boink! (Lavender Ink, 2005)
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"The Poet As Comedian: Contextualizing Dick Martin's *boink!*"

"He created his own Kool Aid reality and was able to illuminate himself by it."
-- *Trout Fishing in America*

On his fiftieth birthday in the final year of the millennium, inspired by a belated reading of Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing In America*, Dick Martin realized his plan of fifty days of writing which he would publish as *boink!*, splendidly unaware he had initiated his "antimemoir" on the mutual birthdate of Tex Avery and Jackie Gleason, while sharing his own birthday with Ducky Nash, the voice of Donald Duck. If reading Brautigan's novel for the first time in 1999 was unfashionably late in its afterlife, an overdue book truly and a fact most of us would omit from the conversation about books we've meant to read, it was no problem for the maladjusted memoirist. I am myself writing a decade too late for a proper book review of *boink!*, my roundabout way of coming to terms with the problems and rewards it poses for a reader of poetry, and humor, and humorous poetry--unless, that is, like the late Thomas Bernhard, the reader is humorless and has abandoned poetry or, like Jackie and Tex, one has a genius for comedy and has passed on--, having been boink'd again by re-reading Dick Martin's classic memoir. (1)

Texts that make us laugh, to wildly paraphrase the Freud of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), are problematical to think about. The master's English-speaking lackey Ernest Jones tells us that *Jokes* and *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* were written on adjoining tables, Freud going from one manuscript to the other when a thought struck. (2) If the father of psychoanalysis had known what we know—that he was not a scientist but, in fact, one of the seminal creative writers of the end of the nineteenth century and, with the lesser poet Benjamin Blood, a pioneer of drug lit—he might have written his two books as one grand collage of sex jokes. Dick Martin, publishing *boink!* on the centennial of the publication of Freud's doubleheader, was free, in the way that Brautigan before him was liberated by collage technique, to carve memoir and comedic poetry with a pen knife into his assigned school desk whenever he thought the teacher wasn't looking. Martin invites us to recall that essential part of ourselves we mostly thought we'd left behind to childhood play by virtue of what Freud calls "the rediscovery of something familiar" in jokes.

Although the influence of *Trout Fishing* never reaches the level of voice in *boink!*—Martin's manic wise-cracker cannot be confused for the disengaged narrator from North Beach—Dick Martin's gaggle of chapters does resemble the collage structure that worked so famously in Brautigan's novel. The forty-seven sections of *Trout Fishing* (which include, but are not limited to, the narrator's memoir of childhood, a cookbook, information on John Dillinger, the narrator's trout fishing trips, news from North Beach, an autopsy report, letters, book cover information, and so-called footnotes, all abandoned in an open-ended ending) are comparable to *boink!*'s chapters (which include, but are not limited by, remembrances of things childhood, query letters

to publishers, newspaper articles, a diploma from a radio and television broadcasting school, the list of readers Dick hosted for the Big Horror Poetry Series in Binghamton from 1983 to 1996, ads for books of poems, reviews of books of poems, an interview with the poet, Dick's accounts of various visits to medical doctors and surgeons, the Martin family tree, maps, Dick's astrological chart, a Joel Daily discography, a bibliography of books published by Peter Kidd for Igneus Press, "chunks" of a novel, and often hilarious footnotes, the ending open-ended). Part of the fun is culling all the good poems from the footnotes, such as:

Remember how perfect the ladder
lay against the moon

Beanstalk and all in our heads
we climbed
out of time
out of space
out of anything to say

We went up and up
into the yellow darkness[.]

And the prose footnotes are as funny as Jack Spicer's. The best poems are two long ones, "How I Became an Elementary School Teacher" and "White Man Appears on Southern California Beach," reprinted here in appendices. A play by "Duck Martian" will give the uninitiated some general idea of Dick Martin performing his poems. (3) Martin sustains his book of pixels and bits like Hans, in the fairy tale, who makes the princess laugh (and gains half the kingdom in so doing) at the line of people sticking to him; we stay glued, wanting to know what he'll say, or do, next.

But the problem with *boink!* is, it's seriously funny. "What looks like a surrealist writing his will and sounds like an irrepressible stand-up comedian is, actually," observed the late Guy Davenport, "fresh, green, recognizably original poetry." We might expect one of the most prominent critics of our era to recognize Dick Martin's poems, but--and herein's the historic problem--, there is no tradition in our reading for funny poetry (a condition necessitating the "is, actually"). If Dick Martin is "a surrealist writing his will," then his is an American surrealism, the realm of Dock Ellis' no-hit game on acid, a work of art and zaniness critiqued telepathically from Arizona by the cryogenic head of Ted Williams. "Surrealism will be around for a long time," Martin surmises in *boink!*. "It's part of the brain." He is the author of the pure surreal line "A beautiful and incomplete guy, he walked into a disaster of plates," which by definition could lead to no additional sentences in his paragraph. Boink! Rightfully adverse to silly verse, Ogden Nash, Joyce Kilmer, Gelett Burgess, Robert Service, the e.e. cummings of "buffalo bill defunct" and "In Just-/spring," and defender of the faith Hilaire Belloc, are no help to readers of Dick Martin. Among those writers in Andre Breton's eclectic *Anthology of Black Humor* (1936), Martin is surely closest in spirit to Christian Dietrich Grabbe (d. 1836). Heine, who quarreled with the playwright, dubbed Grabbe "a drunken Shakespeare," and the anti-literate Nazis were told they loved him; but who in America has read Grabbe's plays or Breton's book? The repeat offender Louis Untermeyer's *A Treasury of Humor* (1946) was the mainstream anthology to Breton's underground stream. However, the household-name cutups of the previous turn of the

century are no help to those of us who read Dick Martin. Perhaps, the Joyce of the *Wake* or John Lennon's two little books of poems sounding like Joyce via Edward Lear nudge us toward making sense of the nonsense verse of the unforgettable Lear and Lewis Carroll, but Martin was not born with a runsible spoon in his mouth. Our very own Crispin laments the linguistic dilemma in *boink!*:

Words are too heavy.
They've grown fat
with centuries and mouths.

Any one of them
could flatten us
into a railroad penny

Go ahead
lie down on their tracks
and see what I mean[.]

Neither does Martin's delivery seem to owe debts to the more recent "occasional" poems of joel oppenheimer, Jonathan Williams, Anselm Hollo, or Bill Shields, although I shelve my copy of *boink!* in an unalphabetized place of honor beside their books, Dorothy Parker's traditioinal-verse quips stuck in sideways. There is a striking physical resemblance between Dick Martin and the Jorg Kolbe black and white photograph of Bertholt Brecht (German Federal Archive, 1954).

Edward Dorn was tasked by his teacher Olson's obsession with his teacher Pound's Cantos to write *a poem containing history*, which he subverted by humor ("Entrapment is this society's sole activity--& only laughter can blow it to rags."). *Gunslinger*, *the historical poem containing humor* Dorn invented, may be the closest predecessor to *boink!* Dealing cards at Slinger's table, Dick Martin proposes "Television is the olive in the martini of chain reaction," a line Dorn would have traded on. By comparison, the emergent distraction of funny cowboy poems is merely another noisy fight down the bar. Martin's brand of humor, like the late master's, is determinedly social. Only the clinically mad tell jokes to themselves, and even then Artaud kept on writing for the stage. As neurotically self-absorbed as *boink!*'s speaker is, Dick Martin is paradoxically one of our unblinking social critics—and part of the power of his book derives from his relentless re-estimations of his fate as a plastic card-carrying member of the popular culture it has taken a century for late capitalism to manifest. The title he chose for the book, and its cover, are a well-aimed shot to the noggin of the slapstick comic as well as an impudent shout ("Boink!") from the Pop Art balloons of Roy Lichtenstein and cheap imitators. When I read that sour-faced old Baudelaire, in his study of laughter, posits the comic as being "visibly double" (showing both its art and its moral) and, at the same time, "transparent" (written in accessible language), I immediately thought of Dick Martin. A poetry written at the table of our impulse to make people laugh, and a poetry written at the table of the compulsion to write poems, startles when they become transparent in one volume, *boink!*. Conversely, and to the detriment of a talent like Martin's, a readership as vast as Amazon may be too lazy to go between two tables, content to know a memoir is a memoir, humor is humor, and I don't buy books of poetry anyway. I have witnessed Dick Martin, in response to the academic equivalent of this audience,

climb the nearest table at a poetry conference in New Hampshire and shout—"But how about *me*?" Everything in the auditorium clarified. If comedic poetry has the power to strip the bride of literary culture, Dick Martin's work is a reminder that we inmates are allowed to use only Swintec Clear Cabinet typewriters made of see-through plastic (the new transparency is self-censoring) for sending messages outside.

In *boink!*, Martin practices most of the types of jokes that Freud classifies and today's humor theorists, such as Jerry Aline Flieger and John Morreall, start from. He is capable of composing loving vignettes of his late father, and sweet poems about the kind of "Love that makes the divorce lawyers go away." George Meredith, the earlier expert on modern love, observed in his essay on comedy that "The reasonings at which we laugh are those we know to be false, but which we might accept as true were we to hear them in a dream." Here's a virtuoso passage of the dreamy poet joke, another type:

In heat, we headed for San Francisco with enough coin to get a room at the YMCA. The Y was gay and I nearly tumbled out the window in our fourteen-story room finishing Hesse's *Narcissus and Goldmund.* I was a period piece without even knowing it. Blissful ignorance. On the run in America and a Hesse fanatic. Horny, too. Digging Goldmund's escapades into sensuality, after the anti-body, repressive days of Roman Catholicism. Yet the monk, Narcissus, was part of me too. I had done time in a seminary before breaking out into being a dropout in New York's public university system. The holy man motif is a basic archetype in young men. And for me, the dialectic of spirit/body was still unresolved and out of whack at the time. Star date: the "Summer of Love" and I remained a virgin. ("Oh, behave, baby!").

So as I crossed the room reading Hesse, I tripped on throw rug and split head first for the big wide-opened window on the far side of the room. Chance had me catch a knee on the window sill and my freefall to the concrete below was canceled, a potential freefall from 14 stories up. Still my body got far enough out of the window for the woman in the tenement across from us to yell: "DON'T JUMP!"

O those hazy lazy days of summer.

To dwell overlong on the poetic achievement of all this funny business risks spoiling the occasion of art, the viewer becoming conscious of Harold Lloyd's prosthetic hand and neglecting to follow the movie, or thinking about Edward Lear's big nose (and, wow, Freud's lit cigar!) when you read "The Dong with a Luminous Nose" to the grandkiddies. To spare me from trying to unscramble the sentence I've just written…*When we read Keats extending his hand in the poem, we boink on Lloyd's gloved hand, only to wake up shaking--Dick Martin's hand, "Friends!"*…, I'll give the memoirist the flood light for the last laugh, and return to my seat in the dark to enjoy.

"Customary Strangers"

I was reading poems about his mother
when the tractor-trailer burst into the yard
and crushed my hosta plants.
His mom could shoot a mean game of pool:
always wore a red party dress (décolleté)

when sinking the eight in the side
and thinking of the Sunday pot roast.
I knew the trucker had been drinking
in a small town with a single bar
run by a man with a bullet
lodged in his jaw
who kept a python in a shed
with a John Deere mowing tractor
and mementos from the days
his son played with toy explosives
before joining the army
to destroy bridges of bad ideology
springing up in the world
like fleurs du mal.

The trucker insisted there was a road
inside my house
and if I consented to hop in his truck
he'd let me shoot holes
in deer crossing signs
as he roared down my living room
blowing retreads and tripping
alarms in the canvases
of two twentieth century masters
I'd stolen while drunk on wine
from a rich girlfriend.
I felt no remorse about the theft
suspecting from my days in the factory
I had missed a turn or two
and with a hatred for customary strangers
maps or the desire to go back
probably had detoured onto a path
littered with failed campaigns
and remnants of escape.
Things beyond the ken of poems
doused with twilight
and pinned on the backs of human targets.
When the trucker yanked on his horn
it was my chance to find out.

Notes:

(1) **A pdf version of *boink!* is available free from the publisher at <www.lavenderink.org>.**

(2) As I worked on this essay, I became acutely aware of a surprising number of jokes about two tables. Two examples will suffice here:

--A man walks up to two tables in a bar and asks them: "May I join you?"

--Two tables walk into a bar. The first one says, "I'll get this round." His friend replies, "Okay, next drinks are on me."

It is our good fortune that "Pieces of Furniture," a play by the Athenian comic poet Plato Comicus (d. 416 BC), survives only as a title, or there would be even more jokes about tables dating back centuries before the bad joke of Greek Revival furniture you couldn't sit on which my grandmother bought at a good price.

(3) Duck Martian is one of the pseudonyms this latter-day Pessoa publishes under; see also Ant McGoogle, Al Pants, and others. No relation to Clarence "Ducky" Nash (see my essay's opening paragraph).