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Christian Hartselle
Butler University

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When Poetry and Humor Get Hitched

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Christian Hartselle

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Christian Hartselle

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When Poetry and Humor Get Hitched

Through humor, poetry explores the imagination and the mind just as it does through other means of expression. Comic poetry finds the truth in the illogical and in the absurd; it finds what unsettles us through its use of surprise; it finds delight and play in the unknown and uncertain. By its very nature, comic poetry clings to the edges of what we know, so pinpointing its characteristics is tricky. But the shared characteristic of all comic poetry is the permission the poet grants herself to disobey boundaries. The poet chooses not to fit her works within the reader's expectations, the reader's sense of logic, or the reader's definitions of things in the world. Some of the boundaries crossed come out of breaking out of poetic custom. Many poems break boundaries of thought and expression; a comic poet uses one or more of these techniques to bring her funny poems to profound places. The result is always the exploration of unexplored or underexplored territory.

This is what drove me to learn more about comic poetry and write some of my own: I was fascinated that a poet could be funny and use that as an asset to deepen her work. I explored many poets' works and saw how they used humor; I also read poets who did not write funny poems but nonetheless influenced comic poetry. All the while, I tried my hand at writing some comic poetry of my own. Through my reading and through refining my thesis, however, one fact became apparent: I could not simply aim to write funny poems. This would inevitably result in failure; poems reject outright intention, and comic poems are no different in that way. Humor

and meaning alike come out of accessing our unconscious thought in poetry. So instead I made use of the techniques used by the poets I read. If the poems were funny, it was a bonus, but ultimately what I wanted was to write poems using the same approach as the poets I was reading. My aim, like theirs, was to permeate the traditional boundaries of the poem, both in writing and in thought.

In order to make claims about comic poetry, it is important to define poetry itself. Poetry is a form of literature in which the rhythm, meaning, and sound of words elicit a focused experience of the world or an emotion that is difficult to convey. Poems do not necessarily make arguments about the experiences they describe. Rather, poems are places readers visit to have their own experiences. The goal of the poet is to communicate complicated things. However, poetry with humor is, in many ways, the same as poetry without it. It communicates ineffable thoughts with vivid description; it reveals thoughts to us we forgot we had. It communicates a mental space or a narrative through the organization of language. At its best, poetry helps the reader sort through her mind so that she can see what is really there. Just as any poem uses moving imagery and rhetorical devices, a comic poem uses these tools along with the mysterious power of humor. Humor can be involved with, and even integral to, a poem worth reading, and while nothing is fundamentally different between a poem that is funny and one that is not, the humor itself serves the poem in just as deep a way as any other aspect.

Outside of poetry, people use humor to communicate complicated things. Humor also communicates what is impossible to put into words. So it is natural that poetry and humor co-exist; they have a lot in common. When the two work in tandem, poetry escapes boundaries, freeing it to discover something new.

It is important to make a distinction between comic poetry and light verse, since in this essay only the former is the subject. Lewis Carroll's "The Crocodile" is light verse:

How doth the little crocodile
 Improve his shining tail,
 And pour the waters of the Nile
 On every golden scale!

How cheerfully he seems to grin
 How neatly spreads his claws,
 And welcomes little fishes in,
 With gently smiling jaws!

Carroll draws a counterintuitive portrait of the crocodile, describing its "shining tail." The animal is represented playing in the water that splashes "every golden scale." The crocodile does not devour the fish but rather "welcomes little fishes in, / With gently smiling jaws!" While Carroll certainly uses purposeful language to produce humor in this poem, the poem is not comic poetry, because the humor is only for its own sake — unlike in some of his other work, Carroll does not connect the humor to any deeper truths in "The Crocodile." Comic poetry elicits laughter, but it must also elicit something more. Carroll's "A Sea Dirge" is comic, but not light:

There are certain things — as, a spider, a ghost,
 The income-tax, gout, an umbrella for three —
 That I hate, but the thing that I hate the most
 Is a thing they call the Sea.

Pour some salt water over the floor —

Ugly I'm sure you'll allow it to be:

Suppose it extended a mile or more,

That's very like the Sea.

(1-8)

The poem uses the speaker's brooding voice to lament the troublesome qualities of the sea. At the outset, Carroll surprises the reader by declaring, "the thing that [I] hate the most / Is a thing they call the Sea." The stanza that follows makes another bold declaration, claiming that "some salt water over the floor — / . . . extended a mile or more" is similar to the sea itself. While there is humor in the peculiarity of that claim, it also makes sense, making it funnier and more meaningful. After all, as he continues to say through the rest of the poem, the sea is vast and chaotic, just like this description. "A Sea Dirge" is funny, and its humor lends poetic resonance, which makes it a comic poem rather than light verse.

A poet and logician, Lewis Carroll often toyed with logic and illogic. In his poem "A Strange Wild Song," he employs a rigid format in nine six-line stanzas. But regardless of the strictness of its form, Carroll also embraces the illogical to find the deeper logic within it. The main character of the poem mistakes certain objects for different ones, allowing Carroll to create insane relationships between things that have nothing to do with each other — that is, he juxtaposes and compares two things that seem illogical placed together. Nevertheless, the placement of the two things together makes sense in the context of each stanza. Each stanza adheres to a three-part structure. The first two lines characterize what the character believes he

sees; in the next two, he realizes what it actually is; in the last two, the character comments on the latter object:

He thought he saw an Elephant
 That practised on a fife:
 He looked again, and found it was
 A letter from his wife.
 'At length I realize,' he said,
 'The bitterness of life!'
 (1-6)

The comment the character makes in the last two lines is the best tool for understanding the relationship between the two objects. In the first stanza, he realizes the “bitterness of life” when he finds out that the flute-playing elephant is actually “A letter from his wife.” The reader makes the connection that the character is excited by the jolly image of an elephant playing a fife, only to be disappointed that it is just a letter from his wife. While it does not make sense that he could mistake a letter for an elephant, the important part is the comical relationship between those two things, which the reader recognizes later in the poem. Again, the poet makes something that clicks with the reader out of something that is really nonsensical:

He thought he saw a Banker's Clerk
 Descending from the bus:
 He looked again, and found it was
 A Hippopotamus.
 'If this should stay to dine,' he said,

'There won't be much for us!'

(19-24)

The relationships between the mistaken objects become more arcane as “A Strange Wild Song” continues. But the complexity of those relationships supplements the humor. Carroll adds layers of nonsense to something that is already illogical. In the fourth stanza, the character mistakes a hippopotamus for a “Banker’s Clerk / Descending from the bus” and comments that “‘There won’t be much for us!’” if he invites this hippopotamus to dinner. The most immediate meaning is that this banker’s clerk has the archetypal greed of his profession, so Carroll calls upon the big, greedy hippopotamus for a funny comparison. However, the best parts of this joke are subtler: while this is the fourth stanza to use an animal in its analogy, it is the first one to say the object turns out to actually be the animal. The clerk is actually a hippopotamus, not the other way around. Also, the line about the hippopotamus “Descending from the bus” conjures the familiar social situation of a chance interaction with an acquaintance, adding to the humor since the character is not truly interested in having the clerk dine with him (“A Strange Wild Song”). Carroll frames an impossible scenario in a way that resonates as something true.

Carroll is knowingly silly in his comic poetry; his funny scenarios and word choices are pointed, and he seems to revel in that fact. His poems, in which high-minded thought are apparent, exhibit a conspicuous interest in playing with words humorously — but he goes beyond just wordplay. Carroll places nonsense in his poetry in such a way that it actually makes sense in its own way.

While Carroll demonstrates the value of the illogical, in the seventeenth century John Wilmot offered a direct criticism of how human beings claim to have a handle on logic. Both

poets are tied to my thesis because of their obsession with logic. *A Satyr against Reason and Mankind* points out the comical arrogance that people have in their perceived capacity to make sense of the world:

And 'tis this very reason I despise:
 This supernatural gift, that makes a mite
 Think he's an image of the infinite,
 Comparing his short life, void of all rest,
 To the eternal and the ever blest.

(75-79)

Wilmot uses “reason” to mean “our fallacious rationality that we call reason,” which is itself contradictory and illogical. But without him doing this, the argument he makes would be impossible — how could he claim that reason is useless by using reason itself? He acknowledges this contradiction, writing, “For I profess I can be very smart / On wit, which I abhor with all my heart” (Wilmot). With this hypocrisy, Wilmot shows the never-ending conflict between humankind and its way of viewing the world: we will always rely on a set of rules and assumptions, so reason is both flawed and necessary. The use of contradictions in Wilmot’s piece produces comic tension. The reader is aware of the different elements of a poem that are supposed to perform in a certain way; the reader then witnesses how these elements do not perform as they typically do. The reader sees logic not performing as it should, and humor results. But what also results is a complex reading on logic itself — a reading that would be impossible without the techniques that also produce humor. Namely, Wilmot extrapolates truth from what appears to be irrational: an attempt to be logical is itself illogical.

Wilmot does not to distinguish between a person's erroneous concept of the viability of her own reason and reason itself. By failing to make this distinction, the poem reads as if he despises reason rather than imperfect rationality. Wilmot writes, "Tis not true reason I despise, but yours," but later contradicts himself by demonstrating the faults of all reason. He makes his rationale for this choice apparent in the poem — there is truly little value to reason when no person has a meaningful grasp on it. Wilmot claims, "Our sphere of action is life's happiness, / And he that thinks beyond, thinks like an ass." Therefore he does not merely distrust reason: he believes that, given the limits of reason, we should use it solely to concentrate on our own happiness. Without questioning the limits of reason, and without the humor that results from that, Wilmot would not be able to communicate this.

Beyond the faulty logic in *A Satyr against Reason and Mankind*, John Wilmot creates a humorous discordance between the subject matter of the piece and its form. Even though he reviles the fabric of reason, his controlled meter suggests a well-balanced person that does not fit with the claim he makes. The reader recognizes this incongruity between the subject matter and the form, and humor results, making the weirdness of his message more palatable for the reader. But this is a result of what Wilmot does with faulty logic, not something he does as his first purpose — humor is never the first purpose of the comic poet. Wilmot makes illogical claims, but each carries some veracity, and the fact that his claims are so odd, coupled with the juxtaposition with the traditional form, makes the reader laugh.

Even back in the time of Gaius Valerius Catullus's colorful writings in 54 BCE, funny poets were doing the same things they do today and have done for many centuries— finding

truth in the illogical. Surprisingly profane even by contemporary standards, “Catullus 42” is a lament about a woman who will not return the affectionate words Catullus wrote about her:

Come here, nasty words, so many I can hardly
 tell where you all came from.
 That ugly slut thinks I'm a joke
 and refuses to give us back
 the poems, can you believe this shit?
 Let's hunt her down, and demand them back!

(1-6)

Catullus complains that this “ugly slut . . . refuses to give us back / the poems.” He supposedly wrote affectionate poetry about her, does not feel the same way anymore, and wants the words he wrote returned to him. While there is humor in his word choice for the girl, and in lines like “can you believe this shit?”, most of the humor is in his illogical demand for her to return the words he wrote about her, since the words can never really be returned. At the end of the piece, he even implores the reader to get involved: “All together shout, once more, louder: / ‘Rotten slut, give my poems back!’” (“Catullus 42”).

It is striking that a work of poetry predating much of recorded history uses the same methods to rouse laughter that comic poets use today. In “Catullus 42,” his method is to keep applying new layers of depth to the comedic framework he has already supplied. His demand at the beginning for her to return his words is already illogical, but he continues to take that absurdity to further extremes. The last layer he adds is a “change in your methods,” asking the

reader to say, “Sweet thing, give my poems back!” (“Catullus 42”), a dramatic change in his framing of the woman after calling her a slut.

Like the funny poets who succeeded him, Catullus harnessed the humor of the illogical in order to communicate things that a poem might otherwise be incapable of communicating. By not limiting itself to logic’s constraints, “Catullus 42” demonstrates the strangeness of romantic love — and it works, since love is rarely logical. Catullus would not expend such emotion on a woman he did not have real feelings for; he claims she has the “gape of a Cisalpine hound,” but even assuming this is truly how he sees her now, he admits to having written poems for her as the premise of the work. There is more to “Catullus 42” than the mere fact that it is funny; it displays his illogical response to losing someone he once loved and perhaps still does. Humor is not the only path to navigating the illogical in a poem, but it is unique in that it can make a speaker appear hilariously human due to his irrational behavior.

While humor is the common feature of the poems I have read for this essay, humor is not employed as a tool in the same way that rhythm and sound devices are. Rather, humor is the naturally occurring byproduct of poems that cross the boundaries of logic, definition, and expectation. There is no evidence in my reading of comic poetry that these poets pursued humor in their writing, but there is clear evidence that they all used one or more of these techniques, allowing themselves to ignore these boundaries. “Catullus 42” allows its speaker to ignore the boundary of logic, and the result is a poem that is truthful to the illogic of romantic love. In “Let’s Live and Love: to Lesbia,” Catullus does just the same, embracing the illogical in order to explore love honestly.

Give me a thousand kisses, a hundred more,

another thousand, and another hundred,
 and, when we've counted up the many thousands,
 confuse them so as not to know them all,
 so that no enemy may cast an evil eye,
 by knowing that there were so many kisses.

(7-12)

The humor in this poem derives from its hyperbolic scale: the speaker describes “another thousand, and another hundred” kisses with Lesbia. While the society around them does not approve, he says there will be so many kisses that the amount itself will “confuse them so as not to know them all” (“Let's Live And Love: To Lesbia”). Again, Catullus generates humor by exaggerating the power of all their kisses, ignoring logic. But by ignoring logic, the poem reflects the love that can be shared between two people, which feels entirely real to the speaker and Lesbia in this poem.

Some of the poetry of the surrealists displays how comic poetry creates humor and meaning through a subversion of our definitions of things in the world — it does so often through juxtaposition. The wild subjectivity displayed by Catullus is not unlike that used by André Breton. Breton will provide a helpful glimpse into how modernist funny poems came to be. Surrealists like him, though not always funny, allowed their imaginations to run free, ignoring many writing conventions in poetry and making offbeat associations:

I myself despair of the lampshade around four o'clock, I despair of the fan
 towards midnight, I despair of the cigarette smoked by men on death row. I know

the general outline of despair. Despair has no heart, my hand always touches breathless despair, the despair whose mirrors never tell us if it's dead. I live on that despair which enchants me. I love that blue fly which hovers in the sky at the hour when the stars hum. I know the general outline of the despair with long slender surprises, the despair of pride, the despair of anger. I get up every day like everyone else and I stretch my arms against a floral wallpaper. I don't remember anything and it's always in despair that I discover the beautiful uprooted trees of night. The air in the room is as beautiful as drumsticks. What weathery weather. I know the general outline of despair. It's like the curtain's wind that holds out a helping hand. Can you imagine such a despair?

A tourist in the sometimes abstruse world of surrealist poetry, I first latched onto Breton's "The Verb to Be" in a way that helped me navigate other surrealist works. The despair underscored in each image gives this prose poem some lucidity, since it connects each image through the lens of despair. Though it breaks the tradition of writing poetry in lines, the paragraph form unites the poem to help the reader make sense of it. Like a typical paragraph, Breton's piece begins with an idea and elaborates on it. It relies on its associations between images to do much of the question-asking: "I myself despair of the lampshade around four o'clock, I despair of the fan towards midnight" (Breton).

Only in a surrealist poem can I read "I get up every day like everyone else and I stretch my arms against a floral wallpaper" and feel unnerved by it; there is nothing strange about this line, but, when placed after everything preceding it, it adopts a new meaning. This is where

Breton helps us read comic poetry's meddling with our definitions of objects in the world. Breton has associated "a pearl necklace for which no clasp can be found" and "the lampshade around four o'clock" with despair, so the equally mundane floral wallpaper is suddenly uncomfortable to encounter — particularly when Breton describes the speaker's arms brushing against it. These unsettling connections between normal things are characteristic of surrealist poems, especially Breton's. The reader may associate the lampshade with light or mundanity, but Breton places the lampshade into the category of despair. As a surrealist, Breton paved the way for later poets to play with definitions in funny ways. The surrealists inspired a wave of poets who took cues from them, delving into automatic writing, the unconscious mind, and the metaphysical — often in humorous ways. The unconscious mind cares less about conventional understandings of the world, so it makes a good place to generate funny poetry.

"The Dreadful Has Already Happened" by Mark Strand is ominous in its title and its tone, but many of its images seem normal on their own. The juxtaposition between mundane images and haunting ones reveals the cues Strand took from surrealist poets. This is possible only through the subversion of definitions, which generates humor:

The relatives are leaning over, staring expectantly.

They moisten their lips with their tongues. I can feel
them urging me on. I hold the baby in the air.

Heaps of broken bottles glitter in the sun.

A small band is playing old fashioned marches.

My mother is keeping time by stamping her foot.

My father is kissing a woman who keeps waving
to somebody else. There are palm trees.

The hills are spotted with orange flamboyants and tall
billowy clouds move behind them. “Go on, Boy,”
I hear somebody say, “Go on.”
I keep wondering if it will rain.

Throughout the piece, Strand describes the day as a catastrophic event, even though he is actually writing about a seemingly ordinary experience with his family. They are “staring expectantly,” which is familiar to most people with families, but they also “moisten their lips with their tongues” while they watch the speaker and his baby (Strand). This could potentially be read as normal, but it also evokes the image of predators licking their lips as they stare at their prey. As Breton places the lampshade in the same category as despair, Strand places his family in the same category as a thunderstorm. He keeps contrasting the ordinary with oncoming disaster. The “Heaps of broken bottles” set the poem up in a dangerous place, but it also seems like a detail seen at a park at a family reunion kind of event. Then “The sky darkens. There is thunder,” which all hints toward the “dreadful.” While the juxtaposition of these things is funny, the poet does it for a reason: to make the setting reflect the emotions of the speaker. The objective correlative lets the reader know the speaker’s mindset and ask questions about existence and the self — what does it mean that a person can feel your average family gathering so intensely, as if a storm is coming along? What does the urgency of this event say about the speaker’s “self”?

A writer of poems about existence and the self, Dickinson seemingly addresses the reclusiveness that is now associated with her in this short poem:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
 Are you – Nobody – too?
 Then there's a pair of us!
 Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
 How public – like a Frog –
 To tell one's name – the livelong June –
 To an admiring Bog!

Dickinson contemplates the pleasure of being “Nobody,” and her overlapping of humor with this existential question is vital. The poem opens with a surprising “I’m nobody! Who are you?” The speaker’s declaration that she is nobody establishes the humorous tone, setting up the ideas she wants to explore. The assertion is an impossible one to make — an illogical one to make, since we all have to be born “Somebody.” Few casual admirers of Emily Dickinson would consider her a coy humorist. Nonetheless, she does not shy away from the funny. She allows her poetry to be funny when what she conveys demands it.

Her question “Who are you?” speaks to the reader directly. The speaker claims “They’d banish” her and the reader if “they” found out she and the reader are not somebodies (“I’m Nobody! Who Are You?”). Dickinson establishes an illogical reality in which people cannot exist, while simultaneously being able to talk. By sharing this ridiculous notion with the reader,

she unearths with a light-hearted tone an assumption all people make — the assumption that we exist. The text’s intimacy with the reader allows it to delve into a profound question of mortality. Without its offhanded humor, this poem would be quite different. It is hard to claim to be “Nobody” without being funny. The very concept of being “nobody” is silly to the reader — and with an existential reading of the piece, the speaker’s reluctance to be “somebody” in the second stanza becomes darker. She calls being “Somebody” dreary, therefore calling existence dreary. The darkness Dickinson achieves in the second stanza cannot be detached from the humor of the whole piece. The absurdity of the poem’s premise necessarily produces humor as well as darkness.

The poem beginning with the line “After great pain, a formal feeling comes” is one of Dickinson’s perennial works. According to Dr. Eleanore Lambert, it toys with “philosophical ambiguities” (20). She explains, “Although verbal ambiguities are frequent sources of poetic humor, philosophical ambiguities are more playful—at least in the sense that in ‘playing’ with perspectives, convictions, and visions of life, they ‘play’ on a higher level” (96). While all good poems seem to take on “philosophical ambiguities,” and not all of them are funny, Dr. Lambert is suggesting that comic poems are *playing* with philosophical ambiguity — making fun out of it. Then the question becomes: why is laughter the response to this?

The phrase “philosophical ambiguity” is aptly vague. Since philosophy is about the attempt to define hard-to-define things, and vagueness is about a lack of clarity, Dr. Lambert’s point is related to my thesis. Comic poetry is created by different elements not fitting — not fitting to our logic (as in the previous poems), not fitting to our definitions of things in the world around us, and not fitting to our expectations. Comic poetry dares to subvert these meanings, or

at least “play” with them. Dr. Lambert writes that “through incongruity and surprise, [Dickinson’s poems] challenge conventional feelings about how descriptions of death should resonate with a reader” (99). While few of Dickinson’s poems would be called funny, in this way they resemble funny poems. Instead of toying with our logic like the previous poems, this Dickinson poem subverts our expectations of how death should affect us:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
 The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
 The stiff Heart questions ‘was it He, that bore,’
 And ‘Yesterday, or Centuries before?’

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
 A Wooden way
 Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
 Regardless grown,
 A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –
 Remembered, if outlived,
 As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
 First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –

This piece is an example of how redundancy can subvert a reader’s expectations. The redundancy also emphasizes its point. Dickinson invokes the dull feeling pain brings with

repetitive images of hard, solid things like tombs and lead. The line “A Quartz contentment, like a stone” is where Dickinson’s awareness of her own redundancy is most apparent — quartz is a stone, not “like” a stone (“After Great Pain, a Formal Feeling Comes”). The repetition is purposeful, however, since it reflects her dull feeling.

Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Tale of Sir Thopas” is also self-referential, and in doing so displays how ignoring the boundary of expectation creates humor and adds depth to a poem. The story adds an entirely new dimension to the storytelling of *The Canterbury Tales*, as Chaucer inserts himself into the fictional narrative. The collection of stories follows a motley assembly of characters of all social and class distinctions; they take turns sharing stories with one another on their journey to Canterbury. In “The Tale of Sir Thopas,” the Host asks Chaucer to take his turn:

And thanne at erst he looked upon me,
 And seyde thus: "What man artow?" quod he;
 "Thou lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare,
 For evere upon the ground I se thee stare.
 "Approche neer, and looke up murily.
 Telle us a tale of myrthe, and that anon.

The first person voice that appears in this passage is abrupt. It is like the camera filming a network drama suddenly turning around to confront the cameraperson. Chaucer makes fun of himself through the Host’s observations of him, depicting himself as self-effacing and then going on to have his character tell a story of very poor quality. The Host eventually interrupts, crying out, “No more of this, for God's dignity!” (Chaucer). He says Chaucer’s tale is not poetry but “doggerel.” After a number of interesting stories told by people from all different walks of life,

Chaucer tells a rather boring one. As a writer, Chaucer could be taking a cheeky jab at writers in general, suggesting that writers tell other people's stories because they do not have their own. This reading of the text also fits with the Host's comment that Chaucer keeps looking at the ground, which reinforces the idea that writers are all words and no action.

More importantly, Chaucer's choice to insert himself into his own verse subverts a reader's expectations about stories. The story reads as though Chaucer has inserted himself abruptly, but in reality he has always been there, telling the tales of his characters from his point of view. His abrupt appearance is funny because it is jarring, but the fact that he does appear suggests that it should not be. Written things are written by writers, so a writer is going to be present in any given piece of writing. Chaucer plays with the reader's idea of how the writer fits into a piece of literature. Humor results, because the way he showcases this does not cohere with how a reader normally sees the reader-writer relationship.

From Catullus to Strand, I have been astonished by how unchanged the methodology of funny poetry is over the centuries. Catullus is funny in consistently taking his works as far as they can go — sometimes writing with hyperbole is more accurate to a feeling than writing without it, even if it is not technically logical to do so. Chaucer is funny in subverting his reader's expectations and projecting himself ironically into his story, and this choice is successful in making the reader think about how a writer fits into a work. Strand is funny in putting family and thunderstorms into the same category, but he also makes the reader think about how that strikes her as true.

When writing my own poems, I found it helpful to think of comic poetry in the terms underlined by my thesis — though there is something ironic about narrowing down something

like comic poetry, which by its very nature tries not to narrow things down. But these deductions helped me write my poetry. The following comes from a poem I wrote; in it, I considered the usefulness of illogic:

A last way to pass through a tree
 comes the easiest to mice
 who simply knock on the wood
 asking to come in greeted nicely
 by squirrels. Little do they know
 these mice want no tea, all they want
 to do is pass through their tree.

In this poem, entitled “Different Ways,” I tried to create a logic that exists only in the poem, a logic in which the goal is to pass through a tree. I was inspired by Carroll specifically; a disregard for logic thrills me almost as much as it does him. Throughout this journey in writing my thesis, I have seen the value of ignoring logic in poetry, so I tried it here.

While some poems I read were absurd, a more accurate way to describe some others is that they subverted my expectations. Chaucer places himself in his own work, but in the context of the piece, this choice makes sense. In the following poem, “Good Music in a Bad World,” I tried to do something a reader would not expect by using odd line breaks:

Mr. Jensen not seldom mentioned
 how nasal sounds are points lost
 when the contest starts, and all
 he’ll accept is a perfect score,

as this chorus earned five years
 prior. Gina is a star, she says
 watch your R's. never pronounce
 that American "R": singing "girl"
 is wrong, now she's a "gull."
 if the judges hear one girl
 butcher it, or one boy, we lose
 the points.

I tried to subvert what a reader would expect sonically as well as logically. In the lines "all / he'll accept is a perfect score, / as this chorus earned five years / prior," I wanted the reader to expect the sentence to end with "before" instead of "prior" because of the word "score" in the fourth line. I also placed "prior" at the beginning of a new line so that the rhythm of this unrhymed phrase would feel awkward and offbeat. Likewise, in the lines "if the judges hear one girl / butcher it," I placed "butcher it" at the beginning of a new line so that the reader would expect "one girl" to be the end of the phrase.

In my poem "The Gravity," I considered how these writers employed juxtaposition in meaningful and funny ways:

Condensation seizes water vapor
 pinning droplets to reused plastic
 bottles and droplets plop onto rolling skateboards
 as a groove in pavement thwarts rapid descent:
 this ramp is a shape leading home.

The bedspread stays spread whether or not
the bedwetter stays in bed and if he goes
to school, watching educational shows
about Ethiopian jawbones, he'll somehow know
these remains never yearned
to return home. Three million years of words excavated,
but this artifact kept its mouth shut.

Painstakingly, I tried to craft a poem to be more like a dream than something of the conscious world, as that was one part of surrealist poetry that I especially liked. I began with the condensation occurring on a water bottle and attempted to make connections to less mundane images. This poem resulted, and I gave it the title “The Gravity” because of the way I wrote it, thinking about how one part of the poem would naturally fall to the next. I am glad I learned about how associative thinking can help one to write a poem.

Humor is a special element of poetry that signifies truths we recognize but do not address — we do not address them publicly or we do not address them at all. Humor taps into the dissonance between seeing images as we recognize them and seeing them depicted in a more honest way, and what we do is laugh. The laughing signals that something is understood, even if it cannot be eloquently explained. In writing my poems and formulating this thesis, I ventured to pull explanatory language out of poetic nonsense and rhymed strangeness, but I acknowledge the paradox: I want to understand something that is not fully understandable. A comic poem sparks something in us emotionally that cannot be properly named, and laughing is all there is to do.

Honors Thesis Poems
Christian Hartselle

They Waited

Not til the rain ran out did the fire spread
over the hills, mountains, and plateaus;
just piles remained of ashes and crumbs.
The lights went out on that distant planet
when a hole in the night consumed the souls
left behind. They wrestled for warmth
in the dark, telling the story repeated
since the seas held fish and the sky birds,
a calming tale in their hour of end, the same
tale told when their ancestors lived:

Once, a tall hero roamed their land.
He discovered his destiny — to be reborn,
to save the doomed place. A sword and a name
adapted to each generation. They awaited
his future feats: restoring their towns and streets,
guarding them. Could he fill out the prophecy?
Guide them back down with a pulley? What came next
was a mystery, but their souls waited still behind.

Concentrated

today has no plans for you. tomorrow there is a roach
not vaguely on your bed, wall, window where the staring
at the side of the neighbor's house takes place.

your latest plan is with Death.
plans can change but usually
it goes to voicemail.
Death answers:
one day you'll understand.
what a relief.

Different Ways

Take a trip to a neighbor's creek
where a hollow oak is yours
to use. Go slip through it.

Another way involves uprooted willows

with hidey holes cut through with steak knives
so baseballs cut through it like butter.

Now pass through a tree at your local library
now open the book about lefts and rights. Trees are paper:
flip through your favorite volume.
You have passed through a tree.

A last way comes the easiest to mice
who simply knock on wood
asking to come in, greeted nicely
by squirrels. Little do they know
these mice want no tea, all they want
to do is to pass through their tree.

Unfolding

orient yourself to the day's program.
press Dial when your boss desires.
you need to be ready to speak.
express interest be receptive.

one voice puts every employee on hold.
no matter what strangers we're speaking to,
the speech twirls into our backgrounds,

but its tone is too soft, says the boss.
no need to feel ashamed, you say,

but keep attention away.

Good Music in a Bad World

Mr. Jensen not seldom mentioned
how nasal sounds are points lost
when the contest starts, and all
he'll accept is a perfect score,
as this chorus earned five years
prior. Gina is a star, she says
watch your R's. never pronounce
that American "R": singing "girl"
is wrong, now she's a "gull."
if the judges hear one girl
butcher it, or one boy, we lose
the points.

yes, each voice counts, Mr. Jensen insists,
 in making the pure sound of practice rooms.
 They're really rooms for settling disputes
 in between tuning their bodily instruments.
 when the singing test comes they'll mimic pitches
 from performers like Gina. she is always on top
 of her game.

they practice their K's:
 can't be too strong
 can't be too shy.
 keep up with the treble clef line,
 soprano — divine your harmony from the tenors —
 it's easy, it's a fifth.

quiet high notes come from Gina but she's a loud alto.
 she steals the show: Gina's solo is too lovely,
 too lost on this hallway.

Actual Fortune Cookies

Let's say she collects them -- that is, the fortunes.
 Each cookie eaten contains an actual fortune. When read,
 the actual fortune activates. She manages each passing fate formidably,
 though admittedly, it is a turbulent life. Once, the slip says,
 "You'll get a day in bed." Asking no questions, she sighs,
 relieved when electric lines give her building no power.
 She's bored, eats another. Her food transforms into hay.
 What an afternoon. Despite the risks she eats cookies
 relentlessly, unexcited when her good and bad fortunes occur.
 Hasn't she heard of diminishing returns? My premise broke her.

Delivery

Think how the ants feel! Their manifest destiny
 becomes two cups of sugar spilled on a porch.
 Ants will take the treasure and run, but what's the fuss?
 Does one of them think, "He left this for us"?
 They carry grains in lines. Their only certain thought
 is a consensus: to move on.

Rehearsal

Yes, others suffer too. Let us revel

in their misfortunes instead of fixating
 on our own. This is one method
 to build rapport with friends.
 Our friendship's reaching unprecedented
 levels of usefulness. Now we move on
 to self-disclosure. Yes, your suffering is important.
 Don't bother with reception; I'll validate it here.
 Once I was out jogging when I felt
 the ground shake; so I knew you were thinking
 about thinking about your suffering. I stumbled
 over a carcass, a squirrel,
 whose face was covered by a leaf.
 I knelt down to smell it for death
 when it scurried away.
 Friend, I thought of you.

Close Reading

The persona describes traveling forward,
 referring to himself or herself. He or she
 proceeds at a moderate pace,
 lifting and setting down both feet,
 one after the other. They rise to the same elevation
 at regular intervals; then, in the same cycle,
 they both touch the ground concurrently,
 also at regular intervals. This precedes
 a careful choice in punctuation, the period,
 completing what is called in grammatical jargon
 a "full stop" (Madison 83). The poet
 pointedly distinguishes himself
 or herself from others by avoiding
 Angelou's polysyndeton or Dickinson's em-dashes.
 The persona wonders what to do next.
 After such a journey, it feels unfair to be left
 with questions at this period. He or she
 would know where he or she means to be going,
 if the poet could offer a hint. But the poet
 stares at the dot, considering
 how to move things along for him or her.
 The considering takes days, then weeks,
 then months, and the persona becomes worried,
 then paranoid, then jealous — envisioning the poet
 seeing other personae, trying them on
 like the easy personae they are.
 This persona is too complicated

for the poet to pursue, so as many men
and women do, the poet picks the easiest
poem to write.

The Gravity

Condensation seizes water vapor
pinning droplets to reused plastic
bottles and droplets plop onto rolling skateboards
as a groove in pavement thwarts rapid descent:
this ramp is a shape leading home.
The bedspread stays spread whether or not
the bedwetter stays in bed and if he goes
to school, watching educational shows
about Ethiopian jawbones, he'll somehow know
these remains never yearned
to return home. Three million years of words excavated,
but this artifact kept its mouth shut.

2/whatever day it is

today i gain no experience points.
i'm blaming the waste
on the Onlooker: you watch
the numbers stale.
i pull on the railing
i numb to accept
my rueful stats
and you just wait.

i am the Onlooker but
"two" supports
if i have "two"
for the plod, i grab
on seams, not air,
even if the numbers
don't rise

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