WIT'S WORTH: A REFLECTION ON CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY

on *Created in Darkness by Troubled Americans*
Dave Eggers, et al, editors. Knopf, 2004.

Michael Theune

Near the beginning of last century, Ezra Pound proclaimed that poetry should be at least as well-written as prose. Near the end of that same century, Charles Bernstein declared that poetry should be at least as interesting as TV. The start of a new century brings with it a new demand for poetry: poetry must be at least as witty, as knowing and as surprising as *Created in Darkness by Troubled Americans*. And, though it may not seem so at first, this silly—and disturbing, and wonderful—book offers serious lessons for and challenges to contemporary American poetry at all levels: from individual poem to overarching theory.

A compilation of selections of humorous writing from *McSweeney's*, an incredibly smart and funny literary magazine founded and edited by Dave Eggers (see www.mcsweeneys.net), *Created in Darkness by Troubled Americans* (*Darkness*) collects flash fictions, short-shorts, lists, gags, mock interviews, parodic essays, jokes and joke theory, absurdist vignettes, send-ups and spoofs done in a variety of voices and tones—from the staid to the manic, from the learned to the sophomoric, from the deadpan to the fabulous—on a panoply of topics, and at a panoply of targets, including talks shows ("A Brief Parody of a Talk Show That Falls Apart about Halfway through"), G.I. Joe ("Journal of a New COBRA Recruit"), Amazon.com (but instead of books it's "My Beard, Reviewed") and Star Wars (the brilliant "On the Implausibility of the Death Star's Trash Compactor").

While some pieces are zany—three different lists give "Bad Names for Professional Wrestlers," including "Linus," "The Spiller," "The Precocious Feline," "Warren G. Harding," and, my favorite, "Magic Realism"—others contain in them a weirdly attractive, if not

quite plausible critical core. "Unused Audio Commentary by Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky, Recorded 2002, for *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* DVD (Platinum Series Extended Edition), Part One" applies a hermeneutics of suspicion to the grand popcorn-pushing vehicle, suggesting that the Fellowship actually is a cover-up for a pipe-weed smuggling operation and siding with the Orcs, a terribly misunderstood, working-class people of the earth. No less critical, and no less funny, other pieces perform their critique more peripherally. "It's Not Actually a Small World" suggests in a series of mini-narratives that perhaps our world is not the cozy community of a Disney village but a place where people do not meet, where important encounters do not take place: "Don Mackinnon was walking to work when he thought he spotted Mrs. Zelikson, his fourth-grade teacher, up ahead. Don raced after the woman and stopped her. It turned out not to be Mrs. Zelikson; in fact, this woman didn't even speak English." And "Circumstances under which I Would Have Sex with Some of My Fellow Jurors," including "Juror #6. You notice me," suggests and admits hilariously the kinds of daydreams such an isolating world evokes.

While the work in *Darkness* is tremendously diverse, almost all the work shares a consistent approach, combining high concept and straightforward structure. The concept driving almost every piece in *Darkness*, and much humor writing in general, is the unholy marriage of high and low, of the grave and the silly, and so "Upcoming Titles from Gavin Menzies, Author of *1421: The Year the Chinese Discovered America*" riffs off that scholarly effort to provide synopses of books such as *1939: The Year Brazil Landed on the Moon*, *1879: The Year Sicily Invented the Microchip*, *250 B.C.: Hannibal Discovers Electricity*, and *1844: The Year Native Americans Discovered Europe*, and "A Graceland for Adolf" supplies "[s]elections from the audiotape accompanying the walking tour of 'Berchtesgaden: Hitler's Summer Retreat,'" that, while moving tourists from bedroom to study to yard, barks commands: "Stand straight!" "Walk ahead. Eyes forward." "Now, march." "Achtung! Time to go…" "This concludes our tour. Thanks once again for coming. Peace."

The structure of most of the pieces in *Darkness* follow a very standard comic pattern. After the title notifies readers that they are in the grip of a joke, the piece establishes its premises, builds up its comic force with a variety of examples and instances, then, about two-thirds or three-quarters of the way through, offers a significant variation on the established pattern only to return at the end to a highly self-aware close. Greg Purcell's "The Ten Worst Films of All Time, as

Reviewed by Ezra Pound over Italian Radio" follows this structure perfectly. After the title, which indicates the forthcoming combination of high and low—you can decide, Pound or the bad movies, which is high and which is low—the opening of the list of movies and commentary establishes a clear pattern:

> *Bambi*
> Filth.
>
> *Casablanca*
> This movie is filth.
>
> *Cat People*
> A race may civilize itself *by language*, not film. *Cat People* is filth.

The next four commentaries offer slight variations on the previous assessments, and so, on *The Magnificent Ambersons*, Pound states, "This movie is indistinguishable from the filth-rustlings of swine in a sty," and a small admission in the commentary on *Yankee Doodle Dandy*—"I sort of liked James Cagney's filthy Irish energy in this one"—clears the way for the piece's major variant, the commentary on *The Palm Beach Story*: "Bless: The Italian *Dolcestilnovisti*, the 'sweet new style' current in the time of the papish Guelphs and the imperial Ghibellines. One will particularly take heed of its foremost practitioner, Guido Cavalcanti. Blast: Preston Sturges and the Jewish moneylenders who helped him to make this film." The piece then concludes by rounding back to its original tirade:

> *Now, Voyager*
> Two boils for the director's infected liver.
>
> *This Gun for Hire*
> This film reeks of syphilis. Filth.

This structure is well-known by all the writers in *Darkness*, and it actually is laid bare in the footnotes accompanying Todd Pruzan's "A Short, Fictional Passage Entitled 'Drift Nets,' in Which Several Enterprising Characters Troll the High Seas, Exploring Abandoned Trade Vessels for 'Pirated' Goods, Learn to Cope with Distinct Personalities in a Close-Knit, High-Stress Environment." The first footnote comments on the establishment of pattern, beginning: "The

principles of comedy, of delivering humor to an audience, hold that the first joke may not get a predictable response. This story's readers are still trying to find their footing in the story, to gauge whether they can determine the author's wavelength and follow it." The second footnote pays attention to the "anticipation" and "expectation" developed in the piece's gradual build-up. The third and fourth footnotes examine the piece's variants, noting how, now, "…humor arises also from the shock of the situation, not merely from the now-predictable repetition," and noting, too, the demand on the author to "…heighten the tension with a surprising joke, which, paradoxically, the audience by now has come to expect." The final two footnotes pay close attention to the story's final twists and risks, recognizing both that the piece's penultimate joke "…could, conceivably, serve as the passage's last 'joke'" and that "[a]ny other attempted jokes must be handled deftly to keep from capsizing the heightened mood of the audience," and confirming that the piece's final joke is, in fact, "[a] wonderful denouement" and "hilarious," and that the "double-joke" the end pulls off "is enormously gratifying."

The beauty of "A Short, Fictional Passage" is that, while it is aware of this pattern, such awareness does not quash but rather adds to the humor. It, like each piece in *Darkness*, still is made to work. All the structure, the joke-, the surprise-making technology in *Darkness* is there for the humor, for the effect, without which, one assumes, the writing would be an empty exercise. That wit requires construction, that a punch line requires techne, is a fact well-known among those who think deeply about such things. In "'Mom's on the Roof': The Usefulness of Jokes in Shaping Short Stories," Antonya Nelson defines a joke, and a good short story, as a narrative that produces an "appropriate incongruity"—Nelson's phrase for the vital and elusive element of punch lines and epiphanies—and she recognizes the work it takes to arrive at such a difficult, tricky place: "Humor depends upon surprise, but that surprise must be crafted. This seeming paradox is at the heart of great humor." And while Laurence Sterne, author of *Tristram Shandy*, famously states that "[d]igressions, incontestably, are the sun-shine—they are the life, the soul of reading,—take them out of this book for instance,—you might as well take the book along with them," he also notes that in his digressions

> …there is a master-stroke of digressive skill, the merit of which has all along…been overlooked by my reader,—not for want of penetration in him—but because 'tis an excellence seldom looked for, or expected indeed, in a digression;—and that

> I fly off from what I am about…yet I constantly take care to order affairs so, that my main business does not stand still in my absence….
>
> By this contrivance the machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive, too,—and at the same time.

If talk of "craft" and "contrivance" makes poets schooled in the cant of "spontaneous overflow" and "negative capability" and "first thought, best thought" a little uneasy, it should. The glories of wit—its ability to deliver the body-blow of the belly-laugh—depend less on the internal make-up of the poet and much more on such contrivance. T.S. Eliot knew this, and, in his essay "Andrew Marvell"—in which he links wit with the heart of poetry, stating that wit's ability to create surprising turns in poetry is "…one of the most important means of poetic effect since Homer"—he recognizes wit as "a literary rather than a personal quality" and "a modest and certainly impersonal virtue," and concludes, "…whatever name we call it, and however we define that name, it is something precious and needed and apparently extinct."

No wonder *Darkness*, where wit thrives, often targets poetry, where wit apparently has long been extinct. In *Darkness*'s introduction editor Dave Eggers notes that a key editorial decision for *McSweeney's* was that "…we shall never publish poetry." And, among other references to poetry, another piece featuring Ezra Pound, "A Letter from Ezra Pound to Billy Wilder, 1963"—in which Pound isn't a poet but a screenwriter trying to get back the manuscript of his rejected screenplay *The Aeneid*, which seemingly is as impenetrable as the densest of *The Cantos*—points its barb at poetry and, more specifically, at poetry's cult of genius. According to Shaftesbury's 1709 *Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor*, wit reveals the falsity of "certain idol-notions," and no notion can be more idol than that of poetic genius. Wit, with its demand for results, for the special—difficult and amazing—effect of the attainment of appropriate incongruity, and its resultant understanding of and, in fact, respect and demand for structure, is always at odds with genius, the time-honored excuse for any and all of poetry's idiosyncrasies.The critique of poetry in *Darkness* is, however, even bigger, if a bit more subtle and time-bound, than this. According to Eggers's introduction,

> From the beginning, *McSweeney's* has brokered an awkward alliance between two opposing forces. On the one hand, the journal sought to publish experimental fiction and journalism; on the other hand, we hoped to make a home for stories that were funny without being humorous…. You have no doubt heard of the many battles, squabbles, fights, and slap-sessions between these two camps. Always this animosity was fueled by those who said that any possibility of peace between two opposites—serious fiction and less serious humor-type writing—was not only impossible, but perhaps not even possible. They said that humor writing should be on the back pages of magazines, and never over 800 words. They said that fiction should never allow one to laugh. And what did we say to that, after thinking about it for a few days and wishing we had had a quicker comeback? We said Nay! We said Nay, these things could coexist….

Darkness thus contains pieces not only interesting in themselves but also representative of the kind of work that can be born in an energetic, playful and demanding middle ground. This is an important lesson for contemporary American poetry, for this poetry is composed at the end of its own stand-off, that between avant-garde, experimental writing and more mainstream lyric poetry, and many poets, critics, and editors—among them: James Longenbach, Alice Fulton, and Reginald Shepherd, editor of *The Iowa Anthology of New American Poetries*—recognize this and have begun emphasizing and privileging the hybrid work of the middle, work that is a hybrid of the two modes. However, whereas *Darkness* showcases the fact that such hybridity can be effective, offering work that almost always powerfully succeeds at attaining the difficult and amazing state of appropriate incongruity, poetry's new development mostly merely extends the problems of genius. In recent poetic theory, the middle demands idiosyncrasy without end, calling for poetic experiment but offering no standard for judging which experiments are successful. In fact, poets and theoreticians of the poetic middle, fearful or unaware of wit's difficult but possible demands, go so far as to privilege poetic *failure*, poetry's continual acknowledgment that it cannot do or have what it wants. And, as a result, the poem, no longer conceived of as a meaningful unit of language, becomes insignificant, and a mere consistency of style, a slight film over nothing, becomes all that, for some reason, matters.

Far better than the work of so much recent poetic theory, the work in *Darkness* offers contemporary poetry a proper—properly difficult, and properly effective—way of conceiving a productive, pro-

found middle ground. With its blatant display of its repetitive, crystalline structures, its self-aware ironies, and its constant cultural critique, *Darkness* reveals its affinity with the avant-garde, but with its clarity and its occasional light touches, *Darkness* reveals its more mainstream tendencies—both Billy Collins fans and Charles Bernstein fans can and will fall for *Darkness*. And *Darkness* asks for experiment—in subject, tone, and voice—but it also demands success in piece after piece. If the resultant laughter or amazement seems incongruous with poetry—often thought to be necessarily serious—well, so much the worse for poetry. Of course, it should be remembered that laughter is a serious matter, deeply connected with what it is to be human—recall Bakhtin or Auden: "The world of Laughter is much more closely related to the world of Prayer than either is to the everyday secular world of Work, for both are worlds in which we are all equal, in the first as individual members of our species, in the latter as unique persons." It is likely recognition of laughter's power to transform and reveal, a power he also demanded of good philosophy, that allowed Wittgenstein to claim that he could imagine a book of philosophy written in the form of jokes.

Created in Darkness by Troubled Americans is a book of jokes that resembles better than most recent books of poetry what a great book of poetry can and should be, and it embodies and enacts current theories applicable to contemporary American poetry in new and enlivening ways. All poets should read this book and be deeply informed—humbled and energized—by what they find.