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- 1 Rachel Trousdale, ed. *Humor in Modern American Poetry*
- 2 New York: Bloomsbury, 2017. Pp. 240. ISBN: 9781501334733.
- 3 Natasha Anderson
- 4 Laughter is the best medicine, yet laughter's central role in modernist poetry is far from common knowledge. The eleven essays collected in *Humor in Modern American Poetry* therefore offer a timely look at the numerous manifestations of lyrical humor. The ten authors featured in this book explore a wide spectrum of comedic elements employed by such diverse writers as Emily Dickinson in the nineteenth century and Phyllis McGinley in the 1950s. The eloquent and meticulously researched contributions are not only a joy to read but also expand our understanding of humor, ranging from sly reversals of convention to biting social satire and from assertions of superiority to joyful wordplay. While the editor, Rachel Trousdale argues early on that the collection can only provide a glimpse of a much broader and still largely unexplored field, this book opens the door to a deeper investigation of humor in modern poetry, offering just enough insight for readers to feel both satisfied and hungry for more.
- 5 The strongest asset of Trousdale's introduction is her historical overview of major theories of humor, starting with Plato and leading all the way to the modern interpretations of feminist and minority studies. By critically evaluating the three leading approaches – which emphasize comedy's evocation of superiority, incongruence, and relief, respectively – Trousdale illuminates the multifunctionality of hilarity as a subversive, dialectic, and community-building tool. In the first essay, Joel Elliot Slotkin scrutinizes Ezra Pound's use of humor to establish superiority by means of "collage" or the juxtaposition of both deliberately pretentious high diction and ludicrous low diction to suggest stereotypical manners of speech (21). Via the fluid switching between different linguistic registers, Ezra Pound creates a self-glorifying authorial voice by uniting competing opposites into a coherent whole.

- 6 Common themes of humor emerge throughout the book's various close readings, thereby letting the individual essays strengthen one another. For example, William Solomon's chapter on erotic humor in E. E. Cummings' writings and Marta Figlerowicz's analysis of Lorine Niedecker's poetry illuminate how humor can unsettle readers by encouraging a new worldview. Solomon focuses on the way Cummings deliberately utilizes tropes in order to mask the familiar and satirize the mundane, thereby transforming romantic and sexual themes into tongue-in-cheek ruminations on the nature of love. Cummings often compared love to such commonplace objects as cars, typewriters, cityscapes, and – perhaps most eccentric of all – cement mixers. In comparison, Figlerowicz expands the spectrum of lyrical comedy in her examination of Lorine Niedecker's "For Paul." Niedecker's humor borders on melancholy by exploring existential questions on teleology and loneliness, yet simultaneously encourages an acceptance of ambiguity in the world.
- 7 In the following chapter, Lena Hill reveals the vital importance of the museum as a forum for the dissemination of cultural knowledge in Melvin Tolson's *Harlem Gallery*. In the same manner that the poet intertwines sophistication with public appeal through humor, so does the persona within the poem learn to employ comedic elements in order to tie different groups together. Hugh Haughton's essay illustrates that both Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop wove witty wordplay and mischievous parallels into their writing in order to uncover the inherent "strangeness" of life and to come to terms with tragedy (100). His article broadens the reader's view by stressing that humor was not exclusive to modernist poetry but also featured in other twentieth-century forms of art such as music and painting.
- 8 Next, Alan Shapiro evaluates how humor arises from contrasts between expectation and surprise while studying the parallels among three prominent poets: Emily Dickinson, Thomas Hardy, and William Carlos Williams. For instance, Williams' "Portrait of a Lady" begins as a romantic poem and devolves into a satiric conversation between the persona and his love interest, who repeatedly interrupts, questions, and undermines the amorous atmosphere. In the subsequent essay, Megan Leroy explores Phyllis McGinley's poetic project to reassert the importance of the housewife. Instead of idealizing or demonizing the home as a workplace for wife and mother, she composes flippant lyrical writing to reveal both the frustration and innate creativity associated with the domestic sphere. McGinley echoes and emphasizes the tenacity and adaptability needed to run a household by means of her poems' quick wit and linguistic dexterity.
- 9 The interplay of humor and love comes to the foreground in Rachel Trousdale's and Stephen Burt's chapters on W. H. Auden and James Merrill, respectively. Trousdale demonstrates how both the comedic and romantic elements of Auden's poetry build bridges between individual insights and common experiences. Through humorous light verse, the poet established a sense of equality between writer and readers. Just as Auden utilized jocularities in order to forge a community based on shared intellectual interest, so did Merrill use jesting conversations on the more intimate levels of friendship and marriage. Burt highlights Merrill's deliberate parallels among matrimony, conversation, and comedy by noting that all three are not a fixed product, but a process that relies on harmonized interaction.
- 10 In the concluding contribution, Karin Roffman links John Ashbery's poetry to key events in his life and to his desire to achieve a balance of levity and gravitas. His poems regularly dismantle idioms in order to uncover the ubiquity of incongruity and ridiculousness hidden in plain sight. Roffman reveals that comically morose reflections on everyday

mishaps fueled Ashbery's humor and encouraged a connection to his readers via self-deprecatory humor.

- 11 While each essay in *Humor in Modern American Poetry* is valuable and illuminating in its own right, the compilation forms a sum greater than its parts. Together, the articles provide a multifaceted view of humor's ability to create connections between individuals and to tie together contradictory ideas into a new whole. A welcome addition would be a thematic organization of the articles into three overarching parts such as community construction, wit in romantic poetry, and the comedy of absurdity in order to assist the reader in uncovering the recurring themes throughout this essay collection, which is a welcome contribution to the analysis of hilarity in literature. The various authors reveal the multiple functions of poetic jesting as social leveler, cultural critic, interpersonal bridge-builder, and everyday eye-opener. Regardless whether this volume is sought out by students, teachers, or seasoned researchers, Trousdale's book leaves the reader with a deeper understanding and a more lighthearted appreciation of humor in modern poetry.
- 12 Natasha Anderson
- 13 University of Mainz