

## Book Review

Lydia Amir\*

Adam Biro. *Dictionnaire amoureux de l'Humour juif*. Paris: Plon, 2017. pp. 785. 25 euros.

Adam Biro is a French publisher and author. Born in Budapest in 1941, he left Hungary at the age of 15 for Paris and Geneva. Since 1970, he lives in Paris, where he publishes selective art books and writes novels, short stories, radio plays and essays, some of which have been translated into English.

Biro has probed his Jewish Hungarian heritage also by attempting to get to terms with Jewish humor. However, he rejects his previous work on this topic (2013). He claims that he educated himself since his earlier publication (2017: 772), although at the early stages of the current volume he still thought humor was a light and inconsequential subject (323). A non-religious Jew, he accepted the challenge of writing this book because it is through humor that he feels his Jewishness. He maintains that non-Jews may have humor, yet no Jew is devoid of it (2017: 201), as humor is the essence of Judaism (323),<sup>1</sup> the religion of life.

This volume attempts to do justice to the complexity of the topic. It endeavors to capture if not the essence of Judaism, at least its history (46) through erudite alphabetical entries interwoven with jokes or Witz. This “Amorous Dictionary of Jewish Humor” is part of the successful “Amorous Dictionaries” series, launched in 2000 by the Parisian publisher Plon. These publications feature subjective or personal (“amorous”) approaches to various topics couched in non-linear and alphabetical essays (“dictionary”). In the entry “amorous dictionaries” (200-202), Biro notes that he is indeed enamored of his subject. However, he confesses that he may not be the best person to write about it, for a variety of reasons, yet he takes this opportunity to write about any topic that interests him.

Still, given the breadth and depth of the author’s experience and knowledge of Jewish humor in literature, comedy, stand-up and film in Europe, Israel, and the United States, the personal approach helps us get a better grip of Jewish humor. The book can be read effortlessly, and the pleasure it gives is sufficient cause for recommending it. Moreover, this volume stands out

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<sup>1</sup> This strength of this assertion is explicitly attenuated (p. 453): humor is now referred to as “one of bases of Judaism.”

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because it does not focus on what is generally, and somewhat narrowly, referred to as Jewish humor, that is, Ashkenazi humor. This study is more encompassing, as it incorporates North-African Jewish humor as well as Israeli humor. This reflects the current situation of French Jewry, many of which are from North-African descent and have strong attachments to Israel, but this also enriches the more common approaches to the topic. From a scholarly point of view, furthermore, although not necessarily aware of contemporary work in English on Jewish humor within humor studies research,<sup>2</sup> the author seems to be well acquainted with the various classical approaches to Jewish humor, even the less flattering ones, such as Otto Weininger's views.

Since true humor for Weininger has to do with the transcendent, he argues in *Sex and Character* that Jews have no humor, only wit "at their own expense and on sexual things" (1906: 319; quoted in Gilman, 1991: 135). Biro's own view of Jewish humor disregards the sexual but insists on the self-referential as a significant aspect of Jewish humor. Jews laugh at what they consider their main faults, but as according to the Bible they are faulty of most human things, Jewish humor may seem universal. Indeed, this humor attempts joyously to adjust the inequalities of life in an existence which already in the Bible is described as tragic and which has been made even more so through Jewish history.

Among many interesting comments and reflections, which I cannot reproduce here, Biro notes that the Jews adopted humor in the Enlightenment as part of the civility needed for being an educated citizen.<sup>3</sup> Before that, the Biblical and Talmudic exhortations to avoid wit and laughter were usually observed, although he emphasizes the deep connection between Judaism and laughter: the mythic history of the Jews begins with laughter (46) as Isaac (or Israel) means, "will laugh," and both his parents, the patriarchs Sarah and Abraham laughed, although in different ways.

I do not know whether the historical assertions about the Jewish Enlightenment Biro advances are well founded. I cannot comment of Jews' use of humor before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but I can point to a common mistake Biro makes in asserting that until the Renaissance, laughter was never self-directed. Although he immediately adds the comment of his friend and editor of the

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<sup>2</sup> I am thinking of the work of Christie Davies, Elliott Oring, Sarah Blacher-Cohen, Avner Ziv, and Arie Sover, among others.

<sup>3</sup> On humor being part of civility in the eighteenth-century, see Shaftesbury's views as analyzed in Chapter One of Amir 2014b.

series “Dictionnaires amoureux,” Jean-Claude Simoën, about the self-referential laughter of Lucian of Samasota, Biro explicitly avoids what he considers controversial (2017: 128).

We know, however, that not only Lucian, but also Democritus, Socrates, and Seneca made use of and sometimes explicitly advocated self-referential laughter.<sup>4</sup> Thus, we could have expected that before making self-referential laughter of the mark of Jewish humor, a deeper investigation of the matter in Greek, Roman, and Christian philosophy would have been undertaken. However, Biro is no philosopher, nor a classicist, and does not pose as an erudite. Yet his book, willingly inordinate (2017: 322) and personal as it is, has the virtue of making you reflect about Jewish humor, and the very education you get through reading it enables you to evaluate the author’s opinions, which Biro himself considers no better or worse than other views of this significant topic (2017: 322) .

## References

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<sup>4</sup> On this topic, see, Amir 2013; 2014a.