

An illustration of a woman in a red dress standing in a field, looking up at a large, glowing orange fruit hanging from a tree. The scene is set against a warm, pinkish-orange background. The woman is holding a white cloth or bag. The tree is dark and leafy, with the fruit being the central focus. The overall style is whimsical and surreal.

American Comic Poetry

History,
Techniques
and Modern
Masters

Jeff Morgan

Foreword by Michael Hettich

American Comic Poetry

*History, Techniques and
Modern Masters*

JEFF MORGAN

Foreword by MICHAEL HETTICH



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American Comic Poetry

To my wife,
Dana Mary Lodge

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Foreword: The Best of All Medicines

Michael Hettich

In my third year of college, when I was just beginning to focus seriously on learning to write poetry, I lucked into the opportunity to study one-on-one with the Finnish American poet Anselm Hollo—a wild ride and a profound education in poetry and in the life-lived-with-gusto. Hollo introduced me to a wide array of new ways (for me) of thinking about—and writing—poetry, including Charles Olson’s “projective” verse, the work of the Objectivists—including Louis Zukofsky—and even some of the poets who would later become central to the LANGUAGE movement of the 1980s and beyond. While all of these poets were doing engaging and exciting work, they, like their High Modernist predecessors, were intellectually daunting, deadly serious, and generally off-putting to anyone who wasn’t him/herself a critic or poet. My heart was more truly drawn to the associative, surrealist-influenced poetics of the “Deep Image” writers and the poets of Latin America and Eastern Europe, so, though I was a bit in awe of Anselm himself, the poets he introduced me to never quite sang for me. Somehow I just didn’t feel smart enough for them.

Then, one morning over small cups of very-strong coffee, Anselm introduced me to Frank O’Hara’s poetry and to his “Personism: A Manifesto.” These were a revelation. I felt as though the sky had suddenly cleared to show a world of dazzling everyday pleasures in which crossing the street in traffic could be a thrill, and wolfing down a hot dog could be a gastronomical delight. In one fell swoop my idea of poetry—and indeed my whole attitude toward life and art—blossomed in its

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capacity for exuberance and humor. Poetry could be fun; daily life, despite its griefs and hassles, could be a great adventure, peopled with vivid friends, good food, lively parties, music, painting, and love. For O'Hara, one of poetry's great tasks was to represent—enact—everyday pleasure and thus celebrate the textures and tones in the swirl and cacophony of the modern urban experience. I was thrilled. Though O'Hara's work was grief-filled at its core, he had the courage to celebrate pleasure, to explode tired stereotypes of poetry and its role in cultural discourse. The poetry was brilliant and accessible, glittering and profound, deeply educated and of-the-moment. And perhaps most importantly: this man had a sense of humor.

Sometime around then, I went with Anselm to a reading by James Tate, who had only published a few books at that point. I was transfixed by the manic darkness in Tate's work and sat spellbound while Anselm laughed uproariously. Though he took Tate seriously as a poet—and though he himself was going through great personal difficulties at the time—he laughed with cathartic relief. To me, it seemed somehow sacrilegious to *laugh* at a poetry reading, though I had to admit, these poems were truly, brutally funny—and they resonated with truth.

As Jeff Morgan demonstrates in this witty, timely, engaging and humane book, comic poetry has a kick that transcends the (merely) personal, confessional, surreal or theoretical, though it can easily contain all these things. It is capacious and voracious, and as such it can bring a vividness and vulnerability into poetry that readers—all of us—are hungry for. In a world beset with horrors beyond imagination, our need for such poetry is not simply a strategy for survival—though it is that—but truly as a way of *seeing*, a way of *being*, a means of staying sane.

As Morgan reminds us, comic poetry is serious stuff.

And, as this book deftly shows, comic poetry enacts a brief victory over the “reasonable” response to our absurd world, enacting a moment of freedom that enables one to behave like a child or a savage—which, as Morgan says, can be “fun.” In liberating us from social trappings, comic poetry enables us to briefly think and feel as we did in childhood. We are freed from reason by laughter, and thus we are renewed.

Or, as O'Hara says of poetic form: “if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go

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to bed with you...” And thus, as in Collins, the ordinary becomes extraordinary. As Morgan asserts, this is poetry that can sing—and speak—to the ordinary reader hungering for the news found there.

I love the way Jeff Morgan illuminates the work of Collins, Lux, and Hoagland, but I am particularly pleased to read his fine discussions of poems by Duhamel and McGrath, wonderful poets and deeply humane, generous, vividly-alive human beings whom I am pleased to call friends. Though the creative writing MFA program at Florida International University where they both teach has long been famous for its writers of detective fiction—Hall, Standiford, Lahane, Dufresne, among others—no one has noted, as far as I know, that it has also been home to three comic poets of the highest caliber—Duhamel and McGrath, of course, but also the novelist Jim Hall, whose early books of poetry—especially *False Statements*—are among the funniest ever written. Perhaps there’s something in the water down here in South Florida, something beyond the fact that it’s rising all around us, more quickly than anywhere else in the world.

Establishing a history, a line of development, a canon, of comic American poetry, Morgan’s book is a valuable first step in demonstrating the serious vein of comedy that runs through American literature and is especially potent in contemporary American poetry. This book illuminates some of the strongest work of the great comic era we are now in, an era when the serious virtues of comedy may begin to be plumbed and the freedom that comedy enacts and encourages may finally be realized. Or, as Tony Hoagland himself has said:

“...I walk out to my old car in the parking lot
—which, after the slight adjustment of a spring shower
looks almost new again.”
 (“Argentina”)

And as we all know, spring showers make the flowers grow, making the world new again—which, after all, as old Ezra Pound reminded us, is the function of all true poetry.

Michael Hettich is the author of Systems of Vanishing, which won the 2013 Tampa Review Prize and was published in April 2014. Other books of poetry include The Animals Beyond Us (2011) and Like Happiness (2010). He lives and teaches in Miami.

Preface

This book has been a long time coming. After studying comic theory under Dr. Marilyn Samuels during my English doctoral studies at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, in the mid-90s, I thought I wanted to write my dissertation using comic theory, specifically Marcel Gutwirth's three-pronged approach, the central paradigm for this book. I worked for a couple months, researching and writing on Mark Twain, aiming to develop a dissertation on his comic technique. The comic theory that grounds this book stems from research initially done at Case Western Reserve University, whose library, by the way, shares the same name as the hall my office is in at Lynn University in Boca Raton. I like stuff like that. Anyway, back in 1996 in Cleveland, the Twain dissertation seemed, at first, like a good idea. After all, Twain almost lived in Cleveland, spending a great deal of time there, and Roger Salomon, my mentor, was a nationally known Twain scholar. Despite my Gutwirth theoretical base, which had never been applied to Twain's comic technique, I felt like I was flooding an already saturated market of scholarly books on Mark Twain's comedy, so I ended up revisiting an essay I wrote for a class with Roger Salomon and expanded that essay into a dissertation on Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. That dissertation was published by Edwin Mellen Press in 2002. The rest, as they say, is history.

This book is awful darn close to the dissertation I wanted to write back in the 1990s in Cleveland. All along the passing years, I have been revisiting Gutwirth and his three-pronged approach to analyzing comedy. Gutwirth focuses on a nexus between incongruity, satire, and the psychological, combining to provide us with a brief victory over reason that could save ourselves if not the world. With such hyperbole it may not surprise that, after graduating with an undergraduate degree in

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English from Ohio University in Athens, I stopped writing poetry, tired of all the rejection, and concentrated on teaching and literary analysis, ultimately earning an M.A. in English from Pan American in Edinburg, Texas, before the Case years. When I personally returned to the writing of poetry after around two decades of abandonment, I fell in with the comic lot: Billy Collins, Thomas Lux, and Tony Hoagland.

After experiencing them live and noting the well-deserved recognition from audiences, I began looking into the critical canon on these three men. There is next to nothing. "As close as 99 is to 100" as Zora Neale Hurston's Janie might say. I felt like championing them. Here was comedy that had some meat on its bone, the kind of rich comedy that Mark Twain wrote, the kind I wanted to write about back in Cleveland, the kind this book is about. David Kirby and Barbara Hamby compiled a 2010 anthology of contemporary American comic poetry in their book, *Seriously Funny*. In their introduction, they explain the selections for the anthology, writing, "We're not looking for funny poems; we're looking for seriously funny poems, ones that evoke poetry's timeless concerns but include a comic element as well" (xiii). The comic element is where this book enters the discussion about contemporary American comic poetry.

In 2009, Lynn University, where I have taught since 1999, was gracious enough to financially support me to present a series of papers that year (yes, four in one year) at conferences where I could test out my Gutwirth-based analysis of these poets, update myself on comic theory and criticism on these poets, and start applying theory to some of their comic writing. The papers that resulted from those conferences are a large part of the culminating, if not crowning, chapters of this book.

Specifically, I must recognize the following conferences. First, in the summer of 2009, Common Ground sponsored the International Conference on the Arts in Society at the Instituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti in Venice, Italy, where I presented on Thomas Lux, focusing on the social ends to his comic poetry. In the fall, I presented on Tony Hoagland's comic poetry under a hybrid gaze of psychology and cultural sensitivity theory at the 34th Annual Colloquium on Literature and Film at West Virginia University in Morgantown. Yes, I stayed in The Morgan Hotel. The stars were aligned. What's the Irish

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joke about never passing a bar with your name on it? Anyway, not much later that fall, while visiting my son, Colin, in New York, I presented on Billy Collins in the Algonquin Hotel, the same hotel where Dorothy Parker, a significant subject of this book, convened with the famous Round Table of wits in the early twentieth-century. I'm at the Algonquin for the annual School of Visual Arts International Conference. I focused on an analysis of the ironic starting points of the comedy in several poems by Collins. So, in those three presentations, I had the three sides to Marcel Gutwirth's comic theory: the functional (social), the psychological, and the intellectual (irony). To test putting all three theories together in one analysis of one poem, I presented "Three Ways of Looking at Campbell McGrath's 'Ode to Bureaucrats'" at the fall 2009 Florida College English Association (FCEA) Annual Meeting in Boynton Beach, Florida, where I happen to live. A year later, at the FCEA conference in Winter Park, Florida, hosted by Rollins College, I presented on a sustained comic piece, a series of prose poems from Denise Duhamel's *Ka-Ching*. If any of the above essays made it into print or online, I cite them in the bibliography.

Since then, I have been working on these manuscripts whenever I could find the time while teaching a full load at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Florida, and finishing other writing projects that were further down my pipeline, but the time has come for *American Comic Poetry: History, Techniques and Modern Masters* to crawl out into the light. I have finally amalgamated all this research and writing into a book whose approach and subject matter set it apart from any other book on the market under the umbrella of comic theory, so I give you *American Comic Poetry: History, Techniques and Modern Masters*. Enjoy!

Introduction

I have noticed the comic poetry at readings usually gets the most response out of the audience, the serious, deep, ponderous poems receiving those under the breath “ums” that Kim Adonizzio refers to as “gerbil orgasms.” Yet, few write about or analyze the comic poems. This book champions its title, *American Comic Poetry*, as a movement that has become popular with readings and festivals but with limited scholarly analysis, likely because the poetry is comic, and comedy all too often is viewed as not having the thematic sophistication of less comic work. This book evinces how sophisticated *American Comic Poetry* can be and how it is worthy of more scholarly analysis, for, in addition to making us laugh, it, too, can produce gerbil orgasms and much, much more.

To get a better understanding of how American comedy has suffered from perception issues for some time, let us turn to the man who is arguably one of the highest priests of American Comedy, the original American stand-up comedian, Mark Twain, born Samuel Langhorne Clemens. I almost always think of him as Mark Twain and almost always refer to him in writing as such, but I will adopt the common practice of Clemens in reference to the man, Twain to the artist, and pronouns wherever I can. He had been living on lecture circuit fame, comically recalling his travels and, in addition to numerous sketches in numerous newspapers, had one book, *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches*, as he tried to woo Olivia Langdon, who hailed from a sophisticated family in Elmira, New York. His propensity for comedy did not help his romance. He recognizes this in a letter to his Cleveland patron, Mary Fairbanks. Clemens writes, “Olivia Langdon wasn’t attracted to her Sam as a humorist, too low, and Sam agreed, thinking ‘a humorist is something perfectly awful”