

Book Review

Marsh, Huw. 2020. *The Comic Turn in Contemporary English Fiction: Who's Laughing Now?* London and New York, ix+247 pp. ISBN: 9781350249387. E-book ISBN: 9781474293044.

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<https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2022-0020>

Huw Marsh's *The Comic Turn in Contemporary English Fiction* (henceforth '*The Comic Turn*') uses representative examples of literary fiction to offer an insightful-if-bleak portrayal of the comic as a site where communities and identities are continually reconstructed. Marsh's book is a product of the period immediately after Donald Trump's presidential election and the Brexit referendum: a moment in which the performative manipulations of Western politicians have become abundantly clear. In light of this context, *The Comic Turn* returns time and time again to the insidious function(s) of the comic as Marsh reveals just how "interestingly problematic" (p. 2) humor has become. This is not to say, though, that the theoretical contributions of *The Comic Turn* are only applicable to fiction published since the millennium. Rather, *The Comic Turn* uses its geo-cultural and historical specificity to substantiate comic forms, concepts and theories that can be extrapolated and applied to texts outside the contemporary period, the English canon, and even strict definitions of 'fiction'.

Marsh's sole authorship offers the perspective of only one critic, yet *The Comic Turn* unpacks numerous aspects of contemporary comic writing, one in each chapter. These are then unified by a clear positioning of the comic as a means of engaging with political debates with unexpected and often contradictory results. This is particularly apparent in the first and last chapters, which focus on the "political effectiveness" (p. 24) of humor and how such writers as Jonathan Coe have reflected upon it to make comic capital at the expense of satire's revolutionary aspirations. Marsh's return to this question of efficacy in his conclusion emphasizes this ambivalence towards the comic, even while he uses the body of his research to offer a range of approaches that acknowledge the breadth of cultural work performed by this multifaceted, pervasive phenomenon.

In the introductory chapter, Marsh opens his discussion by re-visiting the history of critical ghettoization that the comic turn has faced, and links it to the hazy boundaries that delineate the concept of comedy in the contemporary period. To some readers, this introduction may appear counter-productive because it appears more intent on challenging definitions than explaining them. Indeed,

Marsh's acknowledgement of the inherent vagueness of his project's eponymous concerns (including "the comic," "contemporary," and "English") initially threatens to undermine this work's value as a critical endeavor. Yet Marsh's emphasis on contextual factors in all aspects of the comic ultimately highlights the indeterminacy and mutability of humor and comedy. The following chapters then demonstrate that these various facets are what enable comic voices to fulfill a range of socio-political functions. Before that, though, Marsh situates his work among the existing research concerning contemporary comedy via a thorough literature review and a justification of his decision not to synthesize the superiority, relief and incongruity theories of humor that appear in countless preceding works.

The first chapter of *The Comic Turn* uses the work of Jonathan Coe to problematize satire as a form of political intervention. In the process, it invokes a sense of pessimism regarding comedy's political function that, however unintentionally, permeates throughout this study. Marsh's analysis draws upon real-world political events to evidence the cultural work reflected upon by Coe in such comic novels as *What a Carve Up!* (1994) and *Number 11, or Tales that Witness Madness* (2011). These texts, Marsh argues, illustrate the 'paradox of satire' (p. 24): the way in which satire provides the *illusion* of accountability. Beyond the specific deployment of the comic turn within contemporary political discourse, Marsh also draws upon established theories concerning comedy and indicates how they have been updated by later theorists. Of these, the reviewer would have liked to see Marsh's concept of "metacomedy" (p. 29) expanded further, because it represents a timely point of tension between the desire to intervene in socio-political affairs and an unwillingness to dismiss said affairs as mere entertainment.

Similar to the preceding discussion, Marsh's second chapter offers one writer's reflexive commentary on comic fiction to demonstrate and critique an aspect of the comic turn that recurs across their oeuvre. Specifically, this chapter addresses the work of Martin Amis to evidence the insidious 'othering' process performed by "register humor" (p. 60): a form of comedy that raises issues of stereotype fetishization and antipathy. In the pursuit of this, Marsh uses such novels as *London Fields* (1988) and *Lionel Asbo: State of England* (2012) to illustrate the subtle power dynamics that are reinforced through a comic text's discursive style, when style itself becomes loaded with moral value. By framing Amis's fiction as a representative example of this process, Marsh makes it clear that similar arguments could be made in relation to the conflict of styles in the work of other authors.

Marsh's third chapter analyses the multifaceted voice(s) in Zadie Smith's work to examine laughter as a form of interpersonal communication *within* comic literature – as opposed to examining comic literature in its role as cultural product and form of entertainment. This approach to the study of the comic in everyday life

appears a novel one, whereby Smith's self-reflexive commentary on comedy in quotidian interactions underpins Marsh's presentation of the comic as a fruitful means of exploring subjects that people struggle to articulate. Adopting this perspective, the delineation between laughing "with" and laughing "at" is at once made clear and complicated by such texts as *White Teeth* (2000) and *Swing Time* (2016), through which Marsh demonstrates that even a shared joke or complimentary sense of humor can drive people apart when ambiguous, often unspoken, rules are challenged.

Chapter four sets itself the difficult task of positioning tragicomedy as conceptually, politically and metaphysically distinct from tragedy. Here, Marsh uses the novels of Magnus Mills to expand upon the derisive view of automatism laid out by Henri Bergson. From this view of repetitive humor, the mechanical inelasticity of the modern subject is the vehicle for critiquing "the absurdities of work" (p. 106). Consequently, Marsh argues, conformity to capitalism becomes the object of ridicule in Mills' novels and the impersonal endpoint of social, political or economic indoctrination. However, Marsh also demonstrates that the satirical import of Mills' comedy is tempered by ambivalence. Indeed, Marsh attributes a "sense of purgatorial repetition" (p. 128) to such works as *The Restraint of Beasts* (1998) whose cyclical nature undercuts any politically constructive reading. If repetition suggests that some over-arching meta-narrative is dictating the course of our lives, this chapter asks, if "hell is repetition and repetition is hell" (p. 127) then is the repetitiveness of work symptomatic or representative of this meta-narrative?

In chapter five of *The Comic Turn*, Marsh uses Nicola Barker's fiction to consolidate three points of contention regarding comedy's political function that were raised in preceding chapters. He uses *Burley Cross Postbox Theft* (2010) and *The Cauliflower* (2016), while referencing other texts, to outline the centrality of paradox within comic novels, the way their revolutionary potential undermines itself and the use of humor as a sympathetic answer to the dehumanization inherent in postmodern irony. Marsh does not limit this discussion to the comic's didactic potential, though, and expands his discussion to encompass a suitably profound contemplation of the contradictions that define all human lives. Furthermore, Marsh's use of the term "exquisite paradoxes" (p. 165) appears an apt vehicle for the study of comedy (and, indeed, horror) and its exploration in relation to Barker's work helps evidence this appropriateness without becoming overly abstract.

Chapter six turns to Howard Jacobson to demonstrate how comic novels provide a more fertile ground for exploring the comic than non-fiction written by the same authors. The chapter begins by showing how Jacobson's non-fiction supports forms of bigoted humor that veer into the realms of hate-speech. Marsh takes this observation as an opportunity to reiterate how shared humor can

reinforce dichotomies that more idealistic theorists claim it elides. By opening the final chapter with such a discussion, Marsh impresses upon the reader the dangers of absolute freedom from social censorship that his analysis of Trump-era satire then extends directly into the political sphere. However, Marsh also demonstrates how Jacobson's fiction offers a more nuanced sensitivity to the vagaries of a given joke's appropriateness and offensiveness. He thus ends the chapter by suggesting that there is no stable framework to analyze all forms of comedy, because the political paradigms of each joke are predicated upon the context, intention and identity of both the humorist and their audience.

Seemingly determined to provide as startling an indictment of the comic turn's contemporary applications as possible, Marsh uses his conclusion to return, once more, to the use of the comic by politicians such as Boris Johnson, who employs humor to perform accountability and affability while concealing more sinister motives. At this point Marsh's analysis turns away from the ambiguities of 'the comic' and 'the novel' to a specific interrogation of 'Englishness' and how humor is used to construct such a wholly unreal concept. Contrasting the presentation of nationalism in the *Isle of Wonder* (the London Olympics' opening ceremony) and Julian Barnes's novel *England, England* (1998), Marsh ends his study by reiterating his overarching argument that even ostensibly 'positive' applications of the comic are exploited for politically regressive or oppressive ends. Thus, while *The Comic Turn* does offer ways in which comic voices within and without fiction can destabilize hegemonic assumptions and promote egalitarian ideologies, overall Marsh's study leaves the reader with a bleak, almost sinister, portrayal of the comic's political function.