

Book review*

Condren, Conal (2023). *Between Laughter and Satire: Aspects of the Historical Study of Humour*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Conal Condren's stated aim for this collection of essays is to explore "the potential, the problems, and the implications of a more thorough historical approach to humour" (p. 1), and, by the way, to conduct a "ground-clearing exercise" (p. 1) to help those adopting such a historical approach in future. The echo of Wittgenstein is doubtless deliberate. Condren makes conspicuous the ways in which existing theories of humour that are notionally *adduced from* different contexts (whether historical, cultural, linguistic, or a combination of all three) are better understood as having been *imposed upon* different contexts. He shows how such contexts have been ignored, reinterpreted, simplified, or ridiculed in order to avoid threatening the coherence of a venerated theory. Condren's analysis is not only erudite, it is also sympathetic to forms of life that differ from our own and which we are necessarily unable to fully inhabit. It is this awareness of the incompletely appreciable cultural contexts upon which each individual has built their own understanding of language that underlies Condren's fundamental critique of any and all totalising theories of humour.

The book is split into four sections, each of which contains two chapters. The first, longest section interrogates the supposed universality of humour. The second considers how we might establish a methodology for studying humour historically. The third queries assessments of the historic changes to the relationship between satire and humour. The fourth and final section provides a case study of satire's entanglement with its subject matter, in this case the imbrication of television shows *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister* with the British polity. There is a risk that the shifts in perspective between these four sections cause vertigo for the reader, but the reward is a case for dismantling existing historical approaches to the study of humour that has both depth and texture.

The first set of two chapters unpacks and examines the syllogism that laughter is universal; that laughter signals the presence of humour; and that, therefore, humour is universal. Condren cites the *International Journal of Humor Research's* scoping statement that "humour is an important and universal human faculty" as evidence that the proposition amounts "almost to an article of faith in anglophone humour studies" (p. 8). Chapter 2, the longest essay in the book, convincingly attacks the second premise. Condren establishes that our current understanding of humour only emerged in the late seventeenth century anglosphere, providing at least *prima facie* evidence against any earlier link between laughter and humour. He then explicates cases, beginning with Plato's *Phaedo*, in which laughter is linked to an experience that would not fall under a conventional definition of humour, but where humour has now been read back into the original text. As Condren says, "the easiest way to find the present in the past is to put it there first" (p. 65). Doing so is problematic in itself, but also creates a false genealogy that encourages

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us to occlude differences between humour and terms such as *jest* or *wit* with which it is now associated. Condren's case requires an intellectual shuttling back and forth, setting original texts and contexts against later re-interpretations and subjugations, and it is here that his scholarship has its greatest impact. Temporality is crucial when considering the history of humour: it should be no surprise that it's all in the timing.

This first section then transposes the argument from the historic to the geographic, demonstrating how a belief that cultures share common commitments to something like humour might well have resulted from misreading our own notions of humour into other cultures. It takes a conscious effort to recognise the conceptual spectacles through which we are looking. Condren takes what might have been a merely semantic conclusion that there has been an inappropriate elision of laughter, comedy, and humour in the works of -among others- Salvatore Attardo, Amy Carrell, and Terry Eagleton, and raises it to a productive ongoing methodological critique (see Attardo, 1994; Carrell, 2007; Eagleton, 2017). If there are few intellectual pleasures as satisfying as witnessing the forensic cross-examination of authority figures, then this is a very satisfying section. Their assumptions, perhaps lazy, are shown to be specious; their reasoning, possibly motivated, is shown to be incoherent; and their authority, often assumed, is shown to be illegitimate.

Condren affirms that the concept of humour remains valuable in discussions of contexts that did not have the term, but he warns against "the danger of slipping from application to attribution that can result in historical distortion by degrees" (p. 50). This accompanies his conjecture that both the working academic and the general public have a tendency to assume the universality and conceptual independence of those terms with which they are personally familiar. "[T]he evocation of a hypostasised realm as a home for the universal of humour can be terribly convenient" (p. 56). The solution for humour studies, suggests Condren, is to replace a fairy tale of eternal continuity with an appreciation of unmotivated evolution.

The second section of the book considers what methodologies are appropriate to the historical study of humour if we reject the predominant "mythic lineage of humour theory" (p. 69). Chapter 4 considers the role of context: what are the signals that we are in the presence of humour? The awkward truth appears to be that the same action can seem humorous or not depending on the extent of the context that is considered, though Condren notes that this has had the presumably desirable side-effect of "keep[ing] the historian in business" (p. 80). He then considers whether intentionality might indicate the appropriate context. Was it meant to be humorous? More work for the historians, perhaps: intentionality can be opaque to ourselves, let alone those separated from us by time and space. Chapter 5 considers similar issues with humour in translation, and asks whether we can use the reception of a text as a standard by which to assess the presence of humour: do we know it when we see it? Condren points out that this does not work for even the pun, presumably the most semantically basic form of humour. A pun may depend on antique or ephemeral usage, or it may be inadvertent or imagined, problems which are raised to a higher power when there is an attempt to communicate a pun across semantic systems. Just as intention is inadequate to determine context, so reception is an insufficient gauge of translation. We can almost always find a surfeit of possible contexts and a paucity of determining factors, such that we can know too much and too little to assess distant texts definitively.

The penultimate section explores the relationship between works that have been considered as satire, and their contemporaneous definitions of satire. This is chicken and egg territory: can we define a satire without seeing one? But how do we know we have seen one if we cannot explain what they are? Chapter 6 discusses and finds wanting various approaches to definition: by stipulation, by origin, and by implication. Condren's scholarship is in the breadth of examples which demonstrate that these are three possibilities that only look good at a distance. Perhaps

we could extend the chicken and egg analogy: surely satire and the definitions of satire have co-evolved? Chapter 7 attempts to define satire in relation to other, more temporally stable, terms such as parody and allegory, or in relation to moral purpose and seriousness. Each is found wanting, and Condren suggests that even if satire is not coherent enough to offer us a stable genre, it remains robust enough to be applied as a modifier. While ‘satire’ makes essentialist or exclusionary claims that cannot be sustained under scrutiny, ‘satiric’ makes productive, comprehensible, claims of adequacy. This leaves us not with a crystallised reference to an idealised concept, but with a shifting, socially validated categorisation. In turn, this implies a recognition that the groups of human beings using the ‘satiric’ categorisation will change with time and place. As is the case in the rest of the book, Condren’s breadth of examples is important to his argument. It is empathy for unknown other human beings that guards against the insidious and implicit counterargument, that the evolution of language is somehow teleological, warranting the application of our current usage to the past and the foreign because ours is the pinnacle of possible meaning towards which other approximations are groping.

The final two chapters discuss the popular 1980s British TV series *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*. In Chapter 8 Condren asks whether the programme functioned as an independent lens -whether comedic or satirical- applied to the British political system of the time. Condren finds that the show helped define the terms in which the political system was popularly, and internally, understood. It unintentionally legitimised behaviours that it notionally criticised. It ossified into binary oppositions containable within a thirty-minute TV programme those problems that should have been considered fluid and complex in the real world. Chapter 9 examines the programmes’ use of political language, arguing that it adds verisimilitude but also implies that there exist specific, rational, idealised uses of political language that are being manipulated by those who wish to dissemble, obfuscate or mislead. As he writes, “the satires play with and seem to endorse simplistic misunderstandings of political argument” (p. 194). Condren gives us sufficient examples of these conceptual and linguistic entanglements to show that our intellectual desire for a clean division between the satire and the satirised is ultimately unsustainable.

It might be helpful to address three concerns with the book. First, not all the material is novel; but Condren is clear that he is including and updating work that draws on three earlier publications, and the book benefits from their content. Second, the sheer volume of examples of mistranslation or misinterpretation across cultures or across time precludes a concentration of particular cases. This is not answered by what detailed work is here (notably on Hobbes), but rather by the exhilaration of seeing cases drawn from not just Greek and Latin, but also Dutch, Japanese, Mandarin, Maori, and Russian, all brought together in short order. Third, the book demonstrates an underlying approach to the philosophy of language that is, at least broadly, in the pragmatic tradition; this approach is not considered independently. Yet the existence of a philosophical underpinning of the book’s methodology does not undermine its use of the methodology. Indeed, it is entirely consonant with the argument of the book that Condren adopts the historian’s focus on cases rather than the philosopher’s concern with theory.

So: much ground has been cleared, and has been shown to be clear. An indication has even been given of what might be built by way of historical studies of humour in future. Should it start to look like an ivory tower, the architect should be passed a copy of *Between Laughter and Satire*.

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