

Book Review

Rachel Trousdale. *Humor, Empathy, and Community in Twentieth-Century American Poetry.* Oxford University Press, 2022. 288 pages.

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I read much of *Humor, Empathy, and Community in Twentieth-Century American Poetry* during six hours on a full Greyhound bus, which is a good test of any thesis about humor, empathy, or community. Every page was both fun and compelling: this book is an exciting study of recent American poets who are drawn to humor more than—and in more ways than—we have recognized. As Rachel Trousdale shows, these poets do not just write very funny poems: they are interested in the ethical and intersubjective possibilities of humor, especially in how laughter can help people empathize or fail to empathize.

The introduction gradually establishes the many links between humor and fellow-feeling. Our three most famous theories of humor tend to view humor as having little to do with empathy, or indeed see its absence as necessary for laughter, though Trousdale observes that “empathy and laughter are frequently described in similar terms” (36). Her opening pages offer a precise, careful, nuanced encapsulation of previous humor theories—for instance, they make illuminating distinctions between kinds of superiority theorists—and would be useful for undergraduate classes on comedy, both for the detailed overview itself and for how that overview models clarity and generosity in dealing with hundreds of years of critics.

The heart of the introduction sets out humor’s under-explored capacity to draw things and people together—and to draw lines between people, to make in-jokes, to mock. Trousdale immediately acknowledges that modes of humor “can indicate or even create very different kinds of group identity, from the most repressive and authoritarian to the most inclusive and democratic. They can both promote and suppress fellow-feeling” (2). She also notes that empathy itself is a limited, complicated foundation for ethical behavior. But rightly sensing the parallels between the phenomena of laughter and recognition, Trousdale makes a case for “empathic laughter,” which includes not just moments where we laugh with someone experiencing something we’ve experienced but for rarer moments of “constructive humor,” which “create empathy with an unfamiliar or apparently unfamiliar position” (37). There is a lovely analogy made for empathy as “a telescope, bringing us close to another person while we remain distant from them” (35); for the poets of this book, humor itself—at least from time to time—can do something similar.

By pointing to connections between humor and empathy, Trousdale is doing something new, even counterintuitive. But as her book contends, decades of poets have been reflecting on these very connections: W. H. Auden, Marianne Moore, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Sterling A. Brown, Elizabeth Bishop, and eight contemporary poets “frequently explore laughter’s role in revealing or creating common ground, [...] in full awareness that laughter can also reveal or create alienation” (37). At times in the chapters that follow, I sometimes found myself wondering about just how consciously and literally these poets are thinking about humor. For instance, a reference to “Bishop’s adaptation of Moore’s humor” (91) struck me as a little at odds with the almost inherently unstudied, inspired nature of humor. But such phrases raise interesting questions: these writers clearly appreciate and respond to the humor of their peers’ poems; how would one distinguish comic adaptation from comic affinity, and from broader, less-deliberate experiences of laughing and admiring and imitating? Trousdale argues that humor—because it is closely bound up with ethics—does indeed provoke careful, sustained thought in these writers.

The first two chapters, on Auden and Moore, exemplify “large- and small-scale uses of empathic humor” (68). For Auden, humor resembles love in how it “bridges gaps between individuals; but unlike love, it can work on a much larger scale, forming communion among like-minded people who meet only through the medium of the text” (40). Play and wit and comic invention in Moore, on the other hand, center on a smaller possible scope, “direct[ing] us toward I-Thou relationships with even the oddest individuals” (68). Moore sees “humor, like poetry,” as “a rare means to intimacy” (67) and as “a highly efficient and condensed means of communication and sympathy-creation, enfolding multiple layers of meaning” (90).

The chapter on Auden is a good example of the book’s range and depth. Trousdale puts Auden’s interest in humor into the context of his politics and ethics, showing that he uses humor “to differentiate his own flexible, inclusive community from the rigid communities he criticizes—the British bourgeoisie, High Modernists, Nazi Germany” (41). Auden sees humor as “both a test of common attitudes and a defining feature of humanity”; and if you define humanity in part through humor, it becomes “an ethical condition to aspire to, rather than a category determined by species, race, nationality, or gender” (40).

The Auden chapter is also a good example of how thought-producing Trousdale’s focus is: it genuinely invites encourages further conversations. This chapter made me wonder, for instance, about Auden’s sense of humor before the mid-1930s—in work like the “Of the Enemy” section of *The Orators* (1932), which lists about twenty qualities by which to distinguish the “enemy,” such as “Three kinds of enemy bearing” (“the condor stoop—the toad stupor—the robin’s stance”). That sort of list is not just funny in its weirdness and suggestiveness: it seems relevant to Trousdale’s interest in where humor reinforces an *us-them* line versus where it carves out

something more generous. And it brings up questions about what forces are at work as a comic sensibility changes—either over time or from context to context. How would a somewhat snobbish poem like “Under Which Lyre,” which swipes at postwar university culture and affiliates people either with the self-serious Apollo or irreverent Hermes, fit in Trousdale’s argument?

Chapters 3 and 4—on Eliot, on Pound—might seem more unexpected poets for anything to do with empathy. But they offer “models of ambivalence about humor’s power to increase mutual understanding or to alienate the laughter from the object of laughter” (94). For Eliot and Pound, while laughter can stem from and give rise to “mutual understanding” (54)—as it did in their friendship—that kind of empathic humor is rare, and tends to be predicated on exceptionality and exclusivity. The chapter on Pound in particular is intriguing: Trousdale clearly does not find most of Pound’s jokes very amusing. But her recognizing those jokes and thinking through them recalls the truth of the introduction: fascists have senses of humor. And indeed, the possibility that Pound’s humor could “enlist readers in Fascist poetic hierarchies demonstrates how dangerous it can be to make shared laughter the basis of a community” (156).

The remaining chapters—on Brown, Bishop, and contemporary poets—each show further considerations of humor and its potential to join or demarcate. In Chapter 5, Trousdale sets out Brown’s “anti-hierarchical” comic poems, which “mak[e] superiority itself the target of humor” (156). Brown is not nearly as well-known as he should be, especially relative to the canonical, white poets of the previous chapters, and Trousdale’s chapter provides a beautiful introduction to his punning, tonally complex, satirical poems. I appreciated, for instance, her insights on Brown’s use of the dialect tradition, dialect too often being seen in literary studies as an inherently comic device. In serious poems by Brown, like “After Winter,” dialect “does not stereotype or lampoon the speaker; rather, it makes us his intimates” (167). And in the comic poems, the “complexity and self-awareness” of the tradition of dialect humor “provide the basis for an ambitious and multidirectional satire on the impulse to superiority” (168), one that “renders superiority humor recursive, having the laugh rebound on the laughter” (185). For Brown, dialect and humor and understanding are intertwined.

The ambivalence that Trousdale identifies in Bishop—who values humor for its intersubjective potential but also recognizes its proximity to mockery—continues in the final chapter, on poets mostly still writing today, who probe “how laughter extends and limits communication” (221). This chapter could be expanded into its own book; in its current form, it is a wide-ranging, vivid introduction to the very funny poetry of the early 2000s. Some of these poets embrace humor wholeheartedly, as animating their work. For others, like Cathy Park Hong, it is a byproduct of experiment and social critique and inventiveness, more broadly. And still others—

Jamaal May, in “The Gun Joke”; Patricia Lockwood, in “Rape Joke”—are decidedly skeptical of the ethical possibilities for laughter.

That final chapter also makes clear the potential that Trousdale’s argument has for humor studies more generally. Trousdale does not make many explicit connections to genres beyond contemporary poetry. But her attention to empathic humor and especially to self-conscious twenty-first-century assessments of empathic humor should be of interest—to name just a few examples—to people writing about humor and social media, or about comic films of all kinds, or about parody.

It helped, on the bus, that Trousdale’s own prose is often quietly entertaining, especially within parentheses and footnotes. These moments of wit aren’t for their own sake, but in service of actually making a point. Quite a few are neutral paraphrases of idiosyncratic, blinkered, or grandiose scholarly pronouncements: many assertions about humor turn out to be themselves amusing when isolated or paraphrased. Trousdale tends to find exactly the right way to acknowledge, unobtrusively and in passing, the inadvertent comedy of this academic pursuit. See, for instance, when she crisply traces the narrowing trajectory of Sir Leslie Stephen’s definition of “English” humor: this humor is first defined as exclusive to men, and then to upper-class men, and then to “educated English men *who do not enjoy Jane Austen*” (17, Trousdale’s justified emphasis). I think Jane Austen would enjoy this book, both for its careful, expansive looks at humor and ethics, and for its gallery of deeply funny twentieth- and twenty-first-century poems.