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**Review: *The Comic Turn in Contemporary English Fiction* by Huw Marsh (London: Bloomsbury, 2020, 978-1-4742-9303-7, 247 pages, hbk cost: £26.09)**

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Despite the growing interest in comedy studies, there's been a significant lack of critical engagement with the comedy of contemporary fiction. And what limited interest there is, tends to focus only upon the privileged categories of satire or irony. In this excellent examination of the 'comic turn' in English fiction, Huw Marsh has produced a very necessary corrective – one which significantly expands our lexicon for analysing and understanding comedy beyond those categories. Contra one of the book's blurbs, however, the book is very much not 'a comprehensive new theory of laughter' or 'a new definition of English humour', but rather a series of diverse and flexible theoretical frameworks, which are both original and highly productive. Indeed, Marsh is scrupulous about making any grand overarching assertions, while also being careful to counter the overheated claims often made for the radical potential of humour and laughter. In modest, lucid prose, he examines the work of six English authors, using deft and disciplined close reading to investigate the ways in which their use of comedy can illuminate the 'contemporary'.

We start with Jonathan Coe, and *What a Carve Up!*, the exuberantly satirical novel which made his name. Despite the novel being lauded as one of the few instances of genuinely political postmodern fiction, Coe became increasingly suspicious of the political efficacy of satire. His now seminal 2013 piece in *London Review of Books*, ostensibly a review of the collected writings of Boris Johnson, analysed the ways in which laughter let Johnson 'off the hook', and argued that rather than offering critique, the mockery that surrounded him acted as a substitute for both thought and action. Marsh shows the ways in which some of Coe's reservations about satire are indeed borne out by *What a Carve Up!*, whose comic treatment of the grotesque Winshaw family and their Thatcherite values arguably provides 'cathartic release rather than anger-inducing call to arms' (26). Coe's concerns about comedy are then crystallised and dramatized in the 'metacomedy' of his later work (with Coe's own doubts articulated very explicitly by a blogger character in his novel *Number 11*, for example). But Marsh is quick to argue that the shift from the early 'caustic satire' to a 'less aggressive and ironic' mode (42) does not necessitate 'a withdrawal from overtly political writing' (29). *Number 11* for example, despite being less mocking than *What a Carve Up!*, presents a sharp disquisition on the ideological discourse around choice, a discourse which has been so crucial in ensuring 'the dismantling of the post-war consensus' and its founding belief in universal services (43). Rather than satire, Marsh suggests that it is often through jokes that the novel communicates its politics, and wonders if perhaps the form of the joke is inherently political, given that jokes 'employ and embody norms and at the same time undermine those norms' (30) thus providing the ideal medium 'to denaturalise and scrutinize' political systems (34).

The next chapter on Martin Amis uses Amis's own claims for the imbrication of style and ethics, or style as morality, to argue that it is specifically 'the Amisian comic voice' that is 'fundamental to understanding the relationship between ethics and style in his fiction (56)'; Marsh deftly proves just how central Amis's comic strategies are in revealing and enacting his own class bias. Marsh identifies two comic modes that are particularly key to Amis's work: the mismatch in registers between the elevated, eloquent narratorial voice and the 'cliched or inarticulate' voices (59) of some characters, and bathos, a strategy which is also predicated upon the transition from high to low. Both can be understood as forms of 'register humour' where incongruity is caused by the clash of two or more situational linguistic scripts, and Marsh notes just how central ideas of appropriateness and therefore ideas of hierarchies and class are here, in ways that have implications for comedy more generally. It's 'an ethics of style' because of the judgement implied in these comic juxtapositions, when speech is disparaged the more it differs in degrees of formality, or from the eloquence of the narrator. So, while people from all classes are mocked in Amis's work (and 'elevated' speech is mocked too), it is the working-class characters and 'the moral failing of inarticulate and inelegant speech' (76) that are most frequently targeted.

Chapter 3 explores the representation of laughter in Zadie Smith's novels – examining the ways in which her work engages with laughter in its 'full social manifestations' (86). In his influential 'hysterical realism' thesis, James Woods identifies a lack of control behind the unevenness in tone in Smith's celebrated *White Teeth*, but Marsh suggests that the novel's varying tone is due to its 'portrayal of multiple registers of laughter' (84) – capturing the ways in which laughter is in itself inconsistent (laughing with, laughing at). The next section builds upon Anca Parvulescu's sense of our 'impoverished lexicon' (87) for laughter, and proposes fiction as one site which can do greater justice to laughter's complexities, by capturing the breadth of its social meaning. This is borne out by the subsequent analysis of *The Autograph Man*, *On Beauty* and *NW*, which considers instances of laughter as a complex 'communicative behaviour that can signify more than a response to comic stimuli' (91); tracking the minute affective shifts as laughter modulates from bonhomie to uneasy politeness and back in a scene in *On Beauty*, for example, and moments in *NW* which capture the ways in which humour can both enable and threaten intimacy and cohesion.

The following chapter on Magnus Mills, uses a similarly exciting and innovative approach to investigate the comic potential of repetition, a somewhat neglected technique, given the usual foregrounding of the mechanism of surprise. Marsh demonstrates how repetition in Mills' comedies of work helps diagnose systemic issues in contemporary working life, identifying both violence and stasis as defining

characteristics. Drawing particularly upon scholarship by Zupančič and Deleuze, Marsh marshals an argument for repetition's capacity for illuminating and probing the 'hell' of modern work. Characteristically scrupulous, however, Marsh is muted in his claims for what comedy can do here, clear that reproducing 'work's repetitions and structures of power', will not 'dismantle' but only 'shake' them (129).

Chapter 5, on Nicola Barker, addresses paradox and contradiction, and Marsh argues that rather than 'ornamentation or a way to sugar the pill of more serious matters' (140), Barker's comedy actively allows for the exploration of seemingly incompatible states that are otherwise held distinct. Unlike tragedy, 'comedy allows for the suspension of opposites' (139), a thesis illustrated by Barker's novel *The Cauliflower* whose main character is both foolish and wise, clown and guru, gifted and cursed. Like Coe, Barker's later work reveals her increasing concerns about certain aspects of comedy, in particular satire and the carnivalesque. *Clear*, her novel about David Blaine's 2003 performance suspended in a glass box, demonstrates these doubts about the 'revolutionary potential of carnivalesque upheaval' (148). The carnivalesque is much vaunted for its potential to overturn norms and both affirm and unify, but the seemingly 'free feeling' crowds who gather to watch the end of the performance are actually orchestrated by commercial interests, while it is often the spite and antagonism of the British spectators towards the American performer that is the basis for unity. Alongside the increasing ambivalence about the carnivalesque, Marsh traces Barker's move from her early trademark grotesque comedy to a greater empathy, and maps this onto the much-discussed post-postmodern shift from irony to sincerity. However, in another paradoxical manoeuvre, Barker challenges the conventional notion of ironic postmodern detachment by using it to overtly sincere ends.

The final chapter concerns Howard Jacobson, who – like Coe – is 'a practitioner-critic with strong opinions about comedy' (170). Marsh uses Jacobson's own statements about the necessity for comedy's freedom from boundaries to structure a discussion about 'the relationship between comic license and offensiveness' (170), noting how Jacobson's claims about 'communal purgation' and 'lancing the boil' of prejudice (173, 174) clearly ignore the risks of reinforcing stereotypes as well as the part played by intention and context in mitigating against offence. Jacobson's fiction explores the issues with rather more subtlety than his pugnacious commentary, and Marsh demonstrates how Jacobson's arguments about total comic licence are not borne out by his fiction; *The Finkler Question* and *Kalooki Nights* for example, which clearly recognise the significance of 'intentionality and of the subject positions of joke tellers' (186).

The book ends by circling back to the issue of national identity. Marsh uses Jonathan Barnes' novel *England, England* and its satiric spectacle of theme-park Englishness to reflect on Boris Johnson's performative jingoism and the dismaying parochialism of Brexit. These themes are all too relevant and seem set to continue to dominate public discourse; just one of the ways in which the book shows itself to demonstrate that comedy is no mere 'adjunct to the serious work of literature but [...] a site of rich possibilities for the understanding of fiction and the contemporary moment' (210). Alongside the subtle and thoughtful insights about the centrality of comedy to literary meaning, there is much to be learned here about how that comedy illuminates contemporary issues, such as national identity, class, and the nature of work. And indeed, one of the delights of the book is a renewed sense of fiction's gifts for elucidating such issues. Marsh quotes Rita Felski's commendation of literary texts as a form of knowledge which 'do not just represent but make newly present, significant shapes of social meaning' (Felski 87), and his book is a superlative example of the kind of analysis that helps fully articulate and communicate this meaning.

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### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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