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The Year's Work in American Humor Studies, 2013

BRUCE MICHELSON

ABSTRACT: "The Year's Work in American Humor Studies," an annual feature of *Studies in American Humor* since 1999, reviews humor scholarship and related materials published during the specified year from many disciplinary perspectives, including humor theory. The review gives special emphasis to studies of humor in American culture, broadly conceived.

KEYWORDS: stand-up comedy, literary humor, satire, film comedy, American humor, Charlie Chaplin, humor and race, wit

Menus and Subversions

On American wit, laughter, humor, on comic utterance and comic representation of every sort, the year 2013 simmered with publications, another stone-soup with a chaotic array of ingredients and tastes. In such a mix, old dilemmas float up, anomalies that veterans in our trade have been putting off dealing with for decades. By this I mean reckonings with basic words and catchphrases that we use all the time, perhaps of necessity, to describe whatever it is that we're trying to accomplish. *Humor studies*, *humor research*: though differences between these enterprises haven't been laid out clearly yet in high-traffic places, they come unavoidably clear in a sounding of the annual brew. From the evidence: *humor studies*, loose and pliable as a descriptive phrase, commonly signifies an interest in the history and dynamics of American literary and popular culture, and often specifically in varieties of laughter as an energizing and protean presence within it, a presence negotiated as thematically, psychologically,

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and morally important within a given historical moment or a broader span of time. People working in *humor studies* typically don't regard or belabor joke explications as worthwhile in and of themselves; their interest centers instead on voices that take form over a spread of discourse, on expressions of temperament, on entire eras of thinking and feeling, and on complex response to worldly and textual experience. Humor studies scholars seem to value paradox more than they do simple incongruities and blue-printable ironies. In contrast to all that, what has been going on in the name of *humor research* usually looks different—more general and abstract in some respects, narrower in others. In humor research the emphasis remains on semantic analysis and frequently on what some of the practitioners there refer to as the “canned joke,” extracted and brought under scrutiny to define and delimit a signification and often to pass political or moral judgment upon it as well. Perhaps it goes without saying that in such a process, subtle and ephemeral qualities in a cultural text with comic dimensions, qualities that cannot be snipped away without violence to meaning and implications, contexts and contingencies that people in the *studies* cohorts tend to find interesting, either drop out of sight or are negotiated brusquely as awkward complications to that abiding imperative: to determine whether some supposedly discrete string of words or images is funny or not; and if so, how much, and why; and whether any outburst of laughter induced by this fragment, supposedly in and of itself, passes muster. And it may also go without saying that the opener term we use to describe either of these modes of inquiry, this vexatious word *humor*, is only one of several ancient, encumbered, unavoidable words that bother anyone who wants to talk intelligently about rich and ambitious texts that might bring a smile. Obviously, *humor* is a verbal relic from centuries back when the human temperament was sorted out by recourse to junk science. And when we finally learned what these various juices coursing through the body actually do and don't accomplish, it was too late for the lexicon; *humor* was rooted in English vocabulary as a shortcut designation for anything from profoundly resonant comebacks and musings and aphorisms to knock-knock jokes and whoopee cushions. Those of us in the literary trades have always had our work cut out for us when we want to talk about a comic dimension that isn't comic relief, or a moment of contrived irony, or some tidy break from the emotional and intellectual experience of the text, but rather a part

of its fabric. *Humor, irony, wit*: each of these terms comes algae-slimed with unwelcome associations, and these are the awkward, irregular stones with which we begin the cooking.

No prospect of fixing that soon; yet these words that we append to *humor* now, *studies* and *research*, really can be sorted out better, and doing so would require no internecine violence, no theatrics of shunning or expulsion. On a tour through all the 2013 material, what stands out is that neither the *studies* nor the *research* camp, in what we acquiesce to as a broad if provisional alliance of scholars, is paying attention to what goes on across the ditch. Justifiably or otherwise, *studies* people are not prowling the semantic research on verbal-joke explication; and for their part, the *research* set shows a distinct preference for tidier settings, the lab-like survey (frequently, as you will see again here, a posse of local college students filling out questionnaires, apparently in a classroom setting or at a machine back in the dorm), and rarely countenances what the *studies* folk delight in: the rich and changeful contexts of the American cultural past and present. If we can still think of the humanities as a starved confederacy with something in common, then this now-engrained habit of ours in the humor ranks, of coexisting without engagement, brings no dignity or credit to the overall enterprise, and to outsiders it makes us look as if we're not doing our homework. These fundamental differences in what we do, in what we regard as important, and in what we take to be the vital dynamics and cultural work of the comic presence in American culture, these differences are dramatic enough for us to think seriously about being more forthright about all this, and to affirm, at least in the terminology we deploy, an amiable parting of the ways.

Meanwhile, because there is so much material to review and such a range with regard to subject and approach, six headings appear in the essay this year to make for easier navigation. The sequence is chronological with regard to historical period; when we come into the contemporary, however, two pop-culture clusters are broken out for special consideration, gathering work on race as a theme in the comics, and on humor and satire in Hollywood films since 1900.

- American cultural history before 1900
- The early and middle twentieth century
- Wit, humor, and contemporary popular culture
- Humor, race, and the comics

- Comedy and satire in the movies
- The year in theorizing

Here we go:

American Cultural History before 1900

With regard to the reach and resonance of American-style wit, the Ben Franklin legacy is still an ideal place to start. Looking carefully at him as a systematic and thorough moral philosopher—a more important presence in those realms of thought than as a coiner of disruptive adages and epigrams—Kevin Slack builds a case that Franklin's use of irony and wit are a part of his steady engagement with complex moral problems rather than a facile escape from difficulty. "Franklin's *Dissertation*," says Slack, "within which is an undetected metaphysics, rejects the teaching of virtue as the cause of public evils. His *Articles*, a naturalistic credo and prescribed worship service, turns to the quest for the virtuous character. The question of the good life must be settled by a thorough investigation of human goods shorn of any authority apart from that of human reason. *On the Providence of God* is Franklin's defense against supernatural and metaphysical teachings of providence; Franklin replaces them with a self-examination of his own moral sense, constructing an image of the perfectly wise man for his worship, that is, virtuous behavior in the attainment of happiness."¹

Ed Piacentino's collection *Southern Frontier Humor: New Approaches* opens with a crisp review of attention paid to this era from the days of Franklin K. Meine, Walter Blair, Kenneth S. Lynn, Hennig Cohen, and William Dillingham up into the present decade, an instructive overture to a set of ten essays investigating "several areas of promising and fertile inquiry in the field."² The array includes recovery of primary materials as well as fresh speculations on cultural impact then and now. Piacentino observes that three essays here attempt to develop a convergence, largely overlooked until recently, between frontier humor and the enterprises of realism exemplified by local-color fiction. He leads off with a recovery effort, offering Henry Junius Knott, from Columbia, South Carolina, as one of these forgotten progenitors. Making modest claims for Knott's talents as a writer, Piacentino explores sketches and "novelettes" to show an early emergence of themes that would come to fruition in later authors like Longstreet and George Washington Harris.

In "Hysterical Power: Frontier Humor and Genres of Cultural Conquest," Jennifer Hughes looks at "ways in which antebellum authors were engaged rhetorically in an effort to shape their society's beliefs about the importance . . . of laughter itself to the process of imagining an ideal nation."³ An ambitious objective—but working with comic "Almanacks" from the 1830s and 40s, Hughes uncovers an ongoing conversation, in the advertising blurbs, book introductions, and journal editorials of that era, about humor and laughter as effective tonics not only for the individual temperament but also for the social order and health of the country. Settling in with the work of Henry Clay as one such advocate, Hughes builds a case that doing political and moral good was indeed an intention in comic discourses of the Old South.

Working with premises adapted from her reading of Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva—that all rich texts are in some sense hybrid, redolent with echoes and cultural connections—Gretchen Martin complicates our understanding of the relationship between Joel Chandler Harris's work and this legacy. Reviewing the best of the recent commentaries on Harris, she reads through several of his narratives to argue that in their constructions of masculinity and the ins and outs of community politics these stories resonate with Southern humor from earlier in the century, though they depart from that tradition in Harris's engagement with moral and political issues related to slavery and blackness.⁴ Also concentrating on the end of the nineteenth century, and looking into pseudo-science from that age and how it was exploited in ostensibly comic engagements with race and identity, Bruce Blansett's "From Swamp Doctor to Conjure Woman" finds a "functional and stylistic" connection between Henry Clay Lewis and Charles Chesnutt.⁵ Observing that scientific experimentation on African Americans during the later decades of the nineteenth century did arouse considerable anxiety and suspicion in black communities, Blansett explores parallels between Chesnutt and Lewis in their subversion of stereotypes and their shared suspicion for what passed, in many regions of America, for medical wisdom.

A work of historical recovery, Kathryn McKee's "Sherwood Bonner and the Postbellum Legacy of Southwestern Humor" draws attention to Bonner as a woman writer of uneven achievement but also of admirable independence in her region and moment. McKee reviews a legacy of work that "persistently undermines all white male authority, offered up, not just in traditional gentleman characters but also in consistently emasculated members of the medical profession."⁶ Tracy Wuster's contribution, coming just after McKee's, swings

us back to Mark Twain as an omega-point toward which discussions of Southwestern Humor so often veer; but Wuster's approach to "A True Story," Mark Twain's famous short work from the *Atlantic Monthly* under the editorship of William Dean Howells in 1874, achieves a perspective that stands out for all the right reasons, even amid a knee-deep accumulation of readings and pieties about Aunt Rachel's monologue. As Aunt Rachel takes over the narration and holds it through the end of the final line, Wuster develops important themes here about power and dignity, about the capacity for eloquent and confident storytellers to assume dominion, even in the employ and presence of a certified Author from the presiding race and class. He holds that the narrative itself and its publication in the premier literary journal of the moment stand out in a broader project of local color fiction that "revised southern literary traditions—including key aspects of southern frontier humor—to address central issues about race, gender, and representation."⁷

Winifred Morgan's subject here is American tricksters across a span of 150 years, and in "Morphing Once Again: From Jack to Simon Suggs to Aunt Lucille," she moves efficiently through the centuries-old history of trickster tales to offer, as vignettes, a few high-profile examples from the American tradition: Simon Suggs, the duke and the dauphin from *Huckleberry Finn*, and characters from John Kennedy Toole, Mark Childress, and Clyde Edgerton.⁸ One comes away with a bolstered impression that this archetype has been enlivening American storytelling by white Americans for quite a long time. Taking a different approach to the trickery theme, John Lowe's engagement is comparative: in "Anancy's Web/Sut's Strategems: Humor, Race, and Trickery in Jamaica and the Old Southwest," he begins with the trickster Anancy, brought to the Caribbean from the Ashanti culture, and with regard to characterization and dynamics, finds parallels between Anancy tales, the exploits of Sut Lovingood, and Uncle Remus's mischievous animals.⁹

In "Postmodern Humor *ante Litteram*: Self-Reflexivity, Incongruity, and Dialect in George Washington Harris's Yarns Spun," Mark S. Graybill reviews a set of Harris episodes with special attention to John Morreall's assertions about superiority and incongruity as wellsprings of laughter. For the reflexivity part, Graybill draws on Robert Scholes, Bergson, and also Patricia Waugh, building a case that "Harris's comic language rides the tense boundary between 'creative imagination' and 'uncertainty about the validity of its representations,' and between belief in 'literary form' and 'a pervasive insecurity about the relationship' of that form to 'reality'"¹⁰ (the phrases that

Graybill quotes here all come from Waugh). In the closing essay of the set, James E. Bishop's "The Real Big Kill: Authenticity, Ecology, and Narrative in Southern Frontier Humor," the attention centers on hunting stories, looking into a tradition—an imperative, as Bishop sees it—of exaggeration that runs back as far as the pathologically wild tales of Baron Munchhausen. Bishop's finding is that these stories of massacre in our own national lore "may have obscured Americans' ability to see the real environmental destruction that was happening around them, much in the way that frontier humor may have blunted their attentiveness to racism, gender inequality, and rural poverty."¹¹ Well, as he says, maybe. All in all, Piacentino's volume is an informed, thoughtful, and thoroughly contemporary reassessment of a formative era that Piacentino himself has done so much to explore and sustain as a robust presence in the conversation about the American cultural past.

Centering on Hooper and *Simon Suggs*, as well as on Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* and Harris's *Sut Lovingood*, D. Berton Emerson offers a revisionist approach to the political substrate of Southwestern humor. The argument in his *American Literature* essay is that we have relied too much on the rise of Jacksonian democracy to establish the context and explain misadventures in the American outback, and that some of these texts take on additional depth if we see them as informed by local realities rather than national ones. "Unyoked from the nation and its norms," says Emerson, "these local episodes—along with others in the Southwestern humor tradition—yield an unexpected trove of alternative democratic positions in the mid-nineteenth century."¹² Consolidating the young nation isn't the agenda: the humor of the Old Southwest "just as often reveal[s] the inadequacy of national models of republican democracy for making sense of diverse communities negotiating power relations on their own terms."¹³ What we should center on instead are "*alternative domestic socialities*" and "*democratic play*" (the italics here are Emerson's), and by "democratic play" he means "a local sociality less invested in a logic of representation implied in indirect, procedurally representative democracy than in working out the contours of social interaction on their own terms." Along the way in a trek through various episodes involving Suggs, Bakhtin is invoked to explain Suggs's "antiofficial carnivalesque behavior," his escapes from and temporary subversions of national authority. When we come to *Lovingood*, we find that the democratic play here is "less playful," and Deleuze, Guattari, and Kafka are cited to explain the trope of "becoming animal" in these stories, a tactic to "level the social

and political field.”¹⁴ Though the essay bears down repetitively on its thesis, the outcome is valuable, a complication of our thinking about this well-spring of the American comic tradition and a loosening of explanations that perhaps have grown too handy.

“Hawthorne really was a funny guy if you got to know him,” says Monika Elbert in her preface to a special issue of the *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* devoted to his comic side, and in a brief biographical sketch she musters evidence that away from the writing-desk he was a man of geniality and wit—even his children thought so.¹⁵ The challenge taken up by the seven contributors to the number, as well as by guest editor M. Thomas Inge in his introduction, is to showcase the humor in the prose, and especially in the fiction, and to describe its relationship to the “dark” themes that have kept him popular with so many scholars and teachers and repelled so many undergraduates. “Certainly some of this humor is gallows humor,” says Elbert, “and had we or the characters not been laughing, we’d be crying.”¹⁶ Inge carries the ball forward from there: “Hawthorne is so strongly perceived as the chronicler of unhappy lives of guilty Puritans and sinners facing condemnation and inevitable punishment that this overshadows any discussion of his humor;”¹⁷ but this mustering of essays aims to set things right. Veteran Mark Twain scholar James Caron leads off with an investigation of the famous (or notorious) irony that he sees as “front and center” in *The Blithedale Romance*, giving that quality of the novella a fresh spin: the unreliable narrator here, Miles Coverdale, is read by Caron as “a failed humorist of a particular sort, one whose humor is marked by the good-natured amiability of a proper gentleman” reminiscent of Washington Irving’s genial narrator Geoffrey Crayon earlier in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ The theme that Coverdale’s voice represents, rather than overtly develops, is the “dubious viability of the figure of the gentleman humorist” in social and moral situations like those that unfold around Blithedale as a community that “attempts to rationalize within an institutional format” the sociability that Coverdale embodies.¹⁹ Caron makes a strong case that Hawthorne’s narrator is temperamentally indebted to Joseph Addison and Richard Steele in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, where they laid down the English Enlightenment’s prescriptions for wholesome and constructive wit and satire—in other words, a rule-book for how, in Steele’s words, to “rail agreeably.” So Caron’s essay offers considerably more than a re-reading of *The Blithedale Romance* to bring out the amusing moments: he also situates the work in an evolutionary history

of Anglo-American comic discourse, highlighting a moment when certain old guidelines for conduct and utterance have worn out their moral utility and literary welcome.

Looking into Hawthorne's short sketch "Sir William Phips," a Bay Colony reverie that Hawthorne first published when he was in his mid-twenties, Joe Conway sees the piece as posing "the desire for money and the desire for culture as impulses in conflict," and because Phips is one of those "democratic clowns, unrefined personalities who are determined to crash the party of high culture, leveling its social hierarchies and polite protocols,"²⁰ themes and echoes here connect to the Southwest humor tradition, described more than half a century ago by Kenneth S. Lynn as enlivened by the euphoria and challenges of Jackson-era politics. Later in the essay, Conway draws parallels with Hooper's *Simon Suggs* stories of 1845, where another unscrupulous bumpkin tries to get rich in land speculation in the Alabama outback. More modest in the connections it makes, Steven Petersheim's "Legitimate Strokes of Humor" in Hawthorne's *Early Picaresque Tales* laments the modern commentary habit of showcasing darker themes in Hawthorne's work and asserts that standard "critical discussions obscure the fact that Hawthorne's literary corpus is . . . informed by a more light-hearted strain of humor."²¹ Concentrating on narratives that were salvaged from *The Story Teller*, Hawthorne's failed book project from the early 1830s, Petersheim relies on the work of John Morreall to locate here "the therapeutic humor of relief, the irrational humor of incongruity, the anti-social humor of superiority, and humor as neutralizer," and he rolls through "Passages from a Relinquished Work," "The Seven Vagabonds," and "Mr. Higginbotham's Catastrophe" to provide examples, showing that the narrator, over the arc of these sketches, undergoes a "movement to a more self-aware sense of his relation to the rest of the world," a growth that "does not end in the humor of superiority but blossoms into an enjoyment of humanity on its own terms."²² More focused still is Ed Piacentino's engagement with "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," where attention centers on the complex tone of this one story, where "diverse forms of laughter, none of which necessarily seems entirely amusing in the contexts in which Hawthorne stages them, may be more aptly classified as tragicomic, a compound of the serious and the ludicrous."²³ One pleasurable and helpful dimension of this essay is the use it makes of reviews and published criticism from Hawthorne's own day, important documents brought back to light recently, as Piacentino observes,

by Tracy Wuster, demonstrating that Hawthorne's classification as one of our "genuine and genial humorists" (as Gerald Massey, an English critic, called him in the 1850s) has a solid pedigree. Piacentino also makes judicious use of Wolfgang Iser on the enigma of the implied reader and Bakhtin on the relevance of the carnivalesque, as well as Hennig Cohen, Brian Way, Michael Dunne, and others on the shelves of more recent commentary.

Taking on one of the big works, Mimosa Stephenson's "Humor as Antithesis in *The House of the Seven Gables*" also launches from nineteenth-century commentary about comic moments and motifs in the novel, and holds that with regard to its oscillations between the light and the dark, "the antithesis throughout the novel underscores the reality that comedy and tragedy are inseparable, that humor exists in all our human endeavors if seen from an appropriate angle."²⁴ Though August Strindberg and Ingmar Bergman might not embrace a pronouncement like that, it's conventional to observe that Hawthorne does mix his moods; and Stephenson takes us through moments and characters that can be seen as in some dimension funny, though most of the essay is an engagement with a cluster of scholastic critics who have argued about humor and *Gables* this way and that for the past few decades.

Spring-boarding out from Hawthorne's actual work to its permutations in popular culture, two other contributions (a conventional-style prose essay and one in comics form) provide insights on how the fiction has been adapted, explained, and exploited with pictures for about seventy years—the *Classics Illustrated* versions, various pant-pant horror stories adapted from Hawthorne's *Wonder Book*, and from Japan, a recent Manga version of *The Scarlet Letter*. Thorough in building this history, Derek Parker Royal's "Visualizing the Romance: Uses of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Narratives in the Comics" is a well-written study where we see once again that what goes on in the "comics" can have very little to do with comic discourse, humor, laughter, or wit, and that humor *studies*, for the sake of achieving something like a coalesced subject, might want to consider edging away from this body of material and letting people in other buildings take it up. The history that Parker presents, however, is a sound contribution to the role that Hawthorne's work has played as a source, in the rise of visual print media as a prominent variety of American storytelling.²⁵ And the finale of this special issue, an all-out "comic" by Robert Sikoryak (whose work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Onion*, *MAD*, and other big-circulation places) offers a dozen-page recap

of *The Scarlet Letter*, about a hundred cells in which scenes and dialogue from the novel are reified into brief, flat exchanges among porky, gnomish little figures, each of them in a caricature of Puritan dress, a Smurf Boston where the populace apparently eats better and gets less daily exercise than the Bay Colonists that Hawthorne imagined.²⁶ If you need a refresher on the novel's key scenes, this will serve—but beyond that, the intent of this strip slides beyond the grasp of this reviewer.

It's no secret that humanists with a taste for bygone times are taking more heat than usual now about a perceived lack of relevance to current discontents. When wars are underway and campus budgets are tight, the urge can be strong to showcase parallels between moments in the past and big troubles of the present; and when we make that move, sometimes the analogies work, sometimes not. Stephen Mexal's *Reading for Liberalism: "The Overland Monthly" and the Writing of the American West* opens with a proposed connection between the "Wild West" discourses (both public and literary alike, and encompassing the comic) of the later nineteenth century and the American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq at the opening of the twenty-first, the overarching paradox being that regions and peoples had to be subdued in order to achieve "the particular freedoms of the liberal social contract." Accordingly, Bret Harte "examines a hard liberal republicanism rooted both in individual rights and civic responsibilities," while "many years later the literary naturalism of Frank Norris and Jack London pointed toward a new liberal imaginary, one rejecting the limitations of classical liberalism in favor of a liberal egalitarianism encompassing justice, rather than mere rights."²⁷ The book's special strength is its thoughtful recovery of two largely forgotten *Overland* contributors: Ina Coolbrith, a niece and erstwhile stepchild of LDS leader Joseph Smith, with an independent and adventurous life on her own in California in the decades after the Civil War; and Noah Brooks, whose short stories tell of the establishment of "western economic modernity" and the collateral "eradication of dark-skinned peoples."²⁸ For readers of this journal, *Reading for Liberalism* helps sharpen our understanding of the literary and cultural milieu from which humorists of the West emerged and into which they wrote.

In a special number of *American Literary History* dedicated to second book projects, Hsuan L. Hsu notes that "no one has published an extended study of Twain's representations of Asians, and [that] this archive has been marginalized within his body of work."²⁹ Hsu investigates how Mark Twain's

"texts about the Chinese were not just practice runs for his later antislavery novels, not just exercises in interracial empathy: they incorporated and often satirized a range of discourses about the Chinese." Seeing *Huckleberry Finn* as a "narrative of interracial intimacy" he makes a case that Clemens was actually fairly consistent in his racial politics, and that "To a Person Sitting in Darkness" is a late instance of his effort to use issues of material inequality to ground and interrogate analogies between different racialized and colonized groups."³⁰

In the 2013 *Mark Twain Annual*, most of the essays engage subjects at a considerable remove from Clemens as a humorist and wit; the exception is Tracy Wuster's "'There's Millions in It!': *The Gilded Age* and the Economy of Satire," a thorough exploration of that co-authored novel's construction, marketing, and fate at the hands of contemporary reviewers. Looking steadily at a core paradox, that *The Gilded Age* was an enterprise to rake in big money for Clemens and Warner with a satire on contemporary materialism and greed, Wuster looks carefully at the history of the whole project, offering solid evidence that *The Gilded Age*'s "promotion, reception, and transformation illuminate important facets of literary production in the era that it encapsulated, satirized, and ultimately named."³¹ Less convincing are the core assertions in Patrick Keane's "Mark Twain, Nietzsche, and Terrible Truths That Can Set Us Free," which suggests that Clemens knew more about Nietzsche's work than he commonly acknowledged, and notes that in his declining years Nietzsche himself enjoyed Mark Twain's prose and liked listening to *Tom Sawyer* when it was read to him aloud. Swinging out into wider orbits, the essay alludes hastily to Keats, Malraux, Spinoza, Yeats, Mencken, Descartes, a full slate of luminaries, to bolster a case that Mark Twain's writings after about 1885 responded in various ways to the chill winds of modernity.³² To find a more plausible exploration of how Clemens's thinking resembles Nietzsche's, James Leonard's "The View from the Raft: Huck Finn's Authentically Nietzschean Perspective" in *American Literary Realism* is a place to go. This is a poised and balanced argument, steering clear of unsupportable insinuations that Clemens had read Nietzsche in any sustained or thorough way or knew much about this renegade German philosopher when *Huckleberry Finn* was being written. Even so, Leonard moves us beyond the notion that what they shared was at most a generic disaffection with conventional faiths and moral values. For Leonard, a key parallel can be found in their arduous self-scrutiny: Clemens, like Nietzsche, was moving

"toward a focus on the more deeply valid meaningfulness of individual experience and the importance of authentic . . . self-consciousness as a guide to action."³³ What connects them, in other words, is this struggle to emerge from darkness, a struggle that Leonard sees unfolding in Huck's character.

Establishing a bond between Clemens and another thinker of his own day, John Bird's "Mark Twain and the Robert Ingersoll Connection" digs into historical evidence, including their 1879 appearance together as honored guests and speakers at a dinner billed as a "Grand Banquet" at the original Palmer House Hotel in Chicago, to confirm that when Ingersoll was speaking out as a leading American freethinker, Clemens was paying a measure of attention; and that in one specific interval of his autobiographical dictations in June of 1906, insights connected with Ingersoll are strongly in evidence.³⁴ As volumes of the Mark Twain *Autobiography* roll out and take hold as formidable documents in the Twain canon, extra measures of theoretical sophistication may be required to situate them historically and culturally, and Bird and James E. Dobson are helping to break trail in that enterprise. Dobson's "Mark Twain, Memory, and the Failures of Historicism" looks at "the extent to which narrative has broken down in his *Autobiography*" as a subversion of what Dobson calls the "planned obsolescence" inherent in modernity, a way of escaping from the constructs of present and past and the relegation of everything—and everyone—into fixed cultural and historical periods borne back ceaselessly into the past.³⁵ "Anecdotes always require a double take," Dobson observes; and because Twain's dictations and other autobiographical work are full of them, they reflect "Twain's doubled relationship to modernity and his frequent resistance to the myth of progress."³⁶

It's worth pausing in this tour through the *Mark Twain Annual* to take note of another engagement with Robert Ingersoll. In "Religious Conflict and Intellectual Agency: Robert Ingersoll's Contributions to American Thought and Culture," Paul Stob makes a case that Ingersoll's use of wit and humor was more than a sugaring of his indignation against religious dogma; it was also a mode of empowerment for his listeners, a reassurance that with an eye for ironies, paradoxes, and varieties of pious foolery they could find their way into the core of what could otherwise seem like a daunting maze of exegesis and casuistry. Through the laughter he encouraged, his listeners could "become actors in a great intellectual drama—a drama that pitted opposing institutional power structures against the American people's attempt to know and understand the world."³⁷ This is a concise and provocative essay

with broader implications for our understanding of wit, humor, democracy, and American intellectual life.

Alex Brink Effgen's "Mark Twain's Defense of Virtue from the Offense of English Literature" makes a case that Clemens's interest in Percy Shelley devolves both from his scuffles with Matthew Arnold over the literary merits of Grant's *Personal Memoirs* and from a wish to hold the moral high ground in a moment when the profligate and self-centered Shelley was being posthumously rehabbed by British and American critics.³⁸ Rebecca Guess Cantor looks into the importance of names in "Roxy's Power in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*," recognizing the lineage of names like Essex, Driscoll, Burleigh, Cecil and their connection to the status they carry in the town of Dawson's Landing,³⁹ yet omitting what would seem a logical extension of this line of inquiry: a thought about the possibility that Roxy's own name might also draw a measure of significance from its historical source, the wife of Alexander the Great. In the *Annual's* "Notes," Benjamin Griffin offers a preview of the as-yet unpublished Mark Twain manuscript called "A Family Sketch," forthcoming in a University of California Press collection; Alyssa Alexander offers thoughts about student perceptions of racism in "A True Story"; Jennifer Gaye presents a veteran high-school teacher's impressions of *Huckleberry Finn's* continuing value for addressing social issues; Martin Zehr sees stylistic relationships between the early New York *Tribune* piece "A Treaty with China" and later more famous writings, and includes the original satiric essay in full.⁴⁰

Also on the Mark Twain front are a couple of interesting short pieces in other journals. Jennifer M. Nader has discovered and published two additional interviews from the 1895 Australia sojourn, the adventure that figured into *Following the Equator*. One of these is a brief and breezy exchange about jokes and Bret Harte, evidently with a local reporter who fancied himself a wit in his own right; the other includes Mark Twain's offhand thoughts on a period of diplomatic tension around that time between the United States and Great Britain. Though there is nothing astounding in either, they are certainly worth having in the record.⁴¹ Entering the thematic complications (or outright mess) of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and how it was written is a familiar enterprise, and a recent foray into it by Beverly A. Hume sets out to explore parallels between the set of "duplicates" in the novel, Tom Driscoll and Valet de Chambre, and what *Nineteenth Century Literature's* abstract refers to as the "freakishly mocking Duplicates who appear in the author's

only published mysterious stranger manuscript, No. 44, *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916).” A teaser like that, possibly not written by Hume but somewhere along the line by unseen hands at *NCL* or *JSTOR*, does not boost credibility for the argument that follows. The version of the Mysterious Stranger story published in 1916—the paste-job concocted by Albert Paine and Frederick Duneka from a couple of Mark Twain’s manuscripts along with some prose of their own, and not by any stretch the “only published mysterious stranger manuscript,” included no Duplicates and nobody calling himself Number 44. From some angles, however, these pratfalls don’t matter, for in Hume’s essay the Duplicates manufactured by the exuberant all-powerful boy in the final version of the tale are mentioned here only in passing, summarized as “amoral” without much backing for that judgment; and the story itself is alluded to only in general ways. As for the reading of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, each of the major and minor characters in the novel is evaluated in turn for racism and complacency, and Tom is singled out as “devilish” to strengthen a connection with some iteration of the Stranger tales, either the early draft now available as “The Chronicle of the Young Satan” or the fraudulent narrative that Paine and Duneka put out as a Christmas book. About the moral enigma of Tom Driscoll (meaning the slave child raised as a white aristocrat), the roots and the implications of his arrogance, cowardice, and depravity, Hume offers this summation:

Insofar as Twain (or Clemens) was influenced by the racist stereotypes of his culture, his false Tom may be regarded as a realistic and problematic representation of those stereotypes. However, Twain’s exaggerated depictions of Tom’s mercenary machinations and quasi-satanic character also make him an anti-realistic figure, one more difficult to classify.⁴²

Later in the essay there is a nod to a motif of minstrelsy, building on Eric Lott’s reading of the novel but not venturing noticeably farther. The promised echoes and parallels with the Mysterious Stranger manuscripts—any of them—are not sustained, and the reading makes no headway in sorting out the politics and moral dimensions of the novel or its relationship to Mark Twain’s other work.

Meanwhile, in the continuing Dartmouth College Press series called “Re-Mapping the Transnational,” William V. Spanos’s *Shock and Awe: American Exceptionalism and the Imperatives of the Spectacle in Mark Twain’s*

"*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*" works hard, in language wobbly and passive-aggressive, to link the novel to today's headlines: "But, I submit, it is *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, whose protagonist, not incidentally, has often been represented as Huckleberry Finn grown up, that is more revealing of the unseen or unsaid—or, more accurately, disavowed—of the American exceptionalism that has (hyper)canonized Twain. In repeating the national itinerary of *Huckleberry Finn* at a more 'mature' stage and on a wider, global register, *A Connecticut Yankee* not only discloses the dark underside of the American exceptionalist ethos that rendered Twain a powerful weapon in the Cold War against Stalinist communism. As a later, more mature avatar of Huck Finn, its protagonist proleptically discloses more tellingly than *Huckleberry Finn* its self destruction."⁴³ The analysis here is propelled by stock outrage about the 2003 U.S. attack on the Saddam Hussein government of Iraq and the American deployments and air strikes against the Taliban in Afghanistan; along the way there are rounds of fault-finding with the views of the famous long-dead in American cultural studies: F. O. Matthiessen, Bernard DeVoto, Henry Nash Smith, R. W. B. Lewis, Lionel Trilling, and others who held to the "exceptionalist myth" many decades ago when the West was threatened by the Axis Powers and subsequently by Soviet Russia and Maoist China. With a review of the origins and development of the Manifest Destiny ethos, Spanos's opening chapter traces connections back to those Puritan Jeremiads in which Sacvan Bercovitch, forty years ago, located taproots of the American literary temperament. Thereafter, holding to a premise that "the vast majority of critics and commentators on *A Connecticut Yankee* have been blinded [a favorite verb in this study] by their American exceptionalist insight to or, more precisely, by their oversight of the dark side of its 'benign' progressive surface,"⁴⁴ Spanos moves forward with indignation, and with his own variety of selective "blindness": other than Walter Benn Michaels, John Carlos Rowe, and David Sewell, no Mark Twain scholar or critic working in the twenty-first century is countenanced in the discussion; and regarding how this novel was written, the body of information that we now have also gets scant attention. A couple of Mark Twain's letters from the 1880s are quoted from, and there is a quick summary of the "Sir Robert Smith" origins of Hank Morgan; but in the chapters that set the stage for a new reading, much of the space and energy are invested in complaint about other people's commentary. When we finally settle in with the actual novel in Chapter 4, we learn that Hank, as

an American exceptionalist, is out “to transform the groveling and resistant multitude he encounters in feudal England into (disciplined) ‘men,’ as he insistently calls them.”⁴⁵ Hank’s fanatical dedication unsurprisingly reminds Spanos of Melville’s Ahab; and Hank’s delight in pyrotechnic dazzle and mayhem anticipates—again no surprise, and here comes the book’s title—the “shock and awe” aerial bombardment of targets in Baghdad at the start of the second Iraq war. All of this must have seemed timely when the book was being drafted; but where we arrive in this reading is not much different from what Dartmouth’s own James M. Cox proposed in his famous *Yale Review* essay on the novel about fifty years ago.⁴⁶

In the final number of *Studies in American Humor* edited by Ed Piacentino, whose years at the helm were much admired and appreciated in the American Humor Studies Association, the essays he gathers range in subject from Emily Dickinson through World War II adventure comics and onward into recent TV sitcoms and the ever-ramifying Internet. In the Dickinson essay, Eleanor Lewis Lambert begins with a Bergsonian premise about tension and elasticity as components of laughter and looks into half a dozen Dickinson poems, building toward “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” to see how that principle can break the darkness and leaven the mood here and there. Noting that “cheer and mischief statistically outshine bleaker topics” (her word-search of the poems turns up *delight* much more often than either *despair* or *death*), Lambert sides with Garrison Keillor in finding an affirmation of life in her dedication to building all those quatrains and writing thousands of personal letters.⁴⁷ Moreover, Lambert finds a playfulness in Dickinson’s use of *death* and sees a possible source for that flexibility of mood in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*. Observing that death for this poet “is the absence of personal contact,” she interrogates five poems to show that “Dickinson’s humor comes from using outward, worldly examples of (usually) blameless death as metaphors for internal experiences.” On “Because I Could Not Stop For Death”—the apex-poem in so many anthologies and the most thoroughly stopped-for Dickinson poem in undergraduate term papers, Lambert sees “a romantic carriage ride,” an excursion rather than a funeral procession, with death as a companion rather than the end of everything.⁴⁸ Turning to Dickinson’s notes for a poem that never came into final form, Lambert sees Dickinson’s famous indecision as a way of countenancing larger ambiguities. With regard to “I Died For Beauty” it might be a stretch to accept the proposition here that the atmosphere in that

shared tomb, as the moss covers the names on the stones and drives them into eternal silence, is “not somber; it is lively and edifying”⁴⁹—but this is a quibble about an essay that does so much to catch what makes Dickinson a poet to come back to and ponder, a poet in whose enigmatic moods lie much of the appeal.

As a veteran scholar and maestro of American Naturalism, Donald Pizer proposes that we return to one of William Dean Howells’s most famous novels to understand “the complex fictional architectonics of the work” rather than continue reading it almost exclusively as a window into “late nineteenth-century American ideological and social currents.”⁵⁰ With that as the objective, “W. D. Howells’ *A Hazard of New Fortunes*: A Mostly Formalist Reading” sees the book as distinguished “by a considerable display of wit by the narrative voice and by the characters themselves, and by the recurrence of specific settings amenable to the portrayal of conversational exchange by a variety of characters. Thus the major role played in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* by Mrs. Leighton’s parlor, where, among others, the sharp-tongued Alma and Miss Woodburn and the lively Fulkerson often engage in animated discussion.”⁵¹ Pizer sees this wit as consonant not only with Howells’s admiration of Jane Austen as a social observer and patron saint of realist fiction, but also with Basil March’s depiction as a sensitive and sensible social observer, plausibly tentative in his judgments of New York, the country, and the time.

Bridging the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Harry T. Sampson’s *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows* is the massive second edition of a landmark compilation that first appeared about 35 years ago. The historical information assembled here is a trove in the true sense of the word, with masses of information on continuing performance companies and their owners and casts; shorter-lived shows including lists of actors, singers, and program synopses; and biographies of notable figures in this long and varied history. More than 1,300 pages into this study, Sampson ventures a brief summary that could take a prize for poise and understatement: “That during a period when blacks—suffering from widespread racial discrimination and from the psychological effects of the propaganda of inferiority, were being imitated to achieve fame and fortune by many performers who made generous use of distorted ‘Negroid’ characteristics—is a curious anomaly of early American theatre.”⁵² Anyone interested in the cultural paradoxes of the American comic imagination should know this history and put special value on Sampson’s work.

The Early and Middle Twentieth Century

On comic or parody motifs in Native American cultural history, one of the few strong contributions this year is Cristina Stanciu's essay on Laura Cornelius Kellogg, a speaker and writer from the Oneida nation and a well-known public speaker, writer, and social reformer in the early decades of the twentieth century. Including an extensive biography, Stanciu notes that Kellogg also spoke out about the complexities of "Indian humor," noting that racial and cultural divides could make it mysterious to European readers. Pausing over Kellogg's one surviving poem, "A Tribute to the Future of My Race," Stanciu notes that it borrows conspicuously from Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*, the biggest-selling and most famous American Indian Epic (by a white New England poet) of the nineteenth century.⁵³ However, the sample she offers could also support a speculation that Kellogg, Barnard-educated and cosmopolitan in her adventures and tastes, was skilled in the arts of parody—another indication, perhaps, of her predicament as a woman intellectual building an independent life and finding a voice in two worlds at once.

More thoroughly now into the twentieth century: in the heyday of Benchley, Thurber, Dorothy Parker, and S. J. Perelman, a nearly forgotten writer named Will Cuppy, from a small town in Indiana, achieved a season of success with the *New Yorker* among such keen competition, though he never joined the Algonquin set. Cuppy lived his adult life on the quieter fringes of the action, first by temperament and choice, and later because poverty and failure kept him away from the bright lights. In *Will Cuppy, American Satirist*, Wes D. Gehring not only recovers him from obscurity (broke and forgotten in his later years and falling into hack-work, Cuppy committed suicide in 1949), but also argues passionately for the quality of what he wrote in his prime. Cuppy, says Gehring, "remains a neglected gold standard of laughter, whose black humor becomes more timely with each passing day. Moreover, with the possible exception of Benchley, no other American humorist was more gifted in the inspired christening of his books, with my personal favorite being *How to Attract the Wombat*."⁵⁴ Something of a prodigy at the University of Chicago in the opening years of the twentieth century, he did achieve some connections with luminary wits of Midtown when he migrated to New York, turning out an array of good-selling comic *How To . . .* books; when he drifted into doing anthologies and reviews the pay grew meager, and he fell into chronic depression before killing himself a decade after his golden moment. Comparing Cuppy's humor to the Marx

Brothers, W. C. Fields, Charlie Chaplin, and others of the era, Gehring offers a concise and enthusiastic account of what seems, all in all, a sad and lonely life, as well as of the body of work he left behind.

A much bigger name from those *New Yorker* days, of course, is Scott Fitzgerald, and 2013 brought two substantial essays about his skills and struggles as an author with an incisive and mordant wit. In *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, Anne Margaret Daniel offers an essay bursting with facts about Fitzgerald's presence in, and relationship to, the magazine from its inception in 1925, on through the balance of the Jazz Age and into the Great Depression, and even beyond the author's death in 1940.⁵⁵ Daniel casts her net wide, finding considerably more than Fitzgerald's actual (and sparse) publications there, including "A Short Autobiography" in 1929, three short pieces from the 1930s, and finally "Thank You for the Light," a rejected tale which did not come out in the *New Yorker* until the summer of 2012. She also recovers write-ups by others about Fitzgerald as a celebrity to watch, admire, and sometimes lament in the 1920s and 30s. These glimpses showed up in "The Talk of the Town" sections and other chatty pieces about glamorous life downtown, at posh waterholes in France, and at chic regional events closer to home (polo matches, regattas, rah-rah football weekends featuring Yale and Princeton) right around the time when Fitzgerald was writing *The Great Gatsby*. These discoveries are modestly presented as possible sources or inspirations for settings and auras in his most famous novel. Daniel also covers Fitzgerald's mixed luck with the *New Yorker's* book reviewers, and locates many "cartoons, couplets, little asides" and anonymous mentions of him that helped to keep Scott on an A-list. She draws special attention to what may have been a turning-point profile of Fitzgerald in those pages: John Chapin Mosher's elegiac "A Sad Young Man" from April of 1926, centering on Fitzgerald's fast-fading youth and closing with dark predictions that the next decade would bring the "twilight" of a writer who at that moment was barely beyond the age of thirty. Daniel's essay is a thoughtful gathering of fact and evaluation, building our sense of Fitzgerald's relationship to the mood and the subject matter of the magazine that quickly became the Park Place of classy humor and wit as the twentieth century unfolded.

Another valuable essay from this number of the *Review*, also with a special interest in Fitzgerald, New York, and the American comic imagination, is Philip McGowan's engagement with the wry and poignant story from 1939, "The Lost Decade," which McGowan sees as vital to understanding

Fitzgerald's "last fictional engagements with the city"—where he had risen to fame and plumped so suddenly into what his early hero Amory Blaine would call a "personage."⁵⁶ As a riff on Washington Irving's comic masterpiece "Rip Van Winkle," "The Lost Decade" tells of an architect named Louis Trimble returning to the city in a haze of puzzled innocence, resulting partially from a stretch of time out of town, long and obliterating bouts with alcohol, and also a measure of affected naïvete. McGowan plays the story off against Fitzgerald's elegiac memoir from 1932, "My Lost City," in which Fitzgerald, speaking for himself, describes New York as the glamorous place that it was—for his set—before the Depression brought an end to all that. The calyx of the argument:

It is not the issue of drinking or repentance for past abuses that occupies either Trimble's or Fitzgerald's time or their attentions in "The Lost Decade"; rather it is New York itself and the attempt to grasp once more the fundamental concepts that constitute its enigmatic status that dominates this narrative. For this reason, "My Lost City" offers a more immediate and ultimately more relevant comparison to "The Lost Decade" as Fitzgerald returns in both to consider the pull that New York had exercised on both his life and his work.⁵⁷

This is a poised and well-written piece, and a substantive contribution to our understanding that as Fitzgerald and Zelda wandered around America and Europe in the 1930s, an unhappy odyssey that ultimately landed Scott alone in Hollywood, he never left Manhattan completely behind.

In the last essay in the 2013 *StAH* volume, Joseph Coulombe returns us to Dorothy Parker, to look at her humor as a performance of "women's intellectual strength and independence."⁵⁸ To defend this observation, the essay moves quickly from Aristotle to Hobbes to Gregg Camfield on the theme of humor's connection (or lack of it) to a feeling of superiority; thereafter it moves from one Parker sketch to another to demonstrate that her humor can "prompt a positive reactionary growth, in which the beneficiary of humor—i.e., the one laughing (often, the reader)—recognizes and then rejects the errors of others" and that "her humor highlights the incongruity between acceptable and unacceptable behavior."⁵⁹ Again, these may not qualify as original propositions about how some comic material works; moreover, describing Parker's work as didactic in this way seems to hobble it rather than recover it for twenty-first century appreciation. If the problem

to be addressed is, as Coulombe states it, that “Humor is too often treated by critics as a sign of Parker’s triviality and lightness,”⁶⁰ reading her work as an apparatus for moral instruction doesn’t do much to raise her stock as a comic artist.

This is a good place to note that in her recovery of three nearly forgotten “domestic novels” (as she classifies them) from around the time of *The Great Gatsby*, Diane Lichtenstein comments on the presence and effect of humor in at least one of them. She describes E. J. Rath’s *Too Much Efficiency* as an indictment of the emergent middle-class domestic lifestyle of the postwar decade, in which the home was evolving into yet another mechanized production site. The essay situates three similar novels historically, summarizes the plots, and concludes that “the domestic novel in these writers’ imaginations had a vital role to play in challenging the management tools of the capitalistic order by peering into the most intimate of relationships of family life and by honestly criticizing the beliefs, practices, and consequences of industrializing the home.”⁶¹ It’s consoling to know that a measure of humor complicated these indictments and helped bring these books to life.

In the 2013 volume of *Studies in American Humor*, Brian Cremins asserts that we haven’t been paying enough attention to Captain Marvel and what his adventures can tell us about “American popular culture during World War II and its immediate aftermath.”⁶² What Cremins is looking for here are constructions of masculinity, and on that quest we get a concise history of the mighty Captain and his various creators, for his origins were more corporate than those of Superman or Batman. Unlike so many other recent evaluations of American comic books, this essay actually pays genuine attention to humor, finding in these stories “a series of fragile jokes” that offered their youthful audience “humor as a means of problem solving,” and asserting that Captain Marvel beats the bad guys “because he had a uniquely American sense of humor.”⁶³ An intriguing idea: the not-so-hot Batman TV show of the mid-1960s offered itself as a spoof of the ostensible high seriousness and piety of the Batman sagas up to that time; and the Christopher Nolan spectacles of the past decade, his massively elaborate “Dark Knight” rebootings of Batman, make him out to be, well, “dark” from his ear-tips all the way to the soles of his atomic bat-boots. It’s gratifying to know that back in the early days of the action comics, even in the midst of a global conflict, one of the pleasures was a celebration of “the infinite possibilities of childhood play.”⁶⁴

Moving ahead a few decades: from Eric Strand, a multi-dimensional rediscovery of Saul Bellow’s *Henderson the Rain King* provides a lesson in how to

read a novel that contains powerful streams of comedy without pretending that the humor here is a quality discrete from moral and political ambitions and themes.⁶⁵ Writing from South Africa—a vantage point that adds a measure of credibility to the interrogation of this novel as a meditation on good-hearted (if naïve) First World intentions, rude awakenings, and a clash of cultures in an age of globalization—Strand puts special emphasis on the unclassifiable independence of Bellow's thinking about modern Africa and its relations with the West, the impossibility of listing him as neoliberal, neo-conservative, neocolonialist, postcolonialist, cosmopolitan, or anything else in a standard scholastic sorting out of who's in which camp. Implicitly, Strand sees the comedy in *Henderson* as an evasion or outright refusal of all that, a celebration of a spirit operating out beyond conventional logic and received wisdom, plunging off the trail and off the map, much as Henderson himself does when he heads off the map and into the realm of the Wariri. Staying with revisionist readings of American fiction with laughter in it, Richard Hardack's "Revealing the Bidder: The Forgotten Lesbian in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*," approaches the novel's ever-decreasing circles through thickets of other people's commentary—Judith Butler, Myra Jehlen, Terry Castle, Cathy Davidson, Michael Wood, Tony Tanner, Slavoj Žižek, and an abundance of Freud—to represent Pynchon's book as propelled by a swapping of gender identities: Oedipus is reified into Oedipa, and "the text's play with inversion, combined with its protracted engagement with the putative markers of male homosexuality, ultimately suggests a suppressed, muted, or 'indirect' interest in lesbianism."⁶⁶ Though the point seems valid, the problem here is that the essay never settles in with a sustained reading of Pynchon's text, but rather raids at it now and then and retreats back into commentary on secondary sources. "Pynchon," we finally learn,

seems to be working within a broadly post-Freudian framework in situating Oedipa's sexuality. Because Pynchon is not developing a sophisticated psychoanalytic response in this largely parodic and episodic novel, it would be misplaced to expect Oedipa to provide a coherent model for alternative subjectivity, or perhaps even to subject the text to a sustained psychoanalytic inquiry; but it is important to note the novel does challenge standard formulations of sexuation.⁶⁷

Gender and sexuality in the worlds of Pynchon is a subject important enough to warrant steadier attention, perhaps with some concurrent reduction in

the effort to cite everyone else. Implicitly a rejoinder to this kind of work, Bill Solomon's "The Schizoid Ethics of Black Humor: Southern, Fariña, and Pynchon" returns to this "insufficiently comprehended cultural (and commercial) phenomenon" not for any set of missed moral lessons that these writers tried to teach, but for their exuberant refusal of those and other constrictions: moral imperatives, socially and linguistically constructed identity, all the pressures for making sense in conventional ways and sustaining, for social, racial, or ontological reasons, a consistent and circumscribed self.⁶⁸ This is comic subversion of an absolute sort, the kind that off-the-shelf joke analysis in search of incongruities usually can't get near. Relating these three writers to the Beats in their own era and to the no-boundaries anarchy of silent film comedians including Keaton and Lloyd, Solomon celebrates moments when narrators and characters become "other in an undeniably weird way as an affectively intense series of transitions,"⁶⁹ and as they float away, everything can go over the side of the balloon, all the constrictions that keep us mired in categories, lugubrious analysis and debate, the ruts of what passes for seriousness. When Solomon concludes that "one is on solid ground in asserting that, rather than capitulate to the social imposition of linguistically structured, symbolic identities, certain comically oriented writers in the post-World War II era explored the virtues of jettisoning normative models of subjectivity, thus following the footsteps of their slapstick predecessors,"⁷⁰ he has made his case, and done much to rescue two of these writers, Terry Southern and Richard Fariña (killed in a motorcycle accident before he was thirty, and remembered now primarily as a singer-songwriter in the New York folk renaissance of the early sixties), from a constricted niche in the Anglo-American comic tradition.

David Foster Wallace's experiments with what he called "proximal irony" and his open dissatisfaction that the kind of irony valorized by po-mo scholars had gone pop and lost its vitality, have been bothersome to critics who prefer to ride through literary texts with no guidance fresher or more complex than Linda Hutcheon's *Irony's Edge* from twenty years ago. Wilson Kaiser's essay "Humor after Postmodernism: David Foster Wallace and Proximal Irony," is the most thorough explanation we have now of Wallace's intent and practice in this mode that he contrived. Working with his famous essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction" from 1993, and exploring moments in *Infinite Jest* and *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity*, the essay illustrates a long and intense campaign against

"the apparently facile and self-referential aspects of postmodern irony,"⁷¹ and Wallace's turn toward Kafka and Dostoyevsky, and to Pynchon and John Barth (early on, before they were both inundated in the pervasive habit) as well, makes for a reinvigorated intertextual dialogue. This is an excellent essay, not only about Wallace but on what the fate of irony has been in the last three or four decades, the perhaps inevitable dulling of the "edge" celebrated in Hutcheon's famous study, and one writer's struggle—lonely and anguished, as it turned out—to come up with something genuinely new.

Breezily written yet also tristful in various ways, Mark Cohen's *Overweight Sensation: The Life and Comedy of Allan Sherman* sets the record as straight as possible on his subject's origins (Sherman's real name was, depending on when and where you looked, either Allan Copelon or Allan Segal) and tells the story of his messy growing-up, his days of glitzy fame in the early 1960s; his big-selling albums of parody songs; his prime-time TV appearances, and all the dissipated hanging-out with other Big Names in Hollywood, Las Vegas, and New York. Claiming that Sherman (who died before he was fifty, apparently from collateral damage inflicted by a crash diet), represented the most spectacular return of ethnic humor "since the end of vaudeville more than a half-century earlier," Cohen follows the family history back to the *shtetls* of Poland and ladles in joke poems from Sherman's junior high school days.⁷² We have the history of Sherman growing up on the move—Birmingham, Chicago, Los Angeles—his short and rocky career at the University of Illinois, where he wrote newspaper columns and musicals for a while but eventually got himself kicked out for wayward behavior. A theme in Cohen's book, abiding yet not belabored, is that Sherman's comic genius was connected to a longstanding rage against pretense, prudery, and ethnic pigeonholing; oddly, however, there is no mention here of any reaction from him, not even oblique, to the Nazi mass murders, though Sherman was certainly grown up enough to know about that, in college and in New York City during the height of the Second World War. In the 1950s, building a life in the suburbs, up in the comedy-storm of Catskills resorts, and then around Broadway, Sherman steered clear of the fiercer sort of ethnic comedy coming from his contemporaries Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce. Affable, roly-poly monologue and parody were his thing, though his humor was redolent with what Cohen plausibly summarizes as a "mad, chaotic, and violent family legacy."⁷³ Though the cultural upheavals of the late 1960s meant a season of obsolescence for that kind of crystal-ballroom wit, Cohen makes a good case

for Sherman's lasting influence on New York and Hollywood comedy of the 1990s and after; and the appendix to the book includes twenty pages of his best song lyrics.

Allan Sherman died in 1973, and we can use that date to scratch a convenient sand-line between historical studies and material that our own students (some of them, anyway) might actually remember.

Wit, Humor, and Contemporary Popular Culture

To begin with an essay that spans 250 years of media and lands in the American present: in the pages of this journal, Larry Bush's inquiry into political cartoons is admirably ambitious, seeking important patterns with regard to symbolism and signification over that stretch of time.⁷⁴ One interesting proposition here is that the single-image cartoon is a dialogue on a special frequency, that these cartoons appeal most to what he calls "skimmers," people who move through the daily papers quickly rather than hunker down and deliberate. Beginning with Saussure as square one in an inquiry into the dynamics of signification, Bush asserts that cartoonists use symbols arbitrarily, and that every experiment of that sort (except when classic signifiers are deployed, like Democrat donkeys and Republican elephants) involves an element of risk. The history here is detailed. It pauses for observations about symbols that were standard at one time but have faded from popularity (the "Abolition Nag" from newspapers before the Civil War, for example, and Lady Columbia, who has vanished from cartoons but lives on in a logo for the big movie studio); and for accounts of the rise of the single-cell drawing (one major impetus was technical, the complications involved with lithography and other image-reproduction technologies in the nineteenth century). We come up through Pat Oliphant's work and Gary Trudeau's *Doonesbury*, demonstrating that even as the pixelated moving image, available at every mouse click, would seem to be taking over our political and moral discourses, the drawn cartoon retains its relevance and its edge in negotiating daily public life.

The year 2013 saw the publication of two substantial books on recent comedy and the African American experience. *Furious Cool: Richard Pryor and the World that Made Him*, co-authored by David and Joe Henry, is a vigorously written mix of biography and personal reminiscence by a couple of Pryor enthusiasts, one a screenwriter, the other a songwriter. As the first

book-length engagement with Pryor's life and work in half a dozen years, *Furious Cool* moves with an appropriately jittery energy; but because the biographical material is loosely organized around themes and general impressions rather than biographical chronology, the book's lack of an index is a matter for regret. The opening chapter includes facts and snapshots about the history of stand-up comedy in general (Mark Twain is mentioned here), and African American stand-up performance in particular, with special attention given over to Bert Williams, "arguably the first African-American superstar," and comparisons to Pryor's style and work unfold from there.⁷⁵ After a short chapter recounting mayhem, crime, and other misfortunes in the Pryor family history, the Henrys pick up on his adolescence, his persistent effort to get himself into the Army, his time in the Service, the odd job years that followed, and the breaks that finally got him onto the stage in the early 1960s. Part 2 of the book, about fifty pages long, recounts Pryor's adventures in New York with the Beats and the Folkies, and his various involvements as the '60s heated up. In the '70s, after a couple of additional years of personal confusion and professional obscurity, Pryor breaks out from under the nurturing shadow of Bill Cosby and (with Cosby's approval) grows into a voice and presence of his own. The latter half of the book, as you might expect, is all about Hollywood entanglements, celebrity pals and rivalries, the money, the exposure, the headlong lifestyle—in other words, and sadly, the familiar legend of an immolated and self-immolating American pop star. It's a lively read all the way, and there are plenty of insightful snips of commentary here, by the Henrys themselves and by the impressive crowd of big-name contemporaries they chased down and interviewed, that should take hold in any cogent remembering of Richard Pryor.

Ellin Stein's *That's Not Funny, That's Sick* is more than a history of the *National Lampoon's* breakout from Harvard to achieve a dozen years of broad attention; with clarity and style, Stein's book follows *NL* through all the spins, spinoffs, and permutations that involved the magazine itself and the various egos associated with it.⁷⁶ As Stein tells the story, the *Harvard Lampoon* grew edgier and more interesting in the mid-60s because it had to, in response to the neo-Dadaism, anarchic street theatre, rock-culture and pop-culture experimentation, all the "underground" and pharmaceutical acting-out connected to resistance against the Vietnam war, the threat of the draft, the diehard bourgeois complacency of the suburbs, and the rest of it. She follows the trail through the *National Lampoon's* spinoffs and legacies in

later years: the movies, the stage shows, the other publications that variously struck gold or flopped; she recounts further adventures of *NL* staff and contributors as they migrated into *Saturday Night Live*, *Animal House*, *The Second City*, and elsewhere. The alumni are legion: Paul Krassner, P. J. O'Rourke, Harold Ramis, John Hughes, Lorne Michaels, Ivan Reitman, and more than fifty other big names were in the *NL* tangle or benefited from it before the demise of the company in a fog of bankruptcy and lawsuits. This is conscientious scholarship, astutely navigating a thick, complex, and important slice of recent American comic history.

Ruth R. Wisse's *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor* sets out to offer "a descriptive map of some of the centers where Jewish humor thrived and where it still prospers, drawing examples from literature and mass culture that acted on one another."⁷⁷ Ranging briefly back as far as Heine, she situates in the Lower East Side around 1900 a wellspring of this comic creativity in the United States. With little concern for humor theory, she describes Jewish humor as a global phenomenon—or at least as a phenomenon spanning the territory from Hollywood to Tel Aviv—though along the way, she credits Saul Bellow as a better guide to the complex psychology and intention of various modern jokes than Freud, Schnitzler, or the semanticist cadres that dominate what goes on in the International Society for Humor Studies. In Chapter 3, "The Anglosphere," Wisse offers evaluations of Leo Rosten, the comic fare of the Friar's Club and the Catskill resorts, of Philip Roth, the Coen Brothers, and other familiar sources and examples of modern and contemporary American comic styles. Later chapters engage with Jewish jokes as a means of psychological survival under totalitarian genocidal governments in Germany and Russia, and also in Israel as a multicultural and precarious homeland. Also on the subject of Jewish humor: taking her cue from comments over the years by Irving Howe, Sanford Pinsker, Simcha Weinstein, and others about its nature and dynamics, Roberta Rosenberg settles in to read through all the episodes of the now-defunct HBO series *Curb Your Enthusiasm* "with all of their intentional ambiguities, the way scholars might encounter a Talmudic text."⁷⁸ In the words of Maimonides, Yikes! Small wonder that people in our line of work, as scholars and critics, can find ourselves targeted by the kind of satire we try to dissect. Anyway, this Talmudic study concludes that the Larry David self-as-character, as curmudgeon and schlemiel, provides po-mo comic relief as well as exemplification of Jewish comic traditions "to redeem ourselves momentarily from the identity we all share as contemporary Americans living in a dangerous, exciting, and somewhat

Kafkaesque time in history.”⁷⁹ Can you think of successful comedies in recent years that can't fit into that description? Readers who value panegyrics to cancelled sit-coms can have a good time here.

Curb Your Enthusiasm also came under scrutiny here in *Studies in American Humor* in 2013, where Evan Cooper situates the series historically as part of an inquiry into the evolving nature of the “Jewish comedic aesthetic,” as Cooper calls it, in American life.⁸⁰ Cooper's interest here is in how images of American Jewish women have altered in the past half century on the big and small screens, and how we got from Molly Goldberg and the stereotype of the Jewish American Princess to *Seinfeld's* Elaine and *Curb Your Enthusiasm's* Susie Greene. The types, old and new, are not flattering: we have *kvetches*, punishers, ranters, hotheads, varieties of people with limited civility and scant regard for boundaries—and we get a couple of pages of charts about that. Also interested in comic stereotypes, but looking instead at ways in which they are subverted in online comedy, Ina Seethaler centers on the website *Big Bad Chinese Mama* as a hot spot for this insurrection, the targets being the “Asian nerd,” the Susie Wong sex dolls on the porn and mail-order marriage sites, and the Misses Saigons, compliant victims tossed about by circumstance. After touring through a variety of raunchy-angry comic materials online, Seethaler comes to the formidable question: “how much concrete change has BBCM's aggressive, feminist, Internet humor brought about?”⁸¹ Not making inordinate claims, she holds that what we have here is a small step in a healthy direction.

How are comic dimensions distinguishing what's being called the “new disability memoir,” narratives noted for their reflexivity and their heightened attention to professional identity and life? Rosalía Baena's “Disability Memoirs in the Academic World: Mary Felstiner's *Out of Joint* and Simi Linton's *My Body Politic*” makes a case that “through wit and humor, [Linton] introduces a cast of remarkable characters (which include friends who teach her to dance in a wheelchair and a professional dancer with one leg) who can radically change the way we ‘walkies’ understand disability,” building a narrative that turns out to be “a positive affirmation of difference.”⁸² Though the dynamics of that wit and humor don't receive much more than a mention, it's good to see that comic dimensions in important personal accounts are being recognized as something more than relief.

In the 2013 harvest, two books share the (not-so-catchy) title *The Last Laugh*. One of these is a monograph; the other is an essay collection about film, and we will prowl its contents later. Subtitled *Folk Humor, Celebrity*

Culture, and Mass-Mediated Disasters in the Digital Age, Trevor Blank's *Last Laugh* volume sets out to "examine the evolution of the humorous visual and especially narrative folk responses to death, disaster, and scandal as they have emerged in technologically mediated expressive communications over time."⁸³ Blank sees the digital revolution as reifying and reinvigorating "folk" or vernacular expression, breaking the hegemony of media giants, and fostering an anarchy of individual discourse on the web. In a thoughtful introduction, ranging from David Riesman through Marshal McLuhan, Erving Goffman, and Christie Davies, Blank touches down plausibly on memorable and transformative moments: the rise of Twitter; the deaths of Osama Bin Laden and Michael Jackson; the constant proliferation and shape-shifting of ethnic jokes in the darker reaches of the web; the headlong, impulsive uploading of intimacy and spontaneous response, lapses of judgment that never go away; and the possible consequences of all of that. Though our folklife has gone electronic, Blank also bears witness to what he calls "analog" folklore as an abiding presence, the jokes and cartoons that still reach us in the press, and the posters, flyers, and broadsides that haven't entirely whooshed away into bytes and pixels. In a chapter called "Searching for Connections" he offers a concise history of the role of technology in getting the word out (starting with Ben Franklin's Philadelphia printing presses and publications during the Revolution), and builds toward an observation that the mass media downpour of recent years has done much to transform our concept of mortality and death. As he sees it, a new kind "normalization" has come about, thanks to daily streams of raw-video catastrophe and the gorgeous mayhem of hi-def CGI. The five chapters that follow look at various outbreaks of folk response impacted by that predicament: the killing of Bin Laden, the Tiger Woods disasters, the demise of various celebrities. Though he looks into many tasteless responses to this or that recent Big Sad Event, he stays clear of inferences that mouse click access to the turbulence of the world and to all these tools for comment and caricature have palpably coarsened our moral life. Instead, Blank offers a measure of hope about human nature: "I may be naive," he says, "but I believe in the folk. I believe that despite the changing tides of culture . . . we will adapt and seek out meaning in our everyday endeavors."⁸⁴

David Gillota's *Ethnic Humor in Multiethnic America* brings together five essays by this author, three of which were published previously, two in journals and one in a different collection. The core thesis here is that a "sort of

insider/outsider or center/boundary margins drives most ethnic humor through the twentieth century, and—even more important—it underlies the ways we often talk about race and ethnicity.”⁸⁵ Right, that’s a bit blurry; but it allows Gillota to range through a lot of recent popular culture to offer evaluations focused on ethnicity as a theme, and to observe, in the current century, “significant developments in the manner in which ethnicity is performed and defined in popular humor.”⁸⁶ After a base-touching with “serious thinkers like Freud, Hobbes, Bergson, and Kant,”⁸⁷ Gillota makes clear that he is looking at standard motifs—superiority, aggression, self-deprecation. To accomplish this, he divides the history of American ethnic humor in half: an era of marginalized groups performing for the pleasure of the mainstream; and where we find ourselves now, an age when ethnic comic discourses speak frankly about mainstream culture as well as about the minority experience, though he concedes that a lot of authority, with regard to the promulgation of humor in the United States, is centered in the corporate world.⁸⁸ Recently, however, the contest has become more complex: in his view, perennial oppositions between one constituency and another—whites and blacks, blacks and Latinos—have been giving way to an imperative to articulate one’s own identity “within a much larger multiethnic context.”⁸⁹ This proposition seems to subtend the structure of the book. Three chapters take on material emanating from specific ethnic groups; two others focus on “works of popular culture that attempt to represent the full diversity of American culture”—*South Park*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Community*, the U.S. version of *The Office*, and a set of feature-length animated films in which various ethnicities are transmogrified into creatures (*Madagascar*, *Cars*, *Shark Tale*, and so on). Amid this corporate-bankrolled amalgamation and experimenting, Gillota finds a measure of hope: “Ethnic humor can thus serve as an avenue through which we can learn more about what separates us, what holds us together, and how we should like to see ourselves.”⁹⁰

In the pages of *Studies in American Humor*, in “Black Nerds: New Directions in African American Humor,” Gillota chooses Chris Rock’s notorious declaration about “Black People vs. Niggas” as a launch point for considering the evolution of what in some circles is being called a “post-soul aesthetic,” and also the problematics of deploying such a term as yet another label to hang on African American creativity.⁹¹ With special attention to Donald Glover (famous for his *Comedy Central* appearances and his regular spot on *Community*), Gillota sees him as important for “his overall rejection

of essentialist visions of blackness and rigid standards of black authenticity.” There are also useful pages on Key and Peele, a biracial comedy team that likewise works from “a distrust for black authenticity.” The claims that close out the essay are modest; though we might not be seeing here the seeds of “a revolution in African American comedy,”⁹² these developments are well worth our attention.

“*Saturday Night Live*” and *American TV* collects thirteen essays about a show that has hung on through nearly forty years of surges and sags, and the editors here—Ron Becker, Nick Marx, and Matt Sienkiewicz—open with an off-the-shelf lament that the great talents have gone away and that unless *SNL* acquires another burst of creativity and youth, its future is dim (aging readers of this piece will remember hearing such sooth-saying at regular intervals reaching back into the ’80s). Because there are several mass-market books already on *SNL*, the editors rationalize this volume as notching the conversation upward, seeking here to “frame *SNL* from distinct perspectives and place the program in dialogue with a number of cultural, industrial, and social discourses.”⁹³ The overriding theme is that the show represents a vibrant and paradoxical mix of continuity and change, difficult to map or theorize yet emblematic of how American mass media responds to cultural turbulence and participates in maintaining its vitality and shaping its direction. As one would expect, there are compressed histories, overviews of the show’s imaginative connections with New York City and the local comic style; connections back to O’Donoghue’s *National Lampoon* and similar attempts to play it edgy; and analysis of *SNL*’s tactics during political campaign seasons. Matt Sienkiewicz’s contribution is an argument that *SNL*’s pre-9/11 demeanor included a powerful stream of Kierkegaardian irony, “a view that approaches the world with the sense that all meaning is ultimately artificial and thus nothing ought to be taken seriously.”⁹⁴ Alyxandra Vesey’s essay, “Live Music: Mediating Musical Performance and Discord on *Saturday Night Live*,” reviews the complex role of music over the years, not just for variety and relief but also to sustain the show’s aura of hip and cool.⁹⁵ In Derek Johnson’s contribution we learn about Aaron Sorkin’s experiments with reflexivity in his failed series *Studio 60*, which referenced *SNL* skits as a way to signal its own currency and put a knowing human smirk on the visage of a big corporation.⁹⁶ And there are chapters that seem essential now in such a book, on Eddie Murphy and the show’s brand of African American humor, on women and gender politics, on impersonations of Barak Obama as an

opportunity for the show to experiment in “mixed race interpretation.”⁹⁷ One of the most interesting essays here is the closing one, David Gurney’s meditation on the show’s importance, boosted by the luck of its riding the opening decades of the digital revolution, allowing it to have “repeatedly touched off cascading assemblages of viewer engagement, which have long made its pop culture presence more pervasive than its ratings alone have indicated.”⁹⁸

Also countenancing SNL but broadening out from there, *News Parody and Political Satire across the Globe*, edited by Geoffrey Baym and Jeffrey P. Jones, includes fourteen essays gathered around a thesis that parody news programs like *The Daily Show* have gone global in their reach, exporting nuances and inflections rooted in the home culture and its sense of the ridiculous. What connects these shows, the introduction proposes, is their steady commitment to “deconstructing the artifice of news—its naturalistic illusion that news is (or could be) an unmediated window on the world.”⁹⁹ The chapters focus on shows in Hungary, Germany, Israel and Palestine, Romania, Denmark, Italy, India, and elsewhere; the closing essay, by Amber Day and Ethan Thompson, takes on *Saturday Night Live*’s uneven history as signifying a reluctance to engage in what these authors construe as “real satire” (the little air-quotes are theirs), staying instead with safer varieties of political humor out of respect for “commercial imperatives.”¹⁰⁰ Such a finding may not come as a shock, but the essay’s concise review of the last thirty-odd years of the program is handy.

To stay with comic satire as a presence in our mass media: Julie Webber’s *The Cultural Set Up of Comedy: Affective Politics in the United States Post 9/11* sets out to “examine how comedy of the political variety attempts to maneuver its way through the hegemony of earnest political cronyism.”¹⁰¹ Observing that “Each attempt to explain the typologies of humor that elicit laughter has largely ignored the cultural context in which the episodes take place,” Webber roves through John Stewart, Sasha Baron-Cohen, and Stephen Colbert, arriving at an observation that “Generation Y has been the guinea pig for the brain revolution of the 1990s. The confluence of consumer marketing and government advocacy for at-risk youth has produced this peculiar political situation whereby youth are responsible for their choices even when those choices are at every moment scrutinized by larger public health and crime initiatives that worry over their future (mostly for a profit).”¹⁰² So a lot of what goes on to induce laughter in this generation is really an engagement with this paradox, and Webber adds that “it is not political

comedy that makes the incongruities it exploits for laughs; it is the political and social world that we now inhabit, dominated by political and consumer branding on the one hand . . . and the increasing political and social contradictions we are forced to live in an age of declining economic growth."¹⁰³ As the discussion moves into stage and film comedy—Louis C.K., Chris Rock, *Bridesmaids*—and the abiding presence of homophobic language in stand-up comedy, and then back to *The Daily Show*, the evaluations of what's at stake in each of these visits are brisk, though larger premises of the book fade from view. Angelique Haugerud's *No Billionaire Left Behind: Satirical Activism in America* takes its cue from the "Billionaires for Bush" demonstrations, the performative satire, or neo-happenings, or whatever they were when they broke out in New York and elsewhere in 2004. Haugerud wonders about the implications of this development, this possible turn away from "community organizing or traditional canvassing" and toward "decentralization and consensus more than hierarchy and central control."¹⁰⁴ The book provides a detailed history of the "Billionaires" confederation, including commentary from people who got it going, and includes a deeper speculative history that connects back to a Boston Tea Party re-staging in 1998 and anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle a year later. Moving a bit uneasily through conventional descriptions and observations about the nature of humor, parody, irony, and satire, the book retains the freedom and agility to speculate about whether these outbreaks in a social-media age are taking us into uncharted territory in our political and cultural life.

As a perennial favorite for pop-culture omnidirectional satire, *The Simpsons* got another round of analysis in 2013. Edward J. Fink's "Writing *The Simpsons*: A Case Study of Comic Theory" sees the entire long-running series as demonstrating that "the show's writers incorporate every element of comedy in one way or another in every episode. The result is that each episode contains at least some humor to fit everyone's comic style."¹⁰⁵ Yes, it's frightening to think that "every episode" (there are hundreds) has been put through this kind of forensic analysis. Apparently assuming that there is some certified list of such "elements," the essay spins through incongruity, high comedy, low comedy, running gags, sight gags, setup and payoff with quick, hectic references to scenes, and ending with a couple of paragraphs on "psychoanalytic theory" (meaning in this case only Freud) and comedy as catharsis. Aristotle, Morreall, and Raskin all get nods along the way. The corpus of material under scrutiny is too extensive to be handled in

a dozen pages of summary engagement; the observations are for the most part commonplace; and readers are likely to come away with little beyond an assurance that the show is funny in a lot of different ways. In a similarly unenlightening piece in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, David Feltmate sees *The Simpsons* as an established "cultural source for examining shifting political, social, and religious trends in the United States." Relying on Mark Pinsky's 2007 book *The Gospel According to The Simpsons* as a point of departure, Feltmate looks at how evangelical Christianity is approached by means of satirical parody, centering on misadventures of Ned Flanders, Springfield's moral crusader and meddler. The takeaway is that we need "specialized theories" for better engagement with religious satire.¹⁰⁶

In the American Humor Studies Association, one group of accomplished scholars has been drawing our attention back to a magazine of their youth, the years at *Mad* when Harvey Kurtzman and William Gaines were at the helm and Bill Elder was maestro of the illustrations. (A large sample of their work appears in the jumbo fall 2014 special issue of *StAH* [n.s. 3, no. 30] devoted to *Mad*.) Writing not only as a fan of *Mad* but also as an informed and credentialed Poe scholar, Dennis Eddings complicates our thinking about Poe's opulent and emotionally excessive poetry as a satiric target, noting that Poe himself had a taste for satire and parody, and that a good case can be made for reading "The Raven"—the original and supposedly high-serious work from Poe's hand—as in some measure a burlesque aimed at the so-called "Spasmodic" school of Victorian verse that flourished in England around that time. Eddings takes us on an extended tour (more than thirty years) of *Mad* pieces where Poe's schoolroom chestnut is warped to attack modern sales pitches, pollution, obnoxious house pets, the affectations of jazz hipsters and the Beat movement, Ronald Reagan, you name it.¹⁰⁷ One of the pleasures of the article is the high-quality reproduction of many of Elder's illustrations, essential to the exuberant mood that these parodies evoked and for which they are still fondly remembered.

The year brought us one good essay about wit as a dimension of an important poet known for much more than that: Ed Pavlić, a prolific writer well known for his own poetry and experimental prose, meditates at length on Yusef Komunyakaa's verse and its connections to the American blues tradition in an essay in *The Black Scholar*, doing so in ways that not only explore the flashes and undertones of humor amid the darkness in such performances, but also recognize that the impulse that births the deeply comic

is *not* some contrived incongruity, but rather an irreverent and courageous dive into the unknown: the artist who embraces the potential anarchy of dark laughter is taking risks whose dimensions he or she can never calculate.

When the blues impulse “feels how it is” and the jazz impulse turns it wrong side out and upside down, and finally, having blown the walls away, steps through into a new space, the tension can still feel like it leads toward healthier, higher ground. One just has to, as it is said, “keep the feeling,” and believe a little bit. Step out on it. But, er, on what?¹⁰⁸

It’s an appropriately provocative piece—and also an antidote to keep handy, should you overdose on arguments that we laugh for tidy bullet-point lists of reasons.

Martin Gitlin’s *The Greatest Sitcoms of All Time* is a coffee-table guide, gathering TV situation comedies from the 50s up through *Big Bang Theory*, supposedly selected on the basis of longevity, awards, and award nominations.¹⁰⁹ Each series here gets a couple of pages of summary: the cast and other credits; a resume of successes; a few supposedly memorable lines and funny moments that appealed to the compiler. The arch and insufferable *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, a soap opera parody that ran out of gas after two seasons, makes the cut, but long-running well-written shows like *Mad about You* and *How I Met Your Mother* don’t get a mention. It’s that kind of book. From a blue-chip scholarly press, Melissa Mohr’s *Holy Shit: A Brief History of Swearing*, offers an anecdotal tour running back to the Roman Republic and Empire, with stops along the way to sketch the etymologies and deployment of various obscene words.¹¹⁰ Also included are some none-too-convincing asides about how major Roman buildings could resemble phalluses if you happened to be a Flavian seagull passing overhead. A miscellaneous chapter on the Bible (by which Mohr seems to mean the Old Testament, as she spends only a couple of pages on the New) tries to cover holy oaths, comments about sex, and interdictions about urinating; and beneath this compilation there doesn’t seem to be much of a point. When we move toward the present, we learn that soldiers, Beatniks, and Hippies have all done a lot of swearing; that people talk dirty in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and *The Naked and the Dead*; and that obscenity now is all over the place and that people do it for a variety of different reasons. If you need scholarly documentation for any of these truisms, this book will serve the purpose.

The Illustrated Dictionary of Snark: A Snide, Sarcastic Guide to Verbal Sparring, Comebacks, Irony, Insults, and Much More, by Lawrence Dorfman, is part of Skyhorse's "Snark Series," and a nice example of what can go wrong when a commentator tries to be har-dee-har at any length about subjects related to laughter and humor. Dismissing what he calls the "five minute wonders" with whom snark is commonly associated—snark being, he says, "an attitude that was a little more than sarcastic and definitely a lot more than snide" (which is about as clear as the book gets about its subject)—Dorfman sets out to "celebrate" Lewis Black and Dennis Miller and connect them to "the great snarkists/humorists like Dorothy Parker, Groucho Marx, Robert Benchley, Oscar Wilde, H. L. Mencken . . . the list goes on."¹¹¹ Thereafter we get 300 pages (in enormous space-filler fonts), of miscellaneous yuks, ranging from "Shakespearean Insults" to stupid remarks by football coaches.

Humor, Race, and the Comics

Because *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation* takes us into comic strips and comic books—the haunts of superheroes and detectives—rather than into comic material in the older sense of the word, we need to stray from work about comedy, humor, and wit in reviewing various essays in this book; but the opening chapter affirms that "a large component of the success of comic strips is the artist's ability to make people laugh. Humor must characterize any comic strip and is not unique to African American cartoonists,"¹¹² so it's well worth looking into the essays here that help to develop that point. Nancy Goldstein, for example, reviews the career of Jackie Ormes, active in the '40s and '50s, whose romantic narratives often closed a segment with a funny one-liner; Tia M. Tyree reads through a dozen contemporary comic strips looking for stereotypes of black females, concluding with a notable paradox, that in comics produced by African Americans "the Black female has a higher chance of being stereotyped than within comics created by White females and males."¹¹³ In "Black Comics and Social Media Economics: New Media, New Production Models," Derek Lackoff and Michael Sales sketch the recent migration of "comics" to online media—the escape or liberation from the printed page, with large-scale implications with regard to audience, increasing "the visibility and viability of fan and artist communities, allowing many new social structures to develop that provide support and momentum to a growing Black comics movement."¹¹⁴ Narrowing the

focus to one artist, Felipe Smith, Casey Brienza's lively essay offers a brief tour of the Japanese manga phenomenon and Smith's remarkable stature within it as an American artist born to a Jamaican father and a mother from Argentina. Finding that Smith is "more than just the Obama of the manga world," Brienza argues that "by refusing to acknowledge the importance of difference, of persistent social structures of inequality, . . . Smith reduces black and white to mere aesthetic choices of screen tone."¹¹⁵ Angela Nelson's chapter, "Studying Black Comic Strips: Popular Art and the Discourses of Race," reviews the basics of analyzing from either perspective; Christian Davenport offers a review of the life and work of cartoonist Ollie Harrington in the context of the civil rights struggles of the early and middle twentieth century.¹¹⁶ Engaging with the superhero industry of our own moment, Jeffrey A. Brown finds that "the depiction of Black women as superheroes in comic books . . . facilitates a different type of representation than typically occurs when Black women appear as singers, actresses, models, porn stars, and even as celebrity athletes."¹¹⁷ Brown pays special attention to *Black Panther*, a Marvel contrivance from the mid-60s, and *Vixen*, which debuted in 1981. Black superheroes are also the subject of the essay from Kenneth Ghee, who sorts them out by temperament, pedigree (who's fully human and who's not), and social roles.¹¹⁸

The book's co-editor, Sheena Howard, takes on what is probably the best known newspaper comic strip in which African Americans appear regularly: Aaron McGruder's *The Boondocks*. Howard concentrates on the strip's variations on the ritual of "the dozens" and finds fault with McGruder for his pattern of "trivialization and marginalization of women."¹¹⁹ McGruder's work is also the focus in a friendlier essay by Carlos D. Morrison and the collection's other editor, Ronald L. Jackson II, who provide a structural and thematic analysis of *The Birth of a Nation*, a comic novel from 2000 set in East St. Louis, and co-authored by McGruder with Reginald Hudlin and Kyle Baker.¹²⁰ Elizabeth Sills is also more favorably disposed toward McGruder, arguing in "Inappropriate Political Content: Serialized Comic Strips at the Intersection of Visual Rhetoric and the Rhetoric of Humor" that *The Boondocks* should be valued for its edgy engagement with complex realities.¹²¹ Clariza Ruiz de Castilla and Zazil Elena Reyes García review representations of Condoleezza Rice in political cartoons from the start to the end of the Bush 43 era, contending that the range of representations shows an abiding anxiety about powerful Black women.¹²² David Deluliis's "Culturally

Gatekeeping the Black Comic Strip" looks into the history and dynamics of the processes (street-side and also backroom) by which comic strips, African American and otherwise, do or don't achieve a measure of public exposure.¹²³

How *The Boondocks* works in the classroom is the subject of George White's essay "I May Not Know Nuttin' about History but I Ain't Stupid," which appeared in the journal *Fire!!!* early in the year. White reviews his experiences with teaching McGruder's comic strip at York College, a predominantly minority unit of the CUNY system in Queens.¹²⁴ Including a brief history of *The Boondocks* and a set of questions that White has used to provoke discussion and writing about it, he concentrates on sequences about race slavery in America, and he writes candidly about the dialogue that these texts and his presentations of them have brought about. Anyone considering a serious engagement with McGruder's work as a course text would benefit from a serious look at White's experiences, successes, and advice.

Comedy and Satire in the Movies

To start with the year's publications on the silent era and move forward:

Edited by Lawrence Howe, James E. Caron, and Benjamin Click, *Refocusing Chaplin: A Screen Icon through Critical Lenses* is a collection of ten essays intended to refresh our understanding of Chaplin's work in light of critical theory revolutions from later in the twentieth century, to see what happens when we return to Chaplin with insights from Barthes, Lacan, Žižek, Jameson and other A-list scholastic thinkers in mind. If that sounds like a recipe for show-off over-complication, it isn't: the editors here, along with most of the contributors to the book, stay true to the Chaplin spirit, a celebration of common sense values on screen and out in the streets. Charles Maland's introduction crisply offers an array of reasons for Chaplin's continued importance—as comedian, creative artist, master entrepreneur, and global celebrity.¹²⁵ In the opening chapter, with judicious use of Merleau-Ponty, Caron interrogates the Chaplin-variety of slapstick as negotiation with everyday experience, how it pivots "in unforeseen ways from clumsy to clever behavior . . . the eironic role of the clown as trickster."¹²⁶ Turning to a couple of Chaplin's printed texts, his book *My Trip Abroad* and a short memoir "A Comedian Sees the World," Lisa Stein Haven looks into how they configure, for the public, the relation between the Chaplin everyone knew, the "Little Tramp," and the celebrity-artist behind him.¹²⁷ The Tramp's recurring

parings with dance-hall girls is the theme of Cynthia J. Miller's "A Heart of Gold."¹²⁸ Howe's contribution, "American Masculinity and the Gendered Humor of Chaplin's Little Tramp," situates Charlie's on-screen masculinity in a broad context, not only among the other male stars of silent film comedy, but also in an array of constructions and subversions of American masculinity from Benjamin Franklin all the way to the gay club-scene of 1920s New York.¹²⁹ The centerpiece of Howe's chapter is a sharp, sustained reading of *Modern Times*; and staying with that classic film, A. Bowdoin Van Riper scrutinizes its "interwoven depictions of technology-as-wonder and technology-as-curse."¹³⁰

A pause for politics: *Modern Times* gets another workout here when Randall L. Gann sets out to show that "taking a closer look at the Marxist critique in *Modern Times* allows us to see the Tramp as a deconstructive force." Building on Derrida's concept of *différance*, Gann argues that the Tramp "does not fit into either side of the worker/capitalist binary. The Tramp occupies a previously unrecognized space within the binary and . . . is working as a deconstructive force within the binary."¹³¹ If you value the kind of analysis that reduces multidimensional narrative to cleaner oppositions, this one's for you. On Chaplin's *The Circus*, however, Rachel Joseph engages the film not as a political tract but as an ontological puzzle, an experience of "a liminal space that invites the presence of the live within the cinematic that transcends the absence that defines the ontology of film," and Lacan, Žižek, and Bergson are invoked along the way.¹³² In "The Paradox of 'The Dictator,'" Marco Grosoli looks not only into *The Great Dictator* but also at *Monsieur Verdoux* and *Limelight*, as films that "involve and recuperate catharsis in the classical sense; they reinstate theatricality inside cinema while dealing precisely with democracy as opposed to totalitarianism."¹³³ The key is mimesis, resemblance, imitation, and to develop that theme we follow a route from Diderot through Derrida, and of course Žižek, our moment's must-have as a credential for film-crit acceptance. Aner Preminger sees the transition from silent film to talkies as a special challenge for Chaplin, and also as a source for his experimentation with themes of blindness and seeing, hearing and understanding, and (reflexively) with the arc of movie careers.¹³⁴ And Benjamin Click rounds out the book with a chapter on *The Great Dictator*, seeing it as, among other things, a meditation on "the strengths and limitations of the spoken word."¹³⁵

Alan Bilton's *Silent Film Comedy and American Culture* opens with an excellent multipage chronology of the business, its origins, stars, and

movers-and-shakers from 1895 all the way up to *The Artist*, the award-winning silent-by-choice Belgian feature from 2012. The book could perhaps best be described as a combative inquiry into whether the “pleasurable regression” of these comedies (the term is Freud’s) “serves the essentially conformist ends of consumer culture . . . or else represents the return of the repressed, an explosion of anarchy and irrationality among the technocratic systems of supply and demand, the closed loop of production/consumption/entertainment.”¹³⁶ So then, do these movies constitute anarchic resistance or a domestication of such urges? More the latter, sadly enough: “our own mediated, product-driven world can be seen as the consequence of cinematic fever dreams come true.”¹³⁷ For decoding this laughter, Freud is from start to finish the main apparatus, enhanced by his nephew Edward Bernays’s theorizing about crowds, mobs, propaganda, and social control; and the work of Mack Sennett, Charlie Chaplin, Fatty Arbuckle, and Mabel Normand are all explored at length.

Working from the silent era into the first decades of the talkies, Scott Balcerzak’s *Buffoon Men: Classic Hollywood Comedians and Queered Masculinity* reads the period as “fraught with masculine anxieties caused by ‘affronts’ from various social stages.”¹³⁸ Responding to these perilous contexts, “comedian comedy often emerges as queerly ambiguous in its motives, drifting between different protocols of maleness to expose their comic potential without necessarily a direct criticism.”¹³⁹ Balcerzak moves forward prudently, doing his homework amid the moraines of relevant commentary on film and culture-gender issues before launching into W. C. Fields, Laurel and Hardy, Jack Benny’s film appearances, and the now-eclipsed film comedies of Eddie Cantor; building on the momentum of these close readings, Balcerzak’s conclusion offers impressions and speculations on what has been happening lately, in film and on our smaller screens, with regard to laughter and deconstructions of masculinity.

Ryan Bishop’s *Comedy and Cultural Critique in American Film* opens with a refreshing affirmation that “comedy has been able to perform a great deal of analytic work that typically was the domain of tragedy or drama, especially since the end of the First World War”¹⁴⁰—which is a way of saying that wit and humor and comedy really can matter in the work of “serious” authors classifiable as Modernists or Po-Mo, and that the laughter cannot be construed as merely palatable sauce on a literary text, but potentially integral to it. From that recognition, Bishop launches into “the central role comedic films have played in cinema history, in terms of narrative, the construction

of specific comic modes, and the rapidly growing import of visual culture in the public discursive and political spheres,” with special interest in “cinema’s reflexive engagement with visual culture and the various scopic regimes and technologies that constitute it”¹⁴¹—meaning that these films often show satiric awareness of the technological revolution that makes them possible. “Cinema . . . becomes an important site for producing and critiquing visual technology within US and global cultural politics . . . and the thematising of its own power.”¹⁴² Chaplin, Keaton, and Laurel and Hardy are all scrutinized straight away; the Marx Brothers come nearer to the end. Along the way there is a lively recovery of *Team America*, an ambitious puppet-animation flop from the first decade of this century; and useful perspectives on mockumentaries and anomalous hybrids like Woody Allen’s *Zelig* and Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine*. The critical substrate is predominantly Freud, Bergson, Linda Hutcheon, and Leo Braudy.

Considering how many American musical comedies are on the shelves and how popular they continue to be, it’s strange that 2013 saw so little critical interest in this presence of humor and wit in popular entertainment. An exception is Katherine Baber’s “Manhattan Women: Jazz, Blues, and Gender in *On the Town* and *Wonderful Town*.” Baber’s salient observation here is that the legendary writer team Betty Comden and Adolph Green put a special spin on these war-era musicals to address urgencies of the moment, that both of these “New York musicals invert traditional power structures and gender roles for the sake of comedy, but also to present a joyful and unified community alongside the kind of ‘boy gets girl’ romance that carried the U.S. through the war and into postwar society.”¹⁴³

Which brings us to the year’s other *Last Laugh* book: subtitled *Strange Humors of Cinema*, Murray Pomerance’s collection brings together essays that grew out of a conference in 2012. The volume is organized around a premise that “the laughing face can indicate not mirth or release but secrecy, darkness, surrender, and improbability,”¹⁴⁴ and Pomerance’s introduction offers a wealth of instances: grinning villains, lunatics, characters signifying politeness, embarrassment, creepy charm, madness, cold manipulateness, what have you. The thirteen essays in the collection interpret examples ranging from the obvious (Heath Ledger as The Joker in Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight*; Bogart and Walter Huston in John Huston’s *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*) to the more exotic (for instance Bruce Conner’s obscure *A Movie*, an “indie” *avant la lettre* from 1957). Several other specimens tend to reduce

the overriding theme to airy thinness: John Travolta's alien grimaces in the horrendous *Battlefield Earth*, one rueful smile from Orson Welles's Falstaff in *Chimes at Midnight*, recurring shots of deadpan faces in Nicolas Roeg's creepy *Don't Look Now*. One outlier essay here, by Christine Cornea, centers not on laughter as an intention of the script or the performance, but rather on sci-fi films that are laughed *at* because they are so clumsily awful—and as expected, there is a protracted review of Ed Wood's notoriously bad *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, belaboring an insight that our own laughter here is based in perceptions of ineptitude and incongruity.¹⁴⁵ Scholars interested in a checklist of clips in which lips are pulled wide and teeth flash, for any imaginable reason, may find the book useful. *American Film Satire in the 1990s: Hollywood Subversion* by Johan Nilsson is a more modest book with regard to scope, concentrating on this one decade as “the time when satire really began to emerge in the mainstream of American media culture.”¹⁴⁶ After some theorizing about what satire really is, Nilsson centers on how films induce audiences to notice it, and takes up what he calls a “semiformalist” analysis of about a dozen films, indie and also big-budget, looking for varieties of irony and caricature.

The Year in Theorizing

To start close to home: when she assumed the *StAH* editorship with number 2 of the 2013 year, Judith Yaross Lee opened with an essay that went considerably beyond a salutation. Calling for a new fourfold campaign to boost the relevance of humor studies in broader discussions of American cultural life—including sharper taxonomies from its scholars and a heightened awareness of international connections and “cross-media practices and influence”—she organizes her thinking around one key imperative, “to understand American comic culture as a symphony of harmonies and dissonances, not just dominant melodies and counterpoints.”¹⁴⁷ This is a manifesto, and several long responses to it (by Gregg Camfield, James Caron, and myself) appear in the opening number for 2014. If you are seeking an intelligent, informed “what's next?” overview of where we are and where we can sensibly go, you might want to begin with Lee's essay.

From elsewhere in the 2013 theory reaping, the following *amuse-bouches* come raw from the field. For this handful, we will take a break from citations,

as it's nicer to think of them as exotic mushrooms erupting from the compost of the Profound:

The definition of the humorous text proposed by the GTVH helps researchers identify which texts are funny and which are not.

On the whole, their genre regardless, one of the central functions of films, series and serials is to entertain the general public, and humour serves this general purpose.

Disaffiliative humour rests on the speaker's ill feelings towards the butt.

Humor is ubiquitous in human social life. It occurs not only in the way we talk, but also in how we interpret the world.

While few would disagree that humor and associated behaviors such as laughter are forms of communication, it is notoriously difficult to determine precisely what is being communicated when someone is being funny. . . .

Your HQ is your Humor Quotient—your ability to create and appreciate humor that is positive, constructive, and facilitative of your personal relationships.

Knowing the context makes none of these any brighter. But there are, in fact, a number of high-quality 2013 publications that try to contribute to our understanding of the dynamics and consequences of laughter and comic utterance; and following Thoreau's advice about how to read, we should look at the best material first. From Springer Verlag, Mordechai Gordon's *Humor, Laughter, and Human Flourishing* makes clear at the outset that he intends no large-scale contribution to theorizing about humor, no sorting-out of all these contending (and vulnerable) propositions and modes of analysis. Instead, he sets out to "address the relative neglect of humor and laughter among philosophers of education by focusing on the significance of humor and laughter for human flourishing"; humor, he finds, "can provide philosophers of education with a light and amusing mood that can balance the more somber tone that characterizes their work."¹⁴⁸ After an opening chapter that moves from *OED* definitions onward through Plato, Hobbes, Nietzsche, & Co., and eventually closing in on John Morreall's proposition that in the

moment of laughter we can countenance inconvenient truths and see things in new ways, Gordon asserts that today's philosophers of education should lighten up. Subsequent chapters make an encouraging case that humor is indeed worth taking seriously; one chapter speculates on connections between Freud on the subject of *Witz* and his work on dreams, concluding that "we have much to learn about human existence and flourishing by studying dreams and humor."¹⁴⁹ There is also a chapter affirming that humor can build friendship and intimacy, and a chapter advancing a proposition that humor in literary contexts "is beneficial in providing social criticism and exposing inconvenient truths that might otherwise be difficult for many people to accept"¹⁵⁰—literary text as message-delivery armature, humor as the grease. As Gordon cruises through these insights, Freud and Morrell are the talismans dangling from his mirror.

In *Developments in Linguistic Humour Theory*, editor Marta Dynel assembles a set of essays that express a measure of dissatisfaction with the discourses that have dominated what she refers to as "humor theory" for the past three decades; she observes in her introduction that the sententiously named "General Theory of Verbal Humor" (advanced some years ago by Victor Raskin and his frequent collaborator Salvatore Attardo) grew out of ill-proportioned attention to what she calls "canned jokes," and that this theory presumes "the linear development or comprehension of humorous discourse"¹⁵¹—a set of assumptions that many readers of *StAH* have also found wanting. What recent work of this sort can achieve, she observes, is "adequate description of isolated humorous phenomena in the context of chosen criteria"¹⁵²—again, the presumably discrete joke, disconnected from most of the cultural contingencies that could make it interesting. These recognitions constitute a modest but welcome crack in the ice, an incremental movement toward a perception that in fact no "verbal humor" is exclusively "verbal," and that it might be salutary, if also a bit messy with regard to analytic praxis, if the theory-set would put down the semantic handbooks for a moment and see what's cooking in Derrida or Bourdieu—and several essays later in the array offer observations that students of American humor could find beneficial. In "From Perception of Contraries to Humorous Incongruities," Carla Canestrari and Ivana Bianchi use familiar formulations about incongruity to sort out "three types of contrariety," borrowed from work in cognitive psychology, to scrutinize a set of short jokes to demonstrate differences.¹⁵³ Villy Tsakona's "Okras and the Metapragmatic Stereotypes of Humour" proposes

that we can bridge the “analytical gap between socio-cultural approaches to humour and linguistic-pragmatic ones” by moving beyond the speaker-centered GTVH to what Tsakona calls a “theory of audience.”¹⁵⁴ For people who have avoided this kind of analysis altogether, there is a useful summary here of Raskin’s thirty-year-old monograph on the “linguistic mechanisms of humour,” as well as its limitations, conceding that it “cannot very easily answer questions pertaining to the reception of humour, namely to whom it is funny and when, under which circumstances or in which context(s) something is funny.”¹⁵⁵ Thereafter, however, the essay spends most of its time deconstructing a 2011 gag on Greek TV that set off a momentary flap about sexism.

In “Signals of Humor: Encryption and Laughter in Social Interaction,” Thomas J. Flamson and Gregory A. Bryant make a move to bring social and psychological contexts into the craft of joke analysis: “Drawing on relevance theory . . . and other forms of post-Gricean pragmatics, humorous utterances and acts are considered encrypted in the sense that what makes them funny is not merely their surface content, but a relationship between the surface content and implied meaning understood by both the speaker and the audience.”¹⁵⁶ As a step toward a remedy, they advance a construct they call *comic nescience*, and take issue along the way with abiding problems in the humor-theory conversation: “Traditional schools (superiority, incongruity, and relief) have been underscored by an epistemology of knowing, resulting in a tendency towards a reductive interpretive understanding of works under investigation.” Amen to that. “We propose that humor evolved as a means of honestly signaling compatibility within local groups by relying on the detection of ‘encrypted’ information, the recognition of which is then signaled via honest laughter.”¹⁵⁷ “Encryption” turns out to mean allusion to a set of plausible inferences, and the authors propose that an encryption theory of humor “is a synthesis of many disparate approaches to humor and laughter.”¹⁵⁸ Whether or not a reader accepts this taxonomy as some kind of breakthrough, it is heartening to see efforts of this sort, from within humor research, to move out of this winter of semantic analysis. In “Comic Nescience: An Experimental View of Humour and a Case for the Cultural Negotiation Function of Humour,” Dalbir Sehmbly offers another taxonomy in hopes of a similar escape. “The comical is simultaneity: simple and complex, logical and illogical, intellectual and emotional, as well as mental and physical.”¹⁵⁹ To develop the point, Sehmbly concentrates on an old

YouTube pastiche that conjoined images of Bush 41 and Colin Powell to a Harry Belafonte song; after that, he takes up a couple of ancient Gracie Allen routines. We have multiplicity and ambiguity and complication in American comic texts, says Sehmbly, because the United States is "a home for people from around the world, from different religions, ethnicities, and linguistic groups. Today, the United States is composed of a variety of cultures. Aside from cultural diversity, America has also been the site of diverse ideological voices."¹⁶⁰ In reading through this kind of material, you learn to make do with *aperçus* like these.

The first of Dynel's essays in the collection explores "impoliteness" as a source of "disaffiliative humor," a quest that launches her into familiar realms: aggression and superiority, Hobbes, Bergson, Freud. The focus of the essay, however, is the Fox series *House*, with its sociopathic doctor-hero and a hospital full of people who variously and changeably admire him and hate him.¹⁶¹ Her second contribution, "When Does Irony Tickle the Hearer? Towards Capturing the Characteristics of Humorous Irony" also takes us on a tour of *House*, concluding that as a general rule, "the degree of the humour perceived rises as a function of discontinuity or discrepancy between the literal meaning of an utterance and the referent situation, or the intended meaning," which might not convince every reader who has recently wandered in *King Lear* or Stoppard's *The Coast of Utopia*; decoding irony, she says, requires us to work with "both the superiority theory of humour and the incongruity-resolution framework, whose explanatory powers do mesh."¹⁶² Evidently that works for *House*. The most provocative essay in the set, and one of the best written, is Tony Veale's "Strategies and Tactics for Ironic Subversion," which centers on the modern American taste for ironic similes ("as funny as a crutch," "as useful as a chocolate teapot"—his choices), creating patterns that Creative Information Retrieval (CIR), as a capability in information technology, might soon master, thereby closing one of those valorized gaps between human and mechanical discourse and understanding.¹⁶³ "Giving Voice to the Studio Audience: Ratified and Dynamic Participation Statuses in a Television Stand-Up Performance," by Sarah Seewoester Cain, makes a 30-page case that the responsive live audience of Conan O'Brien helps the stand-up monologues go over.¹⁶⁴

Another excursion back to Plato and superiority theory provides the core of "Perspective Clashing as a Humour Mechanism," where Bastian Mayerhofer and Annekathrin Schacht offer *perspective clashing*

(his italics—one motivation evident in this kind of scholarship is to market your own key-phrase), by which they mean situations, comic and otherwise, where the viewer or listener sees things from a different vantage point or level of understanding from everybody else—in other words, dramatic irony. The illustrations in the foreground here, however, are a scene from Chaplin's *Modern Times* and moments from *The Wire*, the latter being, of course, not a work of comedy but essentially of drama and suspense.¹⁶⁵ Dissatisfied with conventional descriptions of humorous teasing as expressions of solidarity or exclusion, Valeria Sinkeviciute develops four replacement classifications: politeness, mock politeness, mock impoliteness, and impoliteness. Most of the examples she deploys are brief quotations of printed material from the British National Corpus,¹⁶⁶ and no American-style teasing or possible differences related to nation, ethnicity, culture, or social class are countenanced here. At the opening of "Televised Political Satire: New Theoretical Introspections," Diana E. Popa offers a concession that satire is "ambiguous and elusive" as a literary and cultural practice; but limiting her scope to television (and ultimately to one program on Romanian television), her coinage here is the *3D content analytic model* (again the italics are original). There is a macro-level to look at and of course a micro one: "The macro level views political satire as an institutionalised humorous genre, which is the outer layer. However, satire is a sophisticated witty genre that needs equally sophisticated hierarchically lower-level containers."¹⁶⁷ The example unpacked in the essay is the Romanian series she translates as *The Animated Planet Show*. Extrapolate from that at your own risk. The only essay in the entire set that tries to engage with American humor's literary texts and authors in any sustained way is Agnes Marszalek's "It's Not Funny out of Context!: A Cognitive Stylistic Approach to Humorous Narratives"—the last one in the collection, which is too bad, since some readers may give up before they get this far. "In contrast to canned jokes," she says,

narratives have their own set of devices used in humour creation—techniques which are mostly related to the construction of the narrative world. A humorous narrative world is a context which relies on a number of techniques to make it amusing as a whole. Once the wider narrative context is established as humorous, the elements which appear in it are likely to be assimilated as humorous. That is why individual instances of narrative comedy tend to lose some of their humour when taken out of their original context.¹⁶⁸

None of this may come as a surprise to people who work with imaginative literature, but even so, an encouraging sign.

Onward to another ambitious collection: in the "Pragmatics & Beyond and Its Companion" [*sic*] series, intended to "cover the full richness of Pragmatics as an interdisciplinary field, within language sciences" (these are phrases from the front matter), *Irony and Humor: From Pragmatics to Discourse* opens with an extended introduction by the two editors—"The Pragmatics of Irony and Humor" by Leonor Ruiz Gurillo and M. Belén Alvarado Ortega—followed by ten essays, two of which are by them, eight by others. Five of these can be seen as having some relationship to the discussion of American comic texts and discourse; three are broader engagements with humor theory, and we will get to those in a moment. Invoking Relevance Theory (reduced to RT in the parlance of humor research) and also the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), the introduction concedes that we still have a ways to go in describing irony, because "the fact that any irony contains an echo, even if it is a vague one . . . does not suffice to address the complexity of this phenomenon." This classification of ironic utterance as "echoic" here means that a "speaker" who is being ironic "transmits an attitude of dissociation from the echoed opinion."¹⁶⁹ The speaker signifies somehow that he or she doesn't really mean what's being said. The editors also concede that a welter of complications are lurking out there, among them "teasing, skepticism or bitter attitudes, together with associated echoes like confusion, anger, fun, or intrigue." That will do for starters. Further complications to the planned analysis are posed by a competing theory, the "Pretense Theory," which holds that an ironist pretends "to be an injudicious person speaking to an uninitiated audience" and the positing of an "ironic environment," which includes "the speaker's expectation, an incongruity between expectation and reality and the speaker's negative attitude towards this incongruity." The book's intended contribution with regard to all this is a proposition that "Irony [is] an inverting procedure which may affect not only what is said and what is inferred but also discursive typologies and textual traditions,"¹⁷⁰ which would seem to encompass culture, history, community, the foundations of personal and collective identity, transience, permanence—the works.

To negotiate that other problem, *humor*, the editors parse it into four components: the script-based semantic theorizing that has been unfolding for decades in the pages of *Humor* (the journal of the ISHS); the General Theory of Verbal Humor, mentioned earlier; Cognitive Linguistics; and Relevance

Theory. In all of these discourses, a basic assumption is once again that comic utterance can be reduced to lab slides of discrete molecules, jokes. "A humorous text, i.e., a joke, is staged in three phases (establishment phase; incongruity phase, and resolution phase). Following the *punch line*, the reader is forced to resolve incongruity for one of these activated scripts so that the understanding of humor, and consequently, the achievement of the effects sought is ensured."¹⁷¹ Anyone who has thought for five minutes about the rich and nuanced comic streams and complex presence in American literary and cultural history can think of legions of instances where this generality fails, but such are the assumptions that subtend this collection and this kind of analysis. The opening essay, Susanna Rodríguez Rosique's "The Power of Inversion: Irony, from Utterance to Discourse" examines irony as "an inverting procedure which may affect not only what is said and what is inferred but also discursive typologies and textual traditions,"¹⁷² meaning that irony can be broadly subversive. Reading through various recent efforts at all-weather descriptions, she arrives at her own variant, that "no clear cut distinction can be drawn between irony and humor"¹⁷³ and that as we move from discrete ironic utterance to full-out ironic discourse, things get complicated. Her observations and generalizations here are based upon texts from the Iberian peninsula, mostly recent ones.

Salvatore Attardo's "Intentionality and Irony" sets a few limits: because "it does not appear that literary and philosophical uses [of irony] can be fruitfully explained in terms of linguistic irony . . . I will limit myself to verbal irony."¹⁷⁴ That circumscription carves out territory that Attardo has focused on frequently, one-liners and jokes; and what he has often studied in these situations is incongruity and "oppositions" of various sorts—literal vs. intended meaning; observations vs. what he calls "the facts of the situation"; a present utterance in contrast to past ones. His culminating assertion is that "all indirect, non-literal discourse is based largely or in part, upon abductive, hence, non-monotonic and open-ended, inferential processes. Therefore, all these modes derive their indeterminacy from the indeterminacy of abduction (i.e., we can never be sure that a given meaning is exactly what was implicated, the hearer's is a best guess)."¹⁷⁵ What isn't countenanced (a recurring pattern in studies of this sort) is that the intention, the meaning, could possibly encompass escape from confinements of determinate meaning, that part of the vertigo and surprise and pleasure of a burst of irony can, in some cases, be the moral and cognitive wilderness into which it takes us,

that there could be exhilarating moments of challenge, and of psychological freedom, when an audience recognizes that no "guess" is really "best," and moreover that no choosing is called for.

In "An Inference-Centered Analysis of Jokes: The Intersecting Circles Model of Humorous Communication," Francisco Yus delivers as promised, proposing an apparatus for taking apart an array of rather thin jokes, positing that all the interpretive action happens in "the language module of the brain," where "appropriate hypotheses of explicit content" are constructed and evaluated¹⁷⁶: brain as language decoder-ring, a hypothesis that would have been more convincing forty years ago than it is now, when Damasio and Pinker and Dennett have led an avalanche of fresh research about the dynamics of the brain and the nature of thinking that cannot be kept off the court. One *New Yorker* cover illustration, a supposedly wry map of the world from December of 2001, gets a thorough going-over in "Phonological Humor as Perception and Representation of Foreignness," by Javier Muñoz-Basols, Pawel Adrjan, and Marianne David, where this analysis-by-committee concludes that "humor is accomplished here by combining popular cultural assumptions regarding remote places . . . with prefixes or suffixes evoking the foreign sounds and languages connected with these places," and observes that other cultures and nations play similar games with place-names and phonemes in use elsewhere.¹⁷⁷ No observations are offered about how the snark of that cover has held up over time, its overarching implication that these funny-sounding, far-off places we are now required to think about, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, really aren't worth the trouble. All of this was before the United States entered two wars "Out There" that have cost thousands of lives and are not over yet. The bottom line offered by the piece is that this kind of humor connects to cultural contexts, linguistic contexts, and individual contexts. Amadeu Viana's contribution to the book builds upon a twenty-year-old proposition that "humor spreads in conversation and through conversational structures displaying a diversity of functions that may be explained and understood as part of a complex interactional construct." Translation: humor thrives in a spread of contexts, contingencies, and ephemerality; and "the structural position of speakers . . . explains the management of discursive [*sic*] tools and its effects,"¹⁷⁸ which, if you can guess the referent of the ghostly pronoun, seems to mean that speakers can put their own spin on an interaction to help a listener sort it out. If you are new to *humor research* you need to get used to this kind of discourse, these enunciations of the self-evident. Viana's purpose in her essay is to explore how "double

intentions in humor match goal-oriented strategies that pervade the structure of argumentation” and whether it is “possible to project the operational background of pragmatic argumentation, i.e., deductive steps, analogical devices . . . or causality, into multifunctional, perhaps multipurpose moves that inform comical utterances?”¹⁷⁹ What follows, as analysis, is based on conversations gathered from action within one academic unit at his home university in Spain. In looking at various “humorous moves sanctioned by laughter,” the discussion pays little attention to the possibly huge importance of cultural difference, but it does arrive at a consoling moment of common sense, that we “should look into the long tradition of using irony in dialogue and the interesting connections between fallacies, wit, and ridicule.”¹⁸⁰

The thesis of Kurt Feyaerts’s “Tackling the Complexity of Spontaneous Humorous Interaction” is that “an adequate analysis of (humorous) meaning . . . heavily depends on the notion of perspectivization, from which we gain insight that the meaning of many humorous utterances is realized on different layers.”¹⁸¹ Again, this insight will not come as a stunner to readers of *StAH*; but in the context of the research exemplified elsewhere in this collection, it borders on subversion, resisting a foundational doctrine that jokes can be forced out of rich contexts and poked at individually to divulge one finite intention and signification. Soon, however, the essay settles into explications of small doses of contemporary Flemish repartee.

Edited by Salvatore Attardo, Manuela Maria Wagner, and Eduardo Urios-Aparisi, *Prosody and Humor* is a set of nine essays, once again elaborating on a premise favored by ISHS leadership that *humor* means joke or a linear sequence of them, and that the key to recognizing a joke *as* funny and decoding all of its meanings and implications lies in semantics. The introductory pages (apparently written by all three editors) affirm that “all the papers share a methodological commitment to empirical instrumental analysis (supplemented, to be sure, by human analysis and interpretation).”¹⁸² Offering a concise summary of what this community of scholars means when they deploy the terms *humor*, *irony*, and *sarcasm*, they also note that the research presented in this book finds that punch lines in jokes of the humor type are in fact *not* “marked prosodically—neither by changes in pitch, volume, or speech rate, nor by significant pauses.”¹⁸³ Evidently this finding is supposed to apply to all languages and cultures on the planet: there is nothing here to limit such an extrapolation as the collection centers its attention on irony and sarcasm. The chapters that follow include a cross-cultural study

on how sarcasm is signified in English oral interactions (no distinctions are countenanced among the many styles and cultures of English—Australian, British, the Indian subcontinent, the sprawling regional variations used across Canada and the United States), compared to how sarcasm is done in Cantonese; an essay on “multimodal markers in conversation,” based on a set of observed dialogue among subjects in an American university lab, finds that “the hypothesis that conversational and narrative/canned humor differ significantly, as far as the prosodic markers we have examined, has been refuted and particularly so the idea that humor is signaled by pauses or emphatic prosody.”¹⁸⁴ Again, this conclusion is proffered as a finding applicable everywhere: all cultures, age groups, languages, contexts. More plausible is the chapter by Thomas Flamson, Gregory A. Bryant, and H. Clark Barrett, which works from the “encryption theory of humor,” summarized as holding “that humor is produced by encrypting multiple implicatures within an utterance that can only be understood by audience members who share relevant background information (including attitudes, beliefs, and preferences, in addition to propositional knowledge). When an audience member has access to this background information, he or she is able to “decrypt” the hidden implicature(s)—that is, they ‘get’ the joke.”¹⁸⁵ Promising, but all the work presented in this essay is based on in-jokes in northern Brazil, and students of American comic discourse and cultural history may find it a stretch with regard to usefulness for their line of work. There’s also an essay on pitch-change in riddle openings (the research this time is evidently based on behavior in one American campus neighborhood).¹⁸⁶ The book closes with a couple of additional chapters on how people sound and what faces they make when they tell jokes (again, with notable dearth of interest in possibilities of cultural and generational difference), and we culminate with an armchair analysis of a few meant-to-be-funny conversations from *Sex and the City*.¹⁸⁷

Building on Bergson’s observations about the roots of laughter in rigidity and on Aaron Smuts’s challenge for colleagues in philosophy and humor research to prove that a tasteless or immoral joke is actually funnier *because* of its moral transgressions, Martin Shuster tries to do just that, to demonstrate that laughter at such jokes can reveal in a flash the true moral fabric of whoever’s listening. This effort seems like a cogent argument, provided a few other possibilities and recognitions are kept out of play. That is, you must ignore, first, that recent and widely circulated suggestions emanating

from the neurosciences locate the start of a response to a comic moment elsewhere in the brain than in the frontal cortex, and actually in several different regions at once—in other words, you can “get it” and laugh before you actually “think” with the frontal cortex about what you’re taking in; and second, that laughter *at* a joke, in other words, at the attempt at humor, can in some situations be a response directly to its awfulness, its ethical pratfall, its stupid failure to meet common sense standards of decency in the discourse-cultures of the moment; and third, that the universe of laughter is not some Newtonian condition of entropy, with jokes floating alone with no collisions or interactions in empty space, a construct normally rejected by people who explore humor in literature and the arts. Humor, says Shuster,

is part of what we might call a “decent upbringing,” to the extent that such an upbringing will consist not only in learning a certain this or that, but also learning to see and inhabit the world in a certain way. Humor teaches what is and what is not important and valuable, worthy of derision or not, and in some cases, ultimately what is and is not. In short, humor helps initiate us into and maintain us within a form of life.¹⁸⁸

Wow. Meaning that wit and humor have obligations to be didactic, to teach and moderate and regulate, and that humor’s powers for rebellion, (including of course rebellion against prescriptive moralizing like this) are to be stifled as part of “initiation” into citizenship? Memorable wit from a Tom Stoppard play: “When philosophers start talking like architects, get out while you can, chaos is coming. When they start laying down rules for beauty, blood in the streets is from that moment inevitable. When reason and measurement are made authorities for the perfect society, seek sanctuary among the cannibals.”¹⁸⁹ One looks forward to being corrected for smiling at that.

In *Humor: An International Journal of Humor Research*, Jared Alan Gray and Thomas E. Ford have conducted a survey using local college students (young people from one campus, or merely one single college course, are often drafted as a supposedly random sample for work of this sort) to demonstrate that local contexts can have much to do with what people laugh at and how hard they laugh. Though a conclusion like that might fail to knock you off the couch, here at last is the proof! To get this established, students were evidently parked in front of computers in a

campus lab, fitted with headphones, and told to imagine themselves in a “professional workplace,” a comedy club, or “no context” at all—which might mean, by default, the peculiar environment of a university setting. Another set of students was recruited to do the same exercise sitting in front of their computer at home (time of day? the level of fatigue? the other work to do on that evening? how many beers under the belt? No sign that any of those possible influences on receptivity and mood were taken into account). Anyway, the finding from this wobbly survey is that sexist jokes are laughed at more freely when students dutifully imagine themselves in a comedy club audience rather than among a set of uneasy employees in a company conference room. The jokes launched at them for this analysis were pre-classified by the investigators as either “sexist” or “neutral” (who adjudicated such a sorting-out, and by what criteria, and what exactly were these jokes? Don’t ask). The researchers also deployed an “offensiveness rating” scale, producing charts with modes and standard deviations in decimals. Where does all this wind up? “Future research can further illuminate the effect of social norms on the interpretation of sexist humor by investigating people’s reactions to sexist humor”¹⁹⁰—which makes it all worthwhile.

Also in *Humor*, David Feltmate has a go at Peter Berger, acknowledged at the outset as “one of the world’s best known sociologists of religion,” to challenge what Berger has to say about the importance of laughter in the spiritual and theological quest. “For Berger,” says Feltmate, “humor alerts us to the incongruities of this life. In those incongruities we realize that there is more to existence than our current state. Because humor reveals that socially created forces oppress us, it allows us to relativize our situation and reach beyond it to something greater.”¹⁹¹ That might seem a plausible insight with nothing eccentric about it, as laughter and liberation and intellectual and psychological refreshment have been linked in our thinking about wit and humor at least as far back as Hobbes. But because Berger has invested so much of his life engaged with the history of organized religion and with the Western intellectual tradition, he hasn’t been paying enough attention, according to Feltmate, to what passes for research in *Humor*, and Berger gets a scolding here for that.¹⁹² The gist of the essay, however, is that there is no proof that humor has bearing on the spiritual quest, though Berger and many other competent theologians and scholars over the years have affirmed such a connection. “When people claim that humor opens them

up to the transcendent,” says Feltmate, “we have no way of knowing if all claimants experience the same thing”:

All we can know is the discourse they use. That humor might open somebody to a transcendent experience is entirely possible. We have no way of knowing, empirically, whether or not humans are actually influenced by something beyond themselves or if transcendent experiences are exclusively psychological phenomena generated through exclusively material processes.¹⁹³

We close with a Deep Thought about getting these moments of freedom and transcendence under some kind of social science dominion: “To start dealing seriously with the widespread phenomenon of religious humor sociologists need a theoretical foundation that acknowledges the deeply held convictions about transcendent realities that religious people hold while remaining able to criticize these beliefs.”¹⁹⁴ Anyone? Anyone? Bueller? Bueller?

NOTES

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