

“The Funny Side of Nature: Humor and the Reclamation of Romantic Unity in the ‘Dark Poetry’ of Bill Hicks”

Paul McDonald (University of Wolverhampton)¹

Abstract:

Many American writers of the Romantic tradition have seen a unity between humanity, spirituality and nature, and strived to articulate it in language. The notion of Romantic interconnectedness expressed in the work of Transcendentalists such as Emerson and Whitman, for instance, also features in the mid-twentieth century writing of the Beats, most notably Allen Ginsberg. More recently, however, postmodernism/ poststructuralism has worked to undermine that project. Given the split between signifier and signified, the idea that language can have any kind of unifying function, or put us in touch with transcendent values, seems untenable, even laughable. This paper argues that the American stand-up comedian, Bill Hicks, reveals a passionate awareness of the link between humanity, spirituality and nature, and that he seeks to express it in routines which have strong affinities with American Romanticism. It constructs Hicks as a comedian who exhibits many of the characteristics of a postmodernist, but whose humor manages to transcend relativity in order to reclaim and embody the spirit of Romantic unity.

Introduction

A unity between humanity and Nature is implicit in Romanticism, both in its European and U.S. varieties. In America, it was the Transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who most clearly articulated what he felt was the poet's role in expressing this unity. For Emerson, as for many Transcendentalists, the poet's task is to discern and express the interconnectedness between humanity, Nature and Divinity:

For, as it is dislocation and detachment from the life of God, that makes things ugly, the poet, who reattaches things to nature and the Whole —reattaching even artificial things, and violations of nature, by a deeper insight—disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts. (Emerson 174)

¹ Paul McDonald, School of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences, University of Wolverhampton, Wulfruna Street, Wolverhampton, England WV1 1LY. P.J.McDonald@wlv.ac.uk

It is the poet's task to re-attach the disparate elements of our experience, "to hear [the] primal warblings" of nature "and attempt to write them down" (quoted in Peebles 185). Emerson felt America to be the ideal context for this project: he thought of it as "a vision of 'the plantations of God' where 'we return to reason and faith'" (quoted in Peebles 185). In the nineteenth century, Walt Whitman represented the quintessential Emersonian poet in many ways, while in the twentieth a case could be made for Allen Ginsberg as Whitman's heir (see Collins 197-208). Certainly, both thought of themselves as "seer" poets in Emerson's sense: both exhibited inclusiveness of the kind suggested above, and both saw America as the potentially utopian space in which unity between humanity, "nature and the Whole" could be sought and achieved.

The idea that poets can somehow put us in touch with the eternal verities of nature and the universe has become less viable in the age of postmodernism/poststructuralism. The irreconcilable split between the signifier and the signified problematizes the notion of language as a medium that might facilitate this, or any other kind of unity. According to Robert Lawson Peebles, for instance, thinking such as Emerson's now seems "comic" because postmodernism/poststructuralism has "erected a wall between the Transcendentalists and us" (174). The use of the word "comic" is interesting and appropriate because I aim to argue that it is a comedian who takes on the task of reclaiming these idealist themes. In this paper, I will indeed show how the stand-up comedian Bill Hicks (1961-1994) fits squarely in the tradition of American Romantic poetry. In particular, I will highlight how Hicks's humor partakes of what critics have called the "transcendental laugh" and thereby becomes the ideal medium via which not only the "nature of nature" gets interrogated, but through which the kind of unity expressed by Emerson in fact ends up also being re-explored and, in a paradoxical way, maybe even realized.

Just as Whitman deemed himself a "bardic prophet" (Miller 25) and Ginsberg "cultivated a public persona of protester-poet-prophet" (Chatterji 320), so the Texas-born comedian Bill Hicks was described as a comic who was "trying to illuminate the collective unconscious" (Lewis, unpaginated). He thought of himself as an "agent of evolution" (Booth and Bertin), and he felt that his project was to enlighten his audience: "I am a Shaman," he said, "come in the guise of a comic" (*Love All the People* 223). He was a stand-up comedian in that his purpose was to make people laugh, but on many occasions he referred to himself as a poet and to his routines as "dark poetry" (*Rant in E-Minor*, unpaginated). Others have also used such terms to describe him and his work on numerous occasions.¹ Hicks shared many of Whitman and Ginsberg's opinions too. The latter both had an ambivalent view of America, for instance, despising its materialism and imperialist aspirations, on the one hand, whilst celebrating its utopian promise on the other. Thus Whitman writes that "the President eats dirt and excrement [...] and tries to force it on the States" (Larson xviii), but elsewhere says that the States "are essentially the greatest poem" (Hook 17). Likewise, Ginsberg ends one of his most celebrated critiques of the country with the line "America, I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel" (Ginsberg 157), expressing his intention to assist the U.S. in realizing its utopian potential. Both poets embraced the "ideal" of America and, as Romantics, looked to re-invent the American Dream in spiritual rather than material terms. This desire is underpinned by a belief in the ultimate spirituality of all things. Thus, in "Song of Myself," Whitman compensates for American suffering "by remembering [that] divinity exist[s] within [...] every individual" (Eikkila 323). Similarly, in "Howl," Ginsberg suggests that repressive

capitalist America can be overcome if only we can recognize the divinity of all things. As Gregory Stephenson argues, "Howl"

is a rhapsodic [...] Whitmanesque illumination of the realm of the actual material world. If we accept and observe attentively, if we see, Ginsberg tells us, then all is reconciled and all is recognized for what it in essence truly is: holy, divine. (55-56)

Ginsberg, like Whitman, offers a critique of social injustice and iniquity built on an idea of spiritual unity; the notion of re-attaching humanity "to nature and the Whole" is fundamental to their thinking.

Bill Hicks shared their attitude and ambition in every sense. Throughout his career, he claimed to be ultra left-wing, and he remained as critical of America as Whitman and Ginsberg ever were. His routines abound in anti-materialist and anti-imperialist sentiments. "You can print this in stone," he says in one routine, "any performer who ever sells a product on TV is for now and all eternity removed from the artistic world. I don't care if you shit Mona Lisas out of your ass on cue, you've made your choice" (*Relentless*, unpaginated). Also Hicks was almost alone among American comedians in attacking the U.S. for its role in the first Gulf War. In one typical routine, he imitates an American general warning about Iraq's "incredible weapons." The general is asked how he knows they have incredible weapons. "We looked at the receipt," replies the General, "as soon as the check clears we're going in" (*Revelations*, unpaginated). However, like Whitman and Ginsberg, while Hicks attacks America for not living up to the utopian ideal, the ideal itself is celebrated in his work. At the beginning of one of his videos, for instance, Hicks is shown riding on horse back while, in the form of a voice over, he makes the following statement:

I always wanted to be a cowboy hero, that loan voice in the wilderness fighting corruption and evil where ever I found it and standing for freedom, truth and justice. In my heart of hearts I still track the remnants of the dream wherever I may go, in my never-ending ride into the setting sun. (*Revelations*, unpaginated)

Notice the implied relationship between the natural world (i.e. the wilderness of the Frontier) and fundamental values of the kind enshrined in the Constitution. Just as Whitman called himself an "American frontiersman democratically sharing his elemental wisdom" (Miller 24), so Hicks invokes the imagery of the Frontier to suggest his commitment to the American Dream. Clearly, his stance implies a link between the natural, unsocialized realm of the frontier and a form of wisdom: the innate insight of the "cowboy hero."

So here we can see the ambivalence toward America that Hicks has in common with Whitman and Ginsberg. But importantly too, Hicks's ambivalence extends beyond America to the human race in general. His attitude and opinions are full of contradictions. For instance, his stage persona came across as profoundly misanthropic: he purported to hate children, was enthusiastically pro-abortion, and loved to insult conventional religion, fellow comedians, celebrities, and anyone who disagreed with him; moreover, his relationship with audiences was often markedly hostile. But he always ended his performances with a demand for social justice based on egalitarian sentiments and the kind of unifying impulse characteristic of both Whitman and Ginsberg:

I'm going to share with you a vision that I had because I love you. You know all the money we spend on nuclear weapons and defense every year? Trillions of dollars. Instead, if we spent that money feeding and clothing the poor of the world, and it would pay for it many times over, not one human being excluded, then we could explore space together, both inner and outer, in peace. (*Revelations*, unpaginated)

Given Hicks's stage persona, the line "because I love you" sounds ironic in context: it is spoken with a sarcastic inflexion (and generates a laugh from the audience). However, this comic line helps prepare the audience for the ostensibly genuine sentiments that follow and which are delivered *without* obvious sarcasm. The idealism in his statement would be unacceptable without the cynicism. Without the humor/irony, it would be clichéd and cloying—the notion of "inner and outer space" has too much of a 60s, Hippy ring to it (like a bad Allen Ginsberg poem!). It would also seem too sanctimonious and preachy without the humorous counter of the comedy. The counter creates an ambivalence that is itself funny and, I will later argue, significant.

So alongside his cynicism and misanthropy, Hicks exhibits idealism born of a decidedly Romantic "vision." As his reference to inner space suggests, Hicks, like the Transcendentalists and the Beats, was interested in exploring the universe within the individual. He was particularly interested in expanding his consciousness with drugs, and his justification had to do with the fact that drugs are naturally occurring: "I believe that God left certain drugs growing naturally upon our planet to help speed up and facilitate our evolution" (*Essays and Effluvia*, unpaginated). You can see a clear relationship between nature and meaning in statements of this kind. Friends talk of Hicks embarking on drug-taking excursions into nature and of these being like religious experiences for him. As Kevin Booth and Michael Bertin write, "when he was talking about mushrooms and he said, 'go to nature. They are sacred,' he wasn't kidding. Tripping would allow Bill to commune with nature" (1). He frequently discusses drugs in his act, saying things such as, "To make marijuana against the law is like saying God made a mistake" (*Love All the People* 54), and "Why is marijuana against the law? It grows naturally upon our planet. Doesn't the idea of making nature against the law seem to you a bit . . . unnatural?" (*Essays and Effluvia*, unpaginated). There is a link between nature, God and morality suggested here which Emerson would surely approve of! Clearly, what is natural is good in Hicks's view.

He also invokes the drug experience to reinforce his attacks on conventional religion:

Christianity has a built-in defense system: anything that questions a belief, no matter how logical the argument, is the work of Satan by the very fact that it makes you question a belief. It's a very interesting defense mechanism and the only way to get by it . . . is to take massive amounts of mushrooms, sit in a field, and just go, "Show me." (*Essays and Effluvia*, unpaginated)

Again notice the reference to the natural world both as a route to Divine revelation (via mushrooms), and as a context for it (a field). In another routine, he asks why Americans never seem to hear positive drugs stories on the news. In

order to counter the bad press that he believes drugs get in the media, he constructs an imaginary positive drugs story, adopting the voice of a newscaster:

Today a young man on acid realized that all matter is merely energy condensed to a slow vibration, that we are all one consciousness experiencing itself subjectively. There's no such thing as death, life is only a dream and we are the imagination of ourselves ... Here's Tom with the weather? (*Revelations*, unpaginated)

With the phrase "one consciousness," Hicks exhibits a Romantic sense of spiritual interconnectedness that is reminiscent of Whitman and Ginsberg: he suggests that humanity and nature are linked at a fundamental level. But notice again how the high-minded sentiments are comically deconstructed by the punch-line. Once more the punch-line qualifies their potential corniness and pretentiousness. It also renders the statement ambivalent in that the comedy implies that perhaps we should not be taking the sentiments seriously at all. I will return to this ambivalence later.

Elsewhere, Hicks attacks government claims that drugs are a hazard to the country. He again has magic mushrooms in mind here, and he claims, comically, that he is *glad* they are against the law:

I'm glad they're against the law because you know what happened when I took them? I lay on the grass for four hours going: My God I love everything. And I realized our true nature is spirit not body, that we are eternal beings and God's love is unconditional and there is nothing we can do to ever change that, and it is only an illusion that we are separate from God, or that we are alone. In fact, we are at one with God and he loves us. Now, if *that* isn't a hazard to our country! What's going to happen to the arms industry when we realize we're all one?! (*Rant*, unpaginated)

The suggestion is that drugs offer an insight into the truth about the nature of the universe, a vision of spiritual unity akin to the pantheism that Whitman expresses in "Song of Myself" and that Ginsberg constructs as an alternative to Moloch in "Howl." It is a vision that these seer-poets – Hicks included – feel has the potential to deepen our understanding of ourselves, and our relationship with the world beyond.

Along with Hicks's insistence on humanity as divine goes a celebration of the human body and sex. He makes candid references to his own sex life and, particularly, his sexual fantasies. He also creates an on-stage persona known as Randy Pan the Goat Boy—a man-beast with rapacious sexual appetites—which is a vehicle for his darker libidinal impulses. As Goat Boy (with his "purple wand and hairy sack of magic" [*Love all the People* 127]), Hicks acts out the deflowering of a sixteen-year-old virgin on stage. The performance is extremely graphic in its imagery; indeed, in one recording of this routine, Hicks senses that his audience feels he is going too far, and he jokes about their inability to "deal with" his material (*Revelations*). His purpose seems to be to encourage the audience to recognize and acknowledge their own instinctive drives. In conversation with John Lahr, Hicks suggests that the Goat Boy figure represents nature: "a randy goat 'with a placid look in his eyes, completely at peace with

nature” (*Love All the People* xiii). As I understand it, what he means is that the man-beast represents natural human impulses that, though disturbing, cannot be denied without hypocrisy and self-deceit. In his act, he juxtaposes images of Goat Boy performing oral sex on a girl’s anus with images of Goat Boy dancing through a field weaving daisy chains. The parallel he draws between sexual acts and a pastoral idyll suggests the utopian potential of sexual liberation. The implication is that if we can accept our instinctive sexual drives, then we can be at one with nature, like Goat Boy.

Here and throughout his comedy, Hicks advocates an *unqualified acceptance of nature*, which in turn *requires accepting the truth about ourselves*. “Our very lives depend only on truth,” he says in one routine (*Dangerous*, unpaginated); elsewhere he asks, “When did sex become a bad thing? Did I miss that meeting?” (*Relentless*, unpaginated). This willingness to posit sex as a route to harmony with nature has much in common with American Romanticism, both in its early and more contemporary forms. As James Miller writes, “[t]hrough sexual imagery Whitman identifies man with fundamental generative forces in Nature. In his sexual identity and experience, man may discover harmony and unity with Nature” (Miller 148). Likewise, in Ginsberg’s “Howl”:

acceptance of the body is essential [...] for the senses can be a way to illumination [...] Throughout “Howl” sexual repression or disgust with the body or denial of the senses [are] forms of mental Moloch (Stephenson 57).

“Mental Moloch” is the mind-set that keeps us blind to the truth about the world: that it, and we, are divine. Hicks also encourages a shameless acceptance of instinctive sexual desires, and of the body, as a way of circumventing a society that drives us to deny our true selves. It is only after achieving the integration of a psyche fragmented by guilt and denial that we can hope to achieve re-attachment to nature of the kind Emerson discusses.

So we can see that Hicks has a very Romantic conception of nature in his work: it features in his Frontier imagery and in the relationship he sees between wilderness and fundamental values; it can be seen in his references to the natural resources that can facilitate the “one consciousness” insight; and it underpins his celebration of instinctive sexual drives as a route to authenticity and integration. But how do these preoccupations relate to his humor? I would like to discuss this here with reference to the relationship between postmodernism and comedy.

Comedy is often a feature of postmodernism partly because comedy—like irony—provides an arena in which exhausted or clichéd ideas can be re-expressed. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, cultural acceleration produced a crisis of originality creating what Umberto Eco, among others, identified as the “postmodern attitude”—an increased need among artists to acknowledge the already written in order to avoid cliché (225-229). Humor is very often part of the tone postmodern texts adopt when they seek to signal their cultural sophistication. As seen above, in the comic context, Hicks’s idealism is less susceptible to banality or naivety: his humor, together with his pseudo-cynicism offsets this. So in this sense, he could be said to reclaim these Romantic preoccupations, making them palatable for a postmodern audience.

Comedy is also a part of postmodernism because it can undermine its own authority, refusing to posit itself as a grand narrative. It complements Lyotard's reading of the postmodern condition as one in which we "can no longer have recourse to the grand narrative" (60). As the comic novelist Howard Jacobson has written, "a joke is a structured dialogue with itself," and so, "cannot, by its very nature, be an expression of opinion" (36). Humorous statements are always potentially ambivalent; they are always, in a sense, "little narratives." Thus when Hick's monologues offer a utopian vision, they do not assert authority or absolute legitimacy, despite his claims to be expressing the "truth." Hicks says in one article, discussing his idealism: "keep in mind, this radical philosophy is coming from me—an avowed misanthrope" (*Love All the People* 227-8). The audience must indeed keep this in mind, given the degrees to which Hicks goes in order to qualify idealism with cynicism: "You hypocritical scum-sucking pieces of shit, you. Ha ha ha. I'm teasin'. No. I'm not. I'm filled with hate" (*Love All the People* 52). He takes pains to reinforce the audience's sense of his ambivalence and, as suggested, any idealistic statements he *does* make are qualified with humor because framed with a comic context. In other words, Hicks's humor could be labeled postmodern in that it refuses to be centered and constantly undermines its own assertions. In this sense also, his comic uncertainty might help reclaim Romanticism and its utopian drive to fuse with nature for a postmodern audience, given their alleged suspicion of absolutist statements.

Emerson felt that poets can "reattach things to nature and the Whole" (174) through language, a notion which, as suggested, has been undermined by poststructuralism. However, there is a sense in which humor, rather than language, might be seen to facilitate this union. Firstly, consider the fact that uncertainty becomes a *source* of laughter in Hick's performances. Very often one finds oneself laughing at the contradiction between idealism and cynicism, as in the line cited earlier: "I'm going to share with you a vision I had, because I love you." This is funny precisely *because* it is a contradiction; since it features in a performance in which Hicks purports to hate practically everyone, its meaning cannot be resolved in a logical way. Humor is generated by the incongruity between the assertion and the implied counter-assertion. The laughter not only acknowledges, but is created by uncertainty. This laughter can be seen as postmodern because it accepts and, in a sense, proceeds from the inevitability of doubt; it is the humor of an *openly fallible shaman*. As numerous humor theorists have pointed out, while fundamental to comic situations, incongruity alone is not enough to create humor. There must be something appropriate about that incongruity: only fitting or plausible incongruities can have humorous potential (see Palmer 95). While Hicks's misanthropic philanthropy and cynical idealism are incongruities on one level, on another they make sense to us because they remind us of our own fallibility and doubt, of our own inevitable contradictions. The laughter they generate is an inclusive laughter because doubt and fallibility are potentially common to us all—perhaps the only ubiquitous experience in the postmodern world of chaos, doubt and relativity. As many humor theorists have noted, people use humor to bond—a shared humor is a shared identity (see, for instance, Christie Davis 306-324)—and those who bond with Hicks are those who sense, albeit in the fleeting moments of their laughter, that truth is ultimately—and eternally—elusive, including the truth of a being made more whole and authentic by its at-onement with nature.

Many have criticized postmodern humor on the grounds that it is valueless, arguing that it cannot offer a moral message and merely reinforces the chaos and

doubt of postmodernism. For instance, *The Simpsons* is often cited as an example of such valuelessness. Several critics have argued that the show cannot function as satire because it fails to construct a moral center: as with Hicks's work, moral points are made and then simultaneously undermined (see Matheson 118). But Hicks's humor complements his message of egalitarianism and unity precisely *because* it acknowledges doubt. I would suggest that when we are laughing at Hicks's ambivalence, that laughter not only signifies, but potentially reinforces our sense of the *common bond* of our predicament within postmodernity: the bond of our all too human fallibility and our inevitable uncertainty about questions of value in all areas of existence, including the value to be associated to either culture or nature. This laughter has affinities with what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the "transcendental laugh." As Andrew Stott suggests, for Nancy, "[l]aughter comes to symbolize the absent origin that has no full significance of its own, but which is constitutive of conceptual attempts to positively structure systems of meaning" (143). In other words, the ultimate truth ("absent origin") that might authenticate knowledge and value can never be found, and the laugh becomes symbolic of this absence.

As suggested, that laugh does not just signify lack, it also signifies unity: the bond of our shared ignorance. This constitutes the essence of the human predicament, of course, and it is one that *deprivileges humanity, placing us on the same level as the rest of nature*. When we laugh at our eternal ignorance about the nature of truth and meaning, we are not only in harmony with each other, but as we are forced to recognize our affinity with the chaos outside of ourselves, we are in harmony with nature too. And to repeat, Hicks's humor transcends and qualifies the chaos because it signals an experience that embodies, even as it deconstructs, his message of unity. So this laughter is different from the laughter that usually features in our lives because the latter—as the likes of Charles Gruner and countless others have observed—is born of superiority. According to Gruner, social situations in which humor occurs can always be explained by the "superiority-disparagement-aggressive theory" (40) and are *always* divisive. But in Hicks, the laugh can also work to unite us—an "us" which, crucially, includes everyone, with "not one human being excluded," *and* nature, the "space" that we "can explore...together...in peace" (*Revelations*, unpaginated).

Postmodernism/poststructuralism renders Emerson's Romantic agenda "comic" according to Robert Lawson Peebles, but, fittingly, it is a comedian who reclaims it. Where poststructuralism constructs "a wall between the Transcendentalists and us" (Peebles 174), humor can demolish it. Like language, humor is relative in many respects, of course, but several critics argue that there is something pervasive, enduring, and transcendent about it. As Peter L. Berger writes:

Humor [...] can safely be regarded as a natural constituent of humanity. At the same time what strikes people as funny ... differs enormously from age to age, and from society to society. Put differently, humor is an anthropological constant and is historically relative. Yet, beyond or behind all the relatives, there is the something that humor is believed to perceive (x).

The "transcendental laugh" is something that communicates "beyond or behind all the relatives." It is a constant, born of uncertainty, that underscores our connection to each other, and to the world beyond ourselves. Hicks, in other words, is fulfilling the poet's task as stated by Emerson at the outset—he is re-

attaching “things to nature and the Whole ... by a deeper insight.” The insight forces us to acknowledge the limits of our understanding and, as a consequence, our affinity with the rest of nature. At the very least, Hicks’s humor unconventionally bridges nature and culture and complements his agenda of inclusiveness in ways that language cannot. In this sense, then, it seems that his claims to be a poet, and the willingness of his fans to describe him as such, may be justified. I would wager that Emerson, Whitman and Ginsberg would have thought so.

Endnotes

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- ¹ This paper develops some of the points made in an earlier article in which I argue that Hicks’s work justifies the use of the term “poetry” in many respects (see McDonald, “Stand up Comedy as Poetry”).

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