon Theater*

garbage. He and his concerned daughters, to the rhythm of a relentless, jazzy drum solo like you'd hear at the climax of a cool action flick, run desperately in and out of Manhattan businesses, pleading with the owners, the police, anyone, for a bathroom).¹⁰ Is this thing trying to be funny? Are people laughing? Check. Must be humor.¹¹

In Louis C.K.'s case – and in the case of stand-up comedy in general – “sexual and scatological humor”¹² abound, so you could make a reasonable inductive conclusion that such subjects are the sources of all humor.¹³ Of course, my examples are far too reductive, making no mention of the mechanics of live humor (set-up, timing, punch-line, etc.), but they should illustrate the key difference between “humor” and “humor in poems”: we can't very well sit in front of every reader of poetry watching his or her face for signs of amusement. Even in public, we read alone.

Robinson and Smith-Lovin explain the problem this way:

In general, theories about what constitutes humor are based inductively on examination of known instances of humor. Most of these theoretical accounts incorporate some notion of incongruity as a necessary component. Humor researchers often define verbal humor as text composed of at least two overlapping ‘scripts’ or interpretations (Raskin 1985; Ruch, Attardo & Raskin 1993; Wilson 1979). Unfortunately, as Wilson (1979) points out, this duality of interpretation is a necessary but not sufficient component of humor... Sociologists of humor (e.g., Davis 1979, 1993; Fine 1983, 1984) often rely on interactional rather than content-based definitions; they often use either actor's intent or audience response to identify humor.

I anticipate shouts of “But there are poetry readings all the time! You *can* see a poem's effect on the audience!” To which I would respond that the poem must be written before it can be performed. If the humor is intentional, it must be conceived before the physical audience ever

¹⁰ *Louie*. “A La Carte.” Season 5, Episode 2.

¹¹ “It is impossible to imagine a panel show or a stand-up/variety format without a studio or theatre audience because ‘liveness’ and ‘working’ an audience are so intrinsic to the formats and rhythms of these comic forms” (Hunt).

¹² Jonathan Malesic, *Taking Sin Seriously*.

¹³ Not as absurd a conclusion as it might sound, given that the oldest uses of the word “humor” are physical, referring to the “fluids of the body” (OED). The body and its functions are among the oldest taboos; discussing taboo is a form of transgression; and transgressing social hierarchies is one of the main goals of humor in poetry.

gathers. Since audience response is out of the question for arriving at a definition of humor in poetry, I will (as do Robinson and Smith-Lovin) follow Gary Fine to consider humor in poetry as “all remarks that are apparently intended to elicit amusement.” This definition is most useful to analyzing humor in poetry, because it allows us to infer *intended* humor based on the presence of comic strategies. As I’ll discuss in my section on difficult laughter, the use of “amusement” as a necessary criterion also frees humor from the restraints of the laugh. Amusement, after all, entails something as small as a smile, or a flush of the cheeks.

Given this small narrowing, let’s consider another definition of humor: “Behavior or actions regarded as whimsical, odd, quaint, or (in later use) amusing” (OED). At this definition, I take pause. I cannot think of many poets who would be happy to hear these words applied to their poems. Walker perfectly articulates the dilemma concerning the relationship between whimsy and humor when it comes to poetry: “When someone types ‘poetry’ and ‘comedy’ into a database search engine, finds this dissertation, and says to himself, ‘Great, Billy Collins and his ilk, finally getting their due,’ the figure can quote Eliot: ‘That is not what I meant at all. That is not it, at all.’” To label *all* humorous poetry “whimsical,” “odd,” or “quaint” diminishes the humorous poem, but it also diminishes poetry.¹⁴ Such categorization is usually motivated by a dismissiveness that probably comes from the generally unintellectual shadow cast by the tradition of limericks, light verse, and persona poems from the perspectives of bitter dead dogs.¹⁵ A certain wariness regarding humor is understandable (“Don Marquis is reported to have divided limericks into three kinds: Limericks to be told when ladies are present; limericks to be told

¹⁴ “The paradox of poetry for the intelligentsia today...to be implemented as an anodyne to business as usual in the marketplace, but please don’t be esoteric in your verse. [Bill Keller stated that] poetry should be fresh and irreverent, quirky even, but never out of reach - never just spontaneous. [What Keller wants is] a poem deprived of its force...a poem without poetry” (Wilkinson).

¹⁵ To “Billy Collins and his ilk,” I’ll reiterate the sentiment of the dead dog to his owner (from Collins’ “The Revenant”): “I never liked you – not one bit.”

when ladies are absent but clergymen are present - and LIMERICKS.”¹⁶). Humor has not always kept pace with the intellectual challenge of contemporary poetry. Yet there can be no doubt that humorous poetry is, and will continue to be, written by people who take the craft of poetry seriously – people who have more in mind than to amuse the naughty, chortling members of a boy’s club.

Having ruled out whimsy and quirk, consider another usage of the word “humor”, from David Hume’s “The history of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the accession of Henry VII, 1761-1762.” Hume writes, “The humours of the people, set afloat by the parliamentary impeachment...broke out in various commotions” (OED). Humor, for much of the history of its English usage,¹⁷ is a personal “temperament,” or a “habitual tendency,” rather than a sociological phenomenon observed through an “evocative transaction” (Robinson & Smith-Lovin). But in Hume’s usage,¹⁸ humor is “An excited state of public feeling” (OED). I’ll adopt this as my presiding understanding of what humor, in the hands of certain poets, can accomplish. Is it not perfectly poetic that a word, which was once the “mental disposition” of the individual, came to be a description of a group’s shared dispositions? Hume’s usage comprises the notion that humor, as a state of mind, is a social phenomenon; that it is a response, triggered by the political or cultural moment; and finally, that it is a display – a spectacle – that takes shape as a “commotion.”

At this point, it’s tempting to conclude that humor somehow always serves the interests of the good and the just. Surely commotion among the people must be a sign of something

¹⁶ The limerick is furtive and mean / You must keep her in close quarantine, / Or she sneaks to the slums / And promptly becomes / Disorderly, drunk and obscene. (Limerick by Prof Morris Bishop, qtd. by G. Legman)

¹⁷ Until 1899, humor is “distinguished from wit as being less purely intellectual.” It’s worth noting that as recently as the beginning of the 20th Century, humor is still associated with the mental condition of the individual. Humor is reluctant to let go of those denotations that regard the dispositions of the mind and the individual.

¹⁸ I’m not strong enough to resist: let’s call it “Hume-or.”

significant and progressive. In other words, inject a little funny into your verse, and voila, you're a revolutionary! Humor has disturbed the universe. But this attitude of "transgressiveness" probably comes from the assumption that being against something – being against *anything* – is a noble act. As Ashley Touchert complains in *Against Transgression*, finding proof of transgression has become a *de facto* characteristic of academic critical analysis:

This was the sum point of analysis: to locate and identify points of transgressive thought in the works of author X. It told me neither why transgression was in itself a worthy endeavour, not why it would bother to secrete itself within the terms of otherwise untransgressive narratives. The core argument was familiar: I had read it many times in precocious essays by students busy absorbing the increasingly dominant theoretical paradigm of Foucault, or in feminist-identified work (including my own) that sought to celebrate transgression as the impulse toward liberation (1).

Such self-important thinking is a dangerous pitfall for poetry, perhaps arising from the need to justify the art, to demonstrate its usefulness, to make it manageable. And sadly, the mere presence of humor does not necessarily challenge the status quo (often it does the exact opposite), and there's no reason to consider transgression as the sole aim or characteristic of literature. Humor *can* challenge social hierarchies, but more often it takes the form of a directionless, chaotic outburst of feeling. As I'll discuss in the last section of this essay, humor should be regarded in poetry as it is in the larger culture: as a tool (an apt metaphor might be the hammer, used to drive in a nail on one end and pull it out with the other) with no single function, but a great deal of power.

A Curtsy and a Caveat for Cody: The Difficulty with *Difficult Laughter*

Underneath everything in your life, there is that thing, that *empty* – that “forever empty.” That knowledge that it’s all for nothing and that you’re alone. It’s down there. And sometimes when things clear away, you’re not watching anything, you’re in your car, and you start going, “Oh no, here it comes...” That I’m alone. It starts to visit on you. Just this sadness. Life is tremendously sad, just by being in it...sadness is poetic, you’re lucky to live sad moments. And then I had this happy feeling, ‘cause when you let yourself feel sad, your body has, like, antibodies, it has happiness that comes rushing in to meet the sadness. You never feel completely sad or completely happy.

Louis C.K., *Conan* (2013)

C.K. expertly articulates an idea that now has some scientific support: in a study on the phenomenon of “cute-aggression” (an example of dimorphous expression — two different expressions that have the same origin – like the sudden, overwhelming desire to violently squeeze an adorable kitten), researchers found evidence for the idea that dimorphous expressions help regulate and maintain emotional equilibrium (Clark, Dyer, and Bargh, 2014). The link between jokes, the science of opposing expressions, and poetry, is the subject of James Cody Walker’s *O Ho Alas Alas: Poetry and difficult laughter* (hereafter referred to as “*Difficult Laughter*”).

It is difficult (probably impossible) for me to overstate the importance that *Difficult Laughter* has had on this thesis. Even the inclusion of Louis C.K. in this paper is an updated analogue to Walker’s use of Richard Pryor. I invoke Jonathan Lethem’s claim from “The Ecstasy of Influence” that “Most artists are brought to their vocation when their own nascent gifts are awakened by the work of a master” (61).¹⁹ Without *Difficult Laughter*, I would never have arrived at anything resembling a coherent discussion on the topic of humor and poetry.

¹⁹ I’ll also echo Lethem when he observes that “Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void but out of chaos.” (Mary Shelley, qtd. by Lethem)

One of the things that makes Walker's approach remarkable is how he substitutes the question, "What is humor?" for one more easily answered: as an emotion, or "audience response" (Fine), is it possible to recognize humor through some outward "wave of bodily disturbance"?²⁰ It makes perfect sense to approach a study of humor from this angle, given that another definition of humor is simply "the capacity to elicit laughter or amusement" (OED).

As both Freud and Baudelaire point out, laughter suggests reaction, a loss of composure,²¹ and in this regard, it corresponds very nicely with my ideas about humor being related to a commotion, alarm, or public disturbance. But for Walker, the decision to use laughter as a way of defining humor lets him side-step the need to wrangle a seemingly endless series of conceptual hang-ups, and it allows him to focus his research on inductive examples. For instance, consider Joe Wenderoth's "Like A Poop Sandwich In Heaven"²² (where, incidentally, he combines both the sexual *and* the scatological):

that the impossible *depends*
up on grammar

it cannot heal

is a fact

only ever
smeared in
to the sound
of laughter
and fucking
in the rooms
of the condemned

dream

structure

²⁰ William James, "What is an Emotion?" (1884).

²¹ Consider Freud's statement in "Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious" that "The comic is concerned with the ugly," or Baudelaire's description of the laughing sage in "On the Essence of Laughter."

²² *If I Don't Breathe How Do I Sleep*, page 40

Had this poem been available when Walker was writing his thesis, I think he may very well have used it as one of his examples. In its explicit reference to laughter, the poem creates a meta-commentary about humor: we don't know what funny is, but here's an instance of its mention. The tension between formal and tonal elements in this short poem characterizes it as an example of difficult laughter: the claustrophobic short line with its hard enjambments, the inability to orient the italicized phrases to their grammatical function in the sentence, and the heightened tonal register of "smeared," and "in the rooms of the condemned" against the plainness of the rest of the language. For Walker, humor is inductively reasoned by finding instances of the "eternal shouts of the flesh,"²³ and where we find the funny paired with the frightening – there is humor. And there is poetry. Walker's big gift to us is the idea that whatever helps us laugh also hurts us. And vice versa.²⁴

We come to understand that Walker's central question is "How do laughter and poetry interact?" and that the rough answer is this: laughter in poetry is a product of the tension, or "perpetual collisions"²⁵ between the "funny and frightening."²⁶ The idea that poetic humor can be characterized as a combination of feelings ("half heartened, half horrified...when I'm pulled in two different directions, anodes and cathodes firing" (2)) is a huge boon to my own understanding of humor. Walker separates his discussion in terms of "theories" and "strategies," which might be understood respectively as "why humor works" and "how humor works."

²³ Charles Simic, "Cut the Comedy."

²⁴ "I remember / as a child / thinking about torture / (and I've understood since then that torture is just / a clarification / of reality)" (Wenderoth, *If I Don't Breathe How Do I Sleep*, 64)

²⁵ A phrase borrowed from Baudelaire's *On the Essence of Laughter*.

²⁶ But Walker acknowledges that even the narrowing of *difficult* laughs is still "amorphous" enough that it will require him the length of the dissertation to define (2).

Difficult Laughter deals with three traditional theories of laughter – superiority, incongruity, and relief – and two comic strategies, misdirection²⁷ and excess (59).

Most of *Difficult Laughter* is spent providing examples and discussing the validity of these theories and strategies; here, I'll briefly define the terms in Walker's usage. Superiority, incongruity, and relief, you can take at face value: we laugh because we feel better than someone else, we laugh because two dissimilar things are brought together, and we laugh because we need sudden emotional release. The comic strategies, however, are terms of art. "Misdirection" is "when a poem's formal elements – rhyme, meter, stanzaic pattern – don't prepare us for its argument or impact." "Excess" is "the capacity as a writer to take any idea and push it as far as it would go, and then give it one more push" (Corrigan). I'll refer to these theories and strategies in my close-readings. I'll also discuss two other theories (intersubjectivity and cohesion building) to help explain how humorous poems might affect social hierarchies.

Walker builds on his claim by tracing a lineage of difficult laughter through Berryman²⁸ to Wenderoth and other contemporary authors, quietly suggesting that one function of difficult laughter might have something to do with the "idea of the ever-diminishing speaker" (156), and "a disappearing self" (166). I agree that vanishing and dissolution *can* be the goals of laughter-producing humor, but they're certainly not the *only* goals. For example, take Rachel Zucker's three-line poem, "real poem (infanticide)"²⁹:

In poems, some poets do bad things
to babies. This is called imagination.
I have babies and no imagination.

²⁷ Walker judiciously separates misdirection into three categories, but I found that the genres were mostly arbitrary and that many of his examples overlapped in their definitions. The definition of misdirection that I've chosen is the one that most closely supports incongruity, the theory of humor to which misdirection usually relates.

²⁸ "Berryman writes from *within* the crisis," an important characteristic of difficult laughter (154).

²⁹ Rachel Zucker, *The Pedestrians* (85).

The assertion in the title that the poem is “real,” the patness of the tone, and the self-righteous substitution of “imagination” for “babies” becomes amusingly incongruent with our idea of how a poet is supposed to think. Imagination is, after all, supremely important to the poet (or at least it’s supposed to be).³⁰ Is the speaker in this poem saying that she’s not really a poet, and that this isn’t really a poem? How we interpret the speaker’s tone depends on how we understand her initial assertion. If there really are poems like this out there (maybe they exist, but I haven’t discovered a single one), this is not a funny poem, and Zucker’s speaker would be taking the stance that poetry ought to be more concerned with the “real.” But the unnamed “poems,” and ambiguous “bad things” make the initial assertion so vague that the reader can hardly help but picture – to their surprise, perhaps – what atrocities are being visited on these innocent babes. By refusing to be specific, Zucker’s speaker has us do the work of imagining. In this case, the superiority of the speaker must be ironic (“I don’t write poems like that”³¹ – but of course she does, and it’s *this* poem). It’s a curious statement about poetry and the imagination: we’re atrocious for having an imagination, but the poet is just as atrocious for making us use it. It’s funny despite (or maybe because of) the fact that it’s uncomfortable for everyone involved. This is difficult laughter. But is Zucker dissolving herself into the poem?

While the project of many authors may be to find ways of substituting “language itself for the person who until then had supposed to be its owner,” (Barthes 143) others may find a necessity to reassert their subjectivity, to resist the dominance of the reader as the final resting place for meaning. Sometimes we need humor in our poems to remember that they’re *our* poems. Much of Zucker’s writing involves being a mother, and thinking around that identity, centering it in the

³⁰ “To whom then am I addressed? To the imagination.” (Williams, *Spring and All*).

³¹ Myles makes a similar move, drawing others in even as she acknowledges her own fallibility: “Everyone’s a monster like me” (*Different Streets* 49).

poem. Whether you read the self-righteousness in Zucker's poem as ironic or not, her short declarative sentences express a genuine desire to differentiate from these "other poets." This might be an example of the superiority theory of humor, which "hinges on the idea that individuals use humor directed at objects in categories to which they do not belong" (Dawn & Smith-Lovin). As I'll discuss in the close readings of the next section, a poem's funny moments can assist the author in attempts to build cohesion with a social group. In "real poem (infanticide)," Zucker's humor distances her from one community (poetry) and brings her closer to another (mothers). And if we're amused by her logic, we might feel integrated into Zucker's new community as well.

As I've already suggested, the largest departure I make from Walker's understanding of the comic in poetry is my thinking that gender plays a significant role in the way we understand humor. Where Walker stops at characterizing the *kind* of humor we tend to find in poetry, I would extend the inquiry to include this question: Who is doing the joking? And who laughs? At this point, I take a few more hesitant steps outside the domain of poetry and into the social/psychological sciences. In their study on gender, status, and interaction, Robinson and Smith-Lovin find that men tend to evaluate their own sense of humor more positively than women do, and that *both* men and women think of men more often when they think of someone with a good "sense of humor" (Crawford). In other words, there might be a generally unacknowledged bias to humor, which bears on our discussion of humor in poetry. Even in the *study* of humor, we find a male bias: "much of the research on gender differences in humor production and appreciation has been based on a male mode of humor – jokes that are often hostile or sexual in content" (Crawford, Lundell, Robinson and Smith-Lovin). It's beyond the scope of this paper to determine why this bias exists and what to do about it, but it's worth noting

that there's been an ongoing, robust public discussion on this very topic since the early 2000s. Christopher Hutchins' misguided and poorly researched article "Why Women Aren't Funny" (Vanity Fair) made the baffling argument that women were "the official enemy of humor," giving rise to ongoing debate. The production and appreciation of humor, including the humor in poetry, is a gendered phenomenon.

To be clear, I don't mean to say that certain people are incapable of "getting" certain jokes. Most of us, even if we don't think something is funny, can begrudgingly understand the reasons that someone else does. But Robinson and Smith-Lovin go on to note that "Humor typically has a target or butt, and jokes tend to be funnier when the good guys win and the bad guys lose" (126). If that idea sounds familiar, and if you weren't skeptical about humor before, you might be now: "good guys winning" and "bad guys losing" is nothing more than a tortured way of describing confirmation bias.³² And if we know that humor is biased towards a male perspective, isn't it reasonable to assume that men will be the targets of humor less often than women? Given this concern, it's worth being skeptical about whether humor can really be an effective tool for poetry. Indeed, might it actually be dangerous to employ humor in poetry, at the risk of tricking ourselves into thinking that we've somehow altered the condition of the world when all we've done is to reproduce, artistically, the dominant version of it?

Despite all of these concerns, the reality of humor is that men *can* make jokes that aren't hostile to women, and women *are* often the jokers. The legitimate danger of this discussion is making it sound as though humor – just because it often does differentiate – will *only* differentiate. In his comedy, the 34-year-old Aziz Ansari often crafts material out of

³² "Confirmation bias, as the term is typically used in the psychological literature, connotes the seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand" (Raymond S. Nickerson, "Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises").

contemporary, gendered dilemmas without being hostile to women. Conversely, many female comics (Tig Notaro, Ali Wong, and Samantha Bee, to name only a few) whose material emerges from a feminist perspective have found wide audiences among both men and women. If we're optimistic, the trends in humor for the culture at large will make their way into poetry (if those trends aren't at least indirectly an effect *of* poetry). When Eileen Myles says, "Is everyone / laughing at the / same thing" (*Different Streets*, 69), we catch her rhetorical drift, via the absence of a question mark on the question. No, we're not all laughing at the same thing. So what does that mean?

The next section will examine poems by Joe Wenderoth, Michael Earl Craig, Eileen Myles, and Mary Ruefle, each of which considers some of the possible effects of humor in poetry. As a bridge between this section and the next, consider Eileen Myles' poem, "to the mountains," the last line of which I pilfered for the title of this thesis. Since "to the mountains" is both a direct address ("Dear Cody Walker...") and a destination ("Thanks for the help, here I go..."), it feels like the right thing to end this section with. In the poem, Myles beholds the towering, white mountains (ostensibly from the inside of a plane³³), and contemplates the absurdity of the danger she faces. At first, danger takes the form of a Diet Coke, before becoming the mountain itself. Myles could be the grimacing mascot of this essay, embodying the idea of a poetry whose humor is social and political (she campaigned as an "openly female" write-in candidate for US president in 1992).

when I look out
at you
how absurd to think
of Diet Coke

³³ The setting for at least one bit, from every comic, ever. C.K. himself tells us about an instance in which he was sitting on a plane in first class, and saw a soldier board. C.K. contemplates whether the soldier, or he himself deserves to be sitting in first class. C.K. considers giving his seat up to the soldier, playing the fantasy of the generous gesture out in his head, and feeling a great sense of pride – but only at the thought. He keeps his seat ("Live at the Beacon Theatre").

killing me
I'm flying through
the air
and there you are
white and dangerous
who's kidding who

(Dis)integrative Humor: What can humor do in poetry?

GROSS: ... What were you working out about age in your mind when you wrote the scene that we just heard?

C.K.: Well, it's an interesting thing, you know. You – when you get older and you become less in the center of things, which I think is part of getting older, you know – there's more energy and focus on younger people – you start to resent it at first. You start to feel like, you know, somebody's taking something away from you. But then you realize that there's a privilege in that, and that it means that we're all developing. And it's part of your responsibility as a human, I think – is to, you know, get old and die. Get out of the way...

(LAUGHTER)

C.K.: ...So things can get better.

GROSS: Yes, get old, and die. And get out of the way (laughter).

Terry Gross interview with Louis C.K. (*NPR*)

Who can hear C.K. talking about youth and age, needing to “get out of the way,” without detecting an echo of those Bob Dylan lyrics: “Come mothers and fathers throughout the land / and don’t criticize what you can’t understand / your sons and your daughters are beyond your command / your old road is rapidly aging / please get out of the new one if you can’t lend your hand / for the times, they are a changin’...”³⁴ As it was in the 60s (as it *always* is), the language of the conflict – between generations, institutions, ideas – revolves around a social/cultural dilemma: Do we preserve and maintain our existing hierarchies, or deconstruct and replace and them?

The problem of preserving or changing social hierarchies exists in and through poetry. I subscribe to Waldrop’s idea that “When I say poetry is an exploration of language, this is not a retreat from the social because language is the structure that is shared by society and this otherness that is poetry.” Joe Wenderoth’s two line “Poem” (“emergency / to ogle”) distills the

³⁴ Bob Dylan, “The Times They Are A-Changin’” (1964).

organizational strategy of Waldrop's essay, "Alarms and Excursions," around the idea that poetry is "noise and commotion which interrupts the main action."³⁵

And at its best, humor in poetry highlights the conflict between private and public, self and other. The remainder of this thesis will consider the idea that "Like poetry, humor is subversive" (Simic 122). I've already argued for the usefulness of Fine's definition of humor regarding poetry ("all remarks that are apparently intended to elicit amusement"), which resolves the need to limit pleasure responses to laughter. Fine's definition allows for a broader range of amusement-responses: everything from the explosive relief of laughter to the quiet blush of delight. Fine's emphasis on participant intention also allows us to infer *intended* humor based on the presence of comic strategies, rather than relying solely on amusement responses.

So if poetry and humor are both subversive on their own, one might assume that humor *in* poetry is especially subversive. A good place to begin probing that assumption is with Murray S. Davis, author of "Sociology Through Humor."

Davis writes,

We can see how humor distances people from its topic in the very act of laughing itself. To laugh is to expell [sic] breath, which throws back the head. People fine-tune their distance from a topic they find funny through their degree of laughter, from giggle to guffaw. Since humor increases distance, it is a safe way to approach the most dangerous, most disruptive aspects of existence, such as sex and death, which are commonly its topics. Conversely, humor decreases the distance between audience members as much as it increases their collective distance from its topic. Thus humor is both integrative and disintegrative, integrative of certain social units precisely because it reveals the disintegration of others.

We should understand three things from Davis: 1) Changing the distance between communicative participants is a function of humor,³⁶ 2) that a joke can endear both the speaker

³⁵ There's that word "commotion" again, calling back Hume.

³⁶ "Distance" is involved at every level of the relationship between humor and poetry. "In order to account for the difference between metaphor and humor, so-called "distance theory" (Fónagy, 1982, Morrissey, 1989 and Pollio, 1996) has postulated that this is a matter of degree, depending on the semantic distance between the domains involved; when the linkage between two domains becomes too distant then it is perceived as humorous" (Piata). We

and the implicit argument to the reader (Just as an especially accurate image creates a halo of reliability around the poet, a good joke lets us “over-estimate the value of the thought on account of the enjoyment given us by its joking envelope” (Freud, 162))³⁷ and 3) that humor can strengthen or weaken certain social relationships. Humor changes the way we relate to one another, reforming, strengthening, or damaging social bonds depending on the context.

But how do we discover the “social units” being affected by a poem? As I’ve already mentioned, discussing the audience of a poem is problematic because of the solitary, individual nature of how poetry is read and consumed.³⁸ To talk about the way comic strategies reinforce the “integrative and disintegrative” social functions of poetry, or how humor in poetry can build cohesion around group identities, we need to spend a little more time dealing with the problem of audience.

For a moment, let’s return to the idea of a “vanishing self” from *Difficult Laughter*. Could we say that the author, whose identity has dissolved, has no audience in mind at all? As Joe Wenderoth says in his interview with Sandy Brown, “it seems ludicrous to me to settle into an identity (and this means place, occupation, etc.) and to write from or for that identity. The fundamental joke of [*Letters to Wendy’s*] is the forcing of truly poetic feeling into truly ludicrous character/place confines” (Wenderoth). Or perhaps more directly, in Wenderoth’s interview with Benjamin Dunham:

know this as the “trick” in making a good figurative image: the visual domains must be adequately distant for the image to be interesting.

³⁷ Washington Irving puts it nicely when he describes Oliver Goldsmith’s “mellow unforced humor, blended so happily with good feeling and sense,” which “win their way irresistibly to the affections and carry the author with them.”

³⁸ Louis C.K. has this to say: “The audience is such a mysterious animal to us, you know, so you’re always kept guessing. There are some nights you go to a club and you’re like, ‘I feel good, I’m ready to do a good show,’ but the audience has a strange unanimous grumpy feeling to them or something, and how did all these people – they’re all strangers to each other – but they’re all sitting there, ‘We hate this show,’ you know?” (Interview with Charlie Rose).

...the poet speaks by way of pretending to have died. The poet speaks from the end of a person's world. Without the end of a person's world, the poem's speech cannot begin. This is because the poem is not spoken by a person so much as it is spoken by the sudden absence of a person. The poet's voice arises from a disorientation-event, and its function is to restore some kind of orientation... so that a person might "go on." Beckett makes a joke of the whole situation—or rather, sees the joke implicit in the situation—when he says: "I can't go on. I'll go on. (Wenderoth)

What we learn from Wenderoth is that the humor in his poems is partly a product of disorientation; to write is to destabilize one's own identity, and there's something a little absurd, a little nihilistic, and a little comical about speaking from this position. Should we infer that the presence of humor in poetry typically signifies a gesture of self-annihilation? Perhaps humor is simply another tool for restoring the status of the reader.³⁹

There is, however, an alternate solution to identifying the audience in a humorous poem, and it doesn't require the annihilation of the author. Maybe the audience of a poem is, first and foremost, the poet writing.⁴⁰ Michael Earl Craig plays with this idea in his prose poem, "The Neighbor":

The neighbor said, 'But seriously, who is it you're writing these for? Surely you have an audience in mind.' I thought about it carefully, I did, but ended up repeating almost word for word what I had already said, which was that the poems were written for me, or for readers who were exactly the same person I was. I said I couldn't imagine any other person. I said I could see how that probably sounded disingenuous, or solipsistic, or both. And just then a small dinner roll fell from the table, rolled across the living room steadily, not slowing at all, or wobbling. It rolled across the room and passed through the doorway into the bedroom and the door slammed shut behind it (*Thin Kimono* 96).

"Readers who were exactly the same person I was," sounds like a paradox. The moment between the speaker and the neighbor comes off as funny because of its excess, its absurdity; "of course," we think "there's no such thing as an identical reader and writer." And that may be true. But the

³⁹ "Mallarme's entire poetics consists in suppressing the author for the sake of the writing (which is, as we shall see, to restore the status of the reader)" (Barthes, "The Death of the Author").

⁴⁰ As Gertrude Stein says, "I am writing for myself and strangers." (*The Making of Americans*, 1906-1908)

idea of intersubjectivity, or the ability to share another person's perspective,⁴¹ helps resolve this discrepancy. There may not ever be an identical poet and audience, but humor offers us the chance to share perspectives, to climb into the poem with a stranger, look around, and see if we find anything familiar.

Beeman offers more insight into how we might think of humor in poetry as a device that allows audience and author to share a perspective:

Humor, of all forms of communicative acts, is one of the most heavily dependent on equal cooperative participation of actor and audience. The audience, in order to enjoy humor, must "get" the joke. This means they must be capable of analyzing the cognitive frames presented by the actor and following the process of the creation of humor.

This description of humor, grounded in the idea of someone who "gets it," is essential. I've already talked about humor in terms of two communicative actors: "person who appreciates" and "person who expresses." For humor in poetry, the idea of someone who "gets it" points us to an ever-shortening distance between the two communicative participants. In a poem, "getting" the punchlines requires that the audience be familiar with a tremendous amount of contextual information. If we laugh at Kenneth Koch's "Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams" ("I chopped down the house that you had been saving to live in next / summer. / I am sorry, but it was morning, and I had nothing to do / and its wooden beams were so inviting."), it's because we recognize how perfectly Koch mimics the ambivalence of the apology, how excessive his parody is in comparison to the original. We're in on the joke.

⁴¹ "Intersubjectivity is an integral aspect of the philosophical movement known as phenomenology...intersubjectivity occurs when individual actors consciously recognize and attribute intentionality to each other. As a result, there is a requirement for actors to be self-aware, conscious beings if they are to participate in intersubjective exchanges" ("Humans and Other Animals," 126).

As a meta-commentary on humor, Wenderoth's "The Sacrifice" takes up the theory of intersubjectivity by using one of the most recognizable comedic tropes in the humor playbook.

The poem begins with a man literally walking into a bar:

I go with friends sometimes over to Woodland
to Big Mac Daddy's authentic Irish pub
to get drunk and sing karaoke.
This last time, on St. Paddy's Day,
the karaoke guy's father had died
earlier in the day, and suddenly he tells us this,
and I thought at first that there would be a punch line,
but there wasn't. Just:
"in a plane crash."
And so then he sings a song to his dad –
that Clapton song about
when I see you in Heaven –
and a woman from somewhere in the bar
goes over to him and hugs him,
and he's singing and crying
while she hugs him.
Then the owner of the bar gets up there
and says how close the karaoke guy
was to his dad, and says
how it's a demonstration of character
that he came in to work tonite.
"I wouldn't have come in," he says.
"So let's support him," he says.
"He's a great guy."
We cheered.
There were twenty-five of us
in the dim bar, give or take.
Twenty-five souls.
We cheered.
We confessed to being *still alive*.
Without irony, we were suddenly able to believe
in the shapes shifting in the dim light –
we sang drank and danced.
But there was nothing we could do to support him.

(*If I Don't Breathe How Do I Sleep* 27)

Wenderoth presents us with an initial cognitive frame, the "man walking into a bar," and builds up to an ending "without irony," creating a surprising incongruity in our expectations about how a joke is supposed to work. The joke is that there is no joke. The plain style of diction and the

dominance of the end-stopped line reinforce the absence of “jokiness”: usually, humor based on incongruity in poems is achieved by playing with enjambments, using the distance between lines to create surprising turns in image or metaphor (Piata). But Wenderoth doesn’t give us any sudden surprises. Instead, the poem concludes with a cheer, repeated twice: the group expresses a shared emotion, a unification of perspective that culminates in a totally sincere ability “to believe” in the chimeras of friend, family, character. Then a small pivot in the last line: the poem’s speaker reveals that the group’s celebration is foolish and misguided, nothing more than a temporary bacchanalia of forgetfulness. But we on the outside, looking on soberly (recalling the comic theory of superiority) – the ones who, like the poet, understand that there’s “nothing we could do to support him” – we grin. This kind of poem is very much in the genre of difficult laughter, and as Walker expounds in detail, Wenderoth probably inherits some of his comedic methodology from authors like Philip Larkin (I think of poems like “Money,” and “This Be the Verse”). Wenderoth shows us what intersubjectivity looks like, and criticizes its uselessness: it leads to false comfort, inaction, hopelessness. The “karaoke guy” is on his own.

Though the humor in “The Sacrifice” leads to a place of hopelessness and inaction, other authors use intersubjectivity as a way of building cohesion with specific social groups. Look at Myles’ “pencil #4”:

A dog walks into a barber
shop.
I’m not into gender
OK says the barber
so don’t think of me
as a bitch
but just one of your regular
customers
who wants to do something
a little different
I’m okay with that
says the barber.
Hot towels warm my
head, smelling of

mint. Warm lather
 on my neck. Woof woof
 You're a dog.
 No I'm not.
 And I bit him.⁴²

While this poem also begins with a “someone walking into a something,” Myles has broken the stability of the classic joke’s logic, using the first line’s enjambment to turn it into a “someone walking into a someone.” The rest of the poem proceeds to conflate the concept of gender and the dog’s need for a haircut (delightfully employing that old haircut cliché “I want to do something a little different” as a way of referring to gender, the poem, and the literal situation). “Bitch” echoes “butch.” The speaker’s request that the barber not “think of” them in terms of a gender binary – which the bartender acquiesces to – may as well be directed at the reader. The poem ends, unusually for Myles, with three end-stopped lines. Who’s speaking to whom in these lines is difficult to parse. Whoever “you” and “I” are, it’s clear that one voice is trying to identify the other. Someone wants to say for sure, “this is what you are,” and someone else is resisting. The poem ends, unresolved, with the minor commotion of a “bite.”

The absurdity of the literal situation in “pencil #4” is part of its excess. The poem requires its audience to suspend the reality of the situation.⁴³ Flaherty calls this “reality-play”: the nature of humor, through its multiple incongruous cognitive frames, to force us into a “situation-defining” reality maintenance: “Do I agree with this? Does this make sense?” If it’s funny, the answer will probably be yes. As Freud says, “Where argument tries to draw the hearer’s criticism over on to its side, the joke endeavors to push the criticism out of sight. There is no doubt that the joke has chosen the method which is psychologically the more effective” (163).⁴⁴ Flaherty suggests that

⁴² *Different Streets*, 11

⁴³ Although it might not be entirely strange to see a dog walk into a barber shop in a city like Seattle, where most pets live in greater luxury than their owners.

⁴⁴ “O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!” (Keats, Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817).

we do this reality-play in order to define ourselves, others, and social situations. In Myles' poetry, the absurd excesses are manifestations of a discontent. The humor "'inserts subjectivity into objectivity' and thus desintegrates [sic] reality" (Jonsson-Devillers 174). The discontent is with a specific social hierarchy – the dominant ways of thinking about gender – and she attempts to disintegrate it by creating a humorous scenario in which its logic is absurd.

I argue that one result of intersubjectivity in humorous poetry is a strengthening of social bonds in people who identify with marginalized or "othered" groups.⁴⁵ Humor closes certain distances related to identity, and the poem becomes a kind of shibboleth. Robinson and Smith-Lovin call it "cohesion building": "A means of defining shared group identities and fostering positive group relations" (126). Walker might have thought of it as a kind of relief, in which the nervous energy of the poem's humor is expelled by the sudden knowledge that there are others who see the world the same way. A shibboleth, in general, is any kind of speech that distinguishes a member of a group (OED). Shibboleths come from "The need to draw a boundary between the internal space of a specific culture (or cultural system) and the external space that lies beyond it. Every culture takes it as a given that something else lies immediately outside it. Without this 'other space,' there can be no sense of cultural self" (Lotman). If humor and poetry are sometimes threatening to existing social hierarchies, it's because they offer other ways of thinking. The dominant ways of thinking about the world go on the defensive. Humor that closes one distance necessarily opens another.

Simic puts it another way: "The whole notion of hierarchy and its various supporting institutions depends on the absence of humor."⁴⁶ The ridiculousness of authority must not be

⁴⁵ "A lot of comedy is a defense. A shield or an arrow shot by a wounded person into a cruel world" (C.K., "Barry Crimmins: Whatever Threatens You").

mentioned. The church, the state, and the academy are in complete accord about that. The Emperor who has no clothes always strolls past silent courtiers” (“Cut the Comedy” 121-22). Simic is likely thinking of political and state hierarchies – but what about the hierarchies that politics and state depend on? Many of the poets published at Wave Books take aim, specifically, at the hierarchy of gender. Take Mary Ruefle’s prose poem, “The Taking of Moundville by Zoom”:

If you were very, very small, smaller than a leprechaun, smaller than a gnome or a fairy, and you lived in a vagina, every time a penis came in there would be a natural disaster. Your dishes would fall out of the cupboards and break and the furniture slide all the way to the other side of the room. It would take a long time to clean up afterwards. (47)

The “if” phrase that begins the poem creates a misdirection, suggesting that the ideas will be organized around a kind of strict, rhetorical logic. The sudden addition of “and you lived in a vagina” at the end of the serial list describing small things (all of which are fantasy creatures) completely disrupts any logic of the analogy. The implicit “then” beginning the phrase “every time a penis came in” heightens the excess of the natural disaster metaphor. The next images, like stock footage from an earthquake, feel only more ridiculous as we struggle to imagine the chaos playing out inside a literal vagina. The last line is a commitment to the metaphor, but the sincerity of the commitment has been undercut by the subjunctive mood of the “would” verbs.

Another one of Ruefle’s poems, “On Twilight,” might help illustrate how she uses humor to deconstruct and examine social hierarchies. In this case, Ruefle levels her canons at religion and masculinity:

I read through the poem of a student and in the poem God wandered through a room picking up random objects - a pear, a vase, a shoe - and in bewilderment said, “I made this?”. Apparently God had forgotten making anything at all. I awarded this poem a prize, because I was judge of such matters. I was not really awarding the student, I was awarding God; I knew someday the student would pick up his old poem and say in bewilderment, “I made this?”, and at that moment his whole world would be lost in the twilight, and when you are finally lost in the twilight, you cannot judge anything. (*The Most of It* 70)

Compare this to Eileen Myles' "#12 Man's Beauty"⁴⁷:

we go this way and
you go that

things are a lot better
for us now

a man's beauty
remains the one thing
you are absolutely
not allowed to
discuss

it's not a subject
he'll tell you
so his beauty winds
up being like that of god

you can be yammering
outside of the castle
god's not going to come out
just so you can see what the

oh shut up

Both of these poems deal with the idea of "man as God." The humor of Ruefle's comparison between herself, the student, and God, revolves around the idea of "making," which they are all guilty of. Ruefle uses the rolling, multi-line, uninterrupted syntax of the prose poem in the beginning and end to heighten the confusion of "who's judging what," punctuating the middle of the poem with short declarative sentences. The inability to determine who should get credit for what, thanks to the shifting identity of the "judge," finds its critique in the small revelation that the student is a "he." The speaker's confidence that, "When you are finally lost in the twilight, you cannot judge anything," seems to come from a place of superiority; however, we already know that the speaker has entangled herself in the mess of judges. This is the humor of self-deprecation, which is central to cohesion building. Superiority theory hinges on the idea that

⁴⁷ *Snowflake*, 40

individuals direct humor at objects in categories to which they do not belong (Robinson & Smith-Lovin). But in some of our best poetry, self-deprecation – or an acknowledgement of one’s own complicitness in what we criticize – allows the poet to draw closer to the criticized group. The speaker acknowledges herself, like God, as a forgetful maker, but distinguishes herself from the male student, who we presume does not see the ironic connection as she does.

Myles takes on the same subject with a different approach. From the outset, she distinguishes between “we” and “you,” setting up an opposition of perspective. When she states that “things are a lot better / for us now,” we implicitly understand that things probably aren’t going so well for “you.” The “you” finds its target in “a man’s beauty.” We are told that masculine beauty is a taboo subject, and by way of being forbidden, it becomes “like that of god.” Then, in a little moment of excess, Myles suddenly introduces a castle. The power dynamic becomes explicitly hierarchical. “We” are “yamming,” making a commotion, maybe for the god-king’s attention – which we don’t get. The poem ends with what seems like an address to “us” from God: “*oh shut up.*” God, a metonym for masculinity, may silence the commotion, but the humor of the poem yammers on.

Though their approaches are different, both Ruefle and Myles use the humor in their poems to challenge social hierarchies related to gender. Where Ruefle is specifically concerned with masculinity, Myles tends to extend the critiquing powers of her humor to gender in general: “There’s no female / in my position / There’s no man / wow / there’s a raccoon / on the tail / of the plane / and there’s / no one / seeing that now / but me” (*Snowflake* 22). The introduction of “raccoon” into the female/male binary that Myles sets up reminds us of how absurd these distinctions are. While Myles claims she’s the only one that sees it, we might apply an

intersubjective explanation to suggest that she *extends* the joke to us – but it’s ultimately up to us to “get it” and get in on it.

With so many examples and excursions, I should come back around to one of the first questions I posed in this section and answer it without any more divagations: Is humor in poetry inherently subversive? Practically (and scientifically) speaking, the answer is no.⁴⁸ Humorous poetry may have the ability to reinforce or challenge social relationships, but the poet is still the determining factor in who the “good” and “bad” guys are. From this investigation into humor and poetry, I take away three principal ideas: firstly, that a poem’s moments of humor can be cruel, finely crafted exercises in confirmation bias; secondly, that sex, death, and scatological humor will always make us laugh (though the context and framing might actually prevent us from laughing); and thirdly, that for better or for worse, humor can be useful to bridge the gap between the reader’s and writer’s experiences in poetry.

What should a writer do with this information? Rather than justifying the use of humor in poetry as I had initially hoped I would, it seems to me now that we should regard the use of humor in our poems with a degree of skepticism. If we accept Derber’s claim that “...attention is a necessary requisite of power,” then I would add that laughter is a tremendously powerful form of attention. I fear that the persuasiveness of humor may lead certain poets to operate under the delusions that they’ve said something important just because it’s funny.

As Waldrop argues in the conclusion to *Alarms and Excursions*, it’s not until techniques spread through many mediums that they truly become effective and gain the power to affect

⁴⁸ Merwin was once asked what social role a poet plays—if any—in America. He commented: “I think there’s a kind of desperate hope built into poetry now that one really wants, hopelessly, to save the world. One is trying to say everything that can be said for the things that one loves while there’s still time. I think that’s a social role, don’t you? ... We keep expressing our anger and our love, and we hope, hopelessly perhaps, that it will have some effect” (Poetry Foundation).

social change on a significant level. In a longer discussion, I would have taken the time to examine how current satirists, especially political TV satirists (Samantha Bee, Trevor Noah, John Oliver, among others) use these humor techniques to reach a wide audience and practice intersubjectivity on a large scale. But even these comedians are cautious about the influence of their humor:

Are the jokes having any effect? The comics themselves are the first to dismiss the notion. "I don't think we move the needle at all," says [Samantha] Bee. "It would be very hurtful to the show if I started to believe that I had influence. It's very hard to do satire when you take yourself too seriously"... [Trevor] Noah frets that satire may give fans "a false sense of activism, because people experience a catharsis and they go, 'Yeah, we've done our job, we've retweeted that clip.' Like Obama said, 'Don't boo, vote.'" (Zoglin)

The lesson for poets interested in using humor may be that we should go about it cautiously, and with realistic expectations. We know that the joke in the third strophe might get a chuckle, but the chuckle may not necessarily entail the toppling of empires. Still, inventing new jokes and amusing ourselves will remain one of the great pleasures of poetry, one of the reasons we pass our time with enjambments and assonances, absurd images and elaborate figures. If humor cannot entirely manage to justify itself or to explain its usefulness, then that's one more thing it shares with poetry. Humor and poetry are both irreducible, both valuable precisely because they cause us a little discomfort, failing to be easily explained. "How awkward the wine is to carry / on my shoulder," says W.S. Merwin. "That's part of the joy."

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