 October 2008 home

The Humorology of Power

by Bernard Chazelle

The worshippers who kneel at the altar of Humor never cease to marvel at the unique capacity humans have to make others laugh. They worship the worship, too, for the only thing cooler than having a sense of humor is to know that you have such a thing and that it *really* matters. Humor is serious stuff. It exposes hypocrisy, punctures vanity, challenges falsehoods, skewers prejudice, and, in our hour of need, lessens the pain. It serves social, evolutionary, and sexual purposes—both Darwin and Freud had much to say on the matter (as on pretty much everything else). The typologies of humor can fill tomes. That's not what this essay is about. My goal is to examine the relation of humor to power.

What is humor?

What makes me laugh is a pleasing answer but it explains nothing. Truth is, humor comes in too many flavors to fit into one all-encompassing theory. Plus it's not for nothing that humor and humid share the same Latin root for "bodily fluid." To analyze humor, indeed, is much like holding water in your hand. It's entirely hopeless to seek sufficient conditions for it—humor is far too dependent on "humors"—so we'll have to content ourselves with necessary ones.

I. Superiority

My first point, unoriginal but so crucial it bears revisiting, is that humor, whether hurtful or not, is inextricably tied to a sentiment of superiority. The humorist, a term taken in the broadest sense, can express his or her superiority in at least two ways. Being clever is one of them. All jokes in the universe having been told 1000 times already, all that's left is how clever you make the 1001-st iteration. If such a tiny fraction of comedy is truly funny, it's because being clever is hard work. The Simpsons' writers are quite obviously workaholics. A pity Churchill died too soon to join their ranks:

> Lady Nancy Astor to Churchill: *"Winston, if you were my husband, I'd poison your tea."*
> Churchill: *"Nancy, if I were your husband, I'd drink it."*

Retaliatory humor puts a premium on cleverness:

> Priest to rabbi: *"When will you eat ham?"*
> Rabbi to priest: *"At your wedding."*

The lady and the priest postulate a world of fantasy (world A), free of superstition and pesky restraint on wanton murder. World A comes crashing against world B, ruled, in this case, by cold logic. Note that the rabbi's world does not clash with the priest's over a demand for tolerance but, rather, consistency. The collision is not moral but logical. Punch lines are the emotion-free, high-energy particles emitted by the LHC (Large Humor Collider).

The other way to channel superiority into laughter is to claim the throne of correctness. You can do it in two ways: one is to paint everybody around you as a blithering idiot and pose as a fount of wisdom. The other is self-deprecation, a device used to create a clone of yourself that you can then torment with impunity. The identification is only an alibi, of course. Emotion is the enemy of comedy. You make yourself into the butt of your own jokes only to immunize your audience against that dreaded humor killer called compassion.
Self-deprecation is the art of empathizing over your own flaws so others won't have to. Thus free-floating in moral weightlessness, the audience can laugh immune to self-loathing. Yet the main function of self-deprecation is not to protect the audience from guilt but the humorist from harm. There is no need tormenting a man busy tormenting himself.
Self-deprecation is defensive. It is a safety mechanism that has little to do with humility. It takes a serious man to take himself not seriously.

For the audience, self-deprecation can also be vicarious. The humor of Seinfeld is that we see bits of ourselves in every situation on the screen and laugh cathartically in much the same way we would watching video highlights of our most world-A moments. We do so from the safety, comfort, and detachment of world B. Last but not least, self-deprecation can also be a vehicle for identity marking: one can affirm superiority via the exclusive ownership of certain lexical fragments (the N-word) or comedic licenses. For a taste of the latter, see how Sarah Silverman, the comedic wrong-footing queen, uses the occasion of an "apology" to Asians to ridicule anti-Semitism:

> "All the papers were calling me a racist, and it hurt, you know. As a Jew, as a member of the Jewish community, I was really concerned. You know, I was concerned that we were losing control of the media."

Do not misconstrue the word superiority. Ms Silverman does not think of herself as being superior any more than a basketball player does when he fakes a shot to drive around a guard and shoot a 3-pointer. At punch-line time, the humorist must claim the mantle of superiority: she must be the ruler of world B (common sense) and the slayer of world A (fantasy of Jewish conspiracies). The better humorist will share the victory spoils with the audience and have it believe it's in on a secret code. The lesser one will humiliate and gloat. The audience might still laugh, but laughter is an unreliable gauge of humor. Unless earned by uncoerced persuasion, humorological superiority is worth nothing. That said, don't delude yourself: to appreciate comedy will often require shooting your heart with novocaine.

II. Liberation Humor

My second point concerns the common illusion that humor, especially of the transgressive kind, wields liberating power. Like other art forms, comedy can challenge norms and influence attitudes, often for the good. But there is something intrinsic to humor that makes it an unlikely vehicle for "liberation." (Not to be confused with "release"—comedy is big on purging.) If humor could have a driving political purpose (and I doubt that it can), it would have to reflect a certain totalitarian temptation. Laughter is a reactionary impulse, and humor is, at its root, a call for order. That it can be enlisted in worthy causes doesn't mean it can easily wash off its original sin. Crudely put, the humorist is a nag—or, to be technical about it, a law enforcement officer. The law might be noble and good but humor never legislates: it enforces necessary norms by violating contingent ones. The violation can be great fun—in fact, that's the whole point—so the enforcement goes largely unnoticed. But humor serves the same evolutionary function as physical pain. It is an alarm bell. As such, it is no more liberating than a wake-up call.

The confusion is understandable. First, comedy targets power preferentially, but that's only because power offers the highest vanity-to-compassion ratio, a humorological dream mix. Second, transgressive humor may be seen as a threat to authority, but it comes way too preconditioned to be more than a mere nuisance. The only power Lenny Bruce ever threatened was his own, notwithstanding the State's overreaction, which was just that. The reason is that comedy is a purchased license: it is the license society gives itself to explore the forbidden in public. The transgression is therefore contractual. Audiences pay good money to hear from comedians words they would never tolerate, even free of charge, from the man on the street. Third, there is indeed an overrepresentation of the historically oppressed in comedy. You don't have to be oppressed to be funny, but it seems to help. Yet one should not infer from it that humor seeks liberation from the jackboot. Comedy may carve out a safe space that the oppressor cannot penetrate. But freedom is not the purpose: protection is. Humor is fundamentally about survival.

> Cossack: *"What's the source of all evil?"*
> Rabbi: *"The Jews and the chimney sweeps."*
> Cossack: *"Why the chimney sweeps?"*
> Rabbi: *"Why the Jews?"*

The rabbi reacts to the trap laid for him by setting up his own. He prods the cossack into displaying his anti-Semitism a second time. That's the rabbi's first act of retaliation. The second one is to ask "Why the Jews?" and beat the cossack at his own game. But retaliation is not rebellion. The rabbi is not jockeying for power or fighting for freedom. He is merely playing a winning game. He baits the (world A) cossack to step into world B only to expose his unfitness. It's superiority humor of the "survival of the fittest" kind. The political implication is dreadful. Not only does it reduce prejudice to illogic—if only those damn cossacks thought things through—but the competitive nature of the effort itself makes it a status quo joke. "Brains vs Brawn": 1-1. Which begs the question: Is everything all right then? You oppress me but I outwit you. Shall we call it a draw?

There's an old principle underpinning humor that goes back to Kant and even Aristotle (two famous comics): incongruity. I don't like the word much because it's too coarse to carry much explanatory punch—there is just too much congruous humor and unfunny incongruity out there. I prefer the image of two clashing worlds. Humor usually requires a narrative that climaxes in an unexpected collision between two independent universes. There's nothing intrinsically funny about a pair of colliding worlds, so humor assigns specific roles to them. Often first on the scene, world A is characteristically dreamy, cartoonish, fantastic, playful, fanciful, expectative, and ruled by its own idealized laws. World B, on the other hand, is the dull backwater of common sense, physical law, submission to order, determinism, logic, immutability, or perhaps even sheer, dreary survivability. World A is ruled by human agency, often endowed with an automaton-like quality. (Note that humor is always human: a landscape is never funny.) World B is under the iron rule of a nonnegotiable force: logic, physics, shame, etc. Although the force is unassailable, it is often socially desirable. (Note that this classification exempts humor based on wordplay, puzzles, or misunderstandings, all types in which this essay is not particularly interested, anyway.) Why does your heart need a dose of novocaine? Because humor must knock down empathy in order to kill fantasy. For an illustration of this in cartoon comedy, try this one:

> *"So, Doc, how bad is it?"*
> *"It's bad. There's no cure. There's not even a race for the cure."*

With suitable bedside manner getting compassion out of the way, fantasy is next on the chopping block: the target is the loony idea that to cure a terminal disease one should run around the block like a madman to save pennies for the cause. The unassailable forces are biology and realism. (There's more to the joke but that will do.) World B is stealthy and its governing law self-evident. This is necessary because it usually appears only in the punch line and, therefore, must require no introduction. It's hard to crack a racial joke if the audience is still unsure whether racism is a bad thing. (This is true whether the joke is racist or anti-racist.) Most comedy is based on denied anticipation. To make world B a crash site and deny the audience's expectation of a soft landing, comedy, being contextual, must rely on an unspoken code. This is necessary because a joke can be told or explained but not both. Ingredients of surprise and suddenness are key to a successful crash.

> *"Have you lived in Boston all your life?"*
> *"Not yet."*

Peremptory claims look more impressive unencumbered by evidence. They're not nearly as persuasive, however, so let me try to argue my case. Grown-up humor feeds so voraciously at the trough of morality (more on this complex relationship below) that it is best to begin with children's jokes, if only to appreciate why humor is, fundamentally, the extinction of fantasy. Tell a 2-year old that in your house there is a polar bear who sleeps in the fridge (world A). She'll open her eyes big and wide and go "Wow!" Yes, Virginia, there's a world out there where polar bears live in refrigerators, and it's all seriously exciting stuff. No joke! World B does not stand a chance.

Now try your polar bear story on Charlotte, who's 4. No "Wow" from her. Unlike her younger sister, Charlotte will laugh out loud. Why? Ask her and she'll say: "A polar bear is too big to sleep in the fridge." Fantasy and physics clashed briefly in Charlotte's mind, and physics won: the humor didn't merely *result* from the triumph of order over imagination: it *was* the triumph of order over imagination. No world B victory, no laugh. (Why humor makes us breathe faster and emit strange sounds is a tension/release mystery that I'll leave to evolutionary biologists.) Does that mean Virginia didn't perceive the same clash? She did. But, swayed by the storyteller's talents of persuasion, she decided on a different outcome: fantasy beat reality. World A won. For Virginia, fantasy is no laughing matter. It's a little scary, in fact. Who are you to be bending the laws of physics and squeeze bears into refrigerators?

Things get tricky with the grown-ups. So let's begin with the granddaddy of comic scenes. An Olympic marathon runner slips on a banana peel right at the starting line. Not so funny if he's a paralympics contestant who falls off his wheelchair at the start of the race (at least not until transgressive reflexivity has taught us it's all right to laugh, but let's not get ahead of ourselves.) It's still pretty cruel, though, to laugh at a runner who falls flat on his face. But with the proper emotional detachment boosted by the right narrative—say, the marathoner is an arrogant stiff—it becomes easier to loosen one's moral shackles and laugh. The banana's cult status in comedy also helps (perhaps the sole exception to the rule that objects can't be funny).

What are the colliding worlds? An Olympic marathoner is possessed with uncommon ambition and determination. He dreams of gold medals, glory, and all that fantastic world A stuff. Trouble is, it all comes crashing against the dull, dreary world B ruled by Newton's law and gooey fruit waste. To laugh is to bow to gravity against human aspiration. For humor is not simply observing two clashing worlds: it's taking sides. It's making world B your home team. To laugh is to side with the natural order of things. Humor is a conservative magnet, a submission to a higher force. After all, you're not taking on the mighty Isaac Newton or the greedy Chiquita Banana, are you? You're laughing at a poor bloke whose life dream has just been shattered. Why? To practice your survival skills in recognition of the world-B reality that gravity kills but marathoners don't. For a more subtle take on this, try this joke from the "Who are you going to believe, me or your lying eyes?" genus:

> Al comes to the rescue of his friend, Bill, who's stuck in his car after a bad crash. "Bill, are you still alive?" A plaintive voice replies: "Yes, I am." "Thank goodness! But you're such a liar, Bill, I don't really know whether to believe you."

On Planet Al, unusual for world A, logic rules. Of course, it's faulty logic and it is its precedence over the obvious reality that Bill is, indeed, alive that makes Al's world cartoonish and "mechanistic" (to use Bergson's classic characterization of humor). The friendship, the pain, and the anxiety of a car crash make the contrast with the cold logic and prudence of Al all the more dramatic. The flawed logic hits hard because one can easily imagine Al walking away from the scene. So the pull toward common sense is amplified by

the unfolding drama. At the same time, Al's fantasy world fails in an exquisitely clever way. Living liars can't be trusted, which is fine. But Al extends that predicate to dead liars, which is creative. That's the cleverness part of the joke. But there's another way to look at it. In his world A, Al is actually showing great courtesy by extending to the dead the laws of the living: it's insane but it's generous. We laugh because we recognize that life is too serious to be left in the hands of cartoon characters: a wise, conservative reaction. Comedy can be adventurous and taboo-breaking but humor itself, to serve its evolutionary purpose, must remain risk averse.

The consensual, unexamined dominance of world B serves a normative function, typically as a social corrective. It may all seem a bit of a paradox. A humorless society would be dreary—laughably so. Comedic intentionality challenges orthodoxies, power, prejudice, and, with its attention to the unseen, sharpens one's critical sense. Humor amuses and cleanses at the same time. Not bad. But humor is merely a call to reality, a sanity check. It abhors denial. If your soul aches, humor is there to remind you lest you forget. Sure, it'll scratch you where it itches, but it'll also wake you up in the middle of the night just to wish you a good night's sleep. Yes, it's *that* type. Humor is counter-rebellion against the fantastic and the illusory. The confusion has two sources: one is that fantasy can be both wonderful ("I'll cure cancer") and foul ("I'm the Master of the Universe"); the other is that the "unassailable" world-B force to which humor is the handmaiden is typically consensual. One rarely minds being enslaved to logic, realism, simplicity, common sense, humility, etc.

The force has two characteristics: it is amoral and necessary (ie, you don't get to choose it). This is a key point. Humor can challenge immorality only for the wrong reasons. Bad-vs-Good is never funny. Bad-vs-Right is. Remember the cossack. We didn't laugh because of his prejudice but because of its inconsistency. The implication is unequivocal: if the cossack would just be rational, his anti-Semitism would vanish. This may appear naive. Not so. The rabbi was only trying to score points. In the same vein, the subliminal message of the Colbert-Stewart style of political comedy is that, if only Bush were smart, articulate, and competent, then everything would be all right (when, in fact, everything would be worse).

The role of morality in humor is subtle. Jokes often double as morality tales, yet moralizing is a yawn. So morality can only be a stage-setter. But humor does not do rehab. It does retributive, not reparative, justice—just as you would expect from a conservative law enforcement vehicle. As such, it rewards your moral impulse by indulging your mean streak. Like rewarding an alcoholic for staying away from the stuff by giving him a beer.

Despite the saying that performance is what we call comedy that bombs, there is a prevalent confusion in this area that I'd rather sidestep. So I'll focus on humor, spoken or written, that transcends its delivery; in other words, I'll confine the discussion to the funny that remains so even if you can only read it. I realize this excludes the large segment of American stand-up that relies on abjection, power reversal, metajokes, narcissism, forbidden impulses, alienation, performance therapy, and other theatrical modes of self-expression. I'll conflate jokes, wit, and humor, which is regrettable but fine nonetheless, as no theory that did not survive such conflation could be worth much,

anyway.

Transgressive humor lives off the very existence of the norms that it seeks to violate. It demands taboos that it can then heroically break. Hippies meant to be transgressive: they tried to change norms and they were utterly humorless about it. But when Sarah Silverman (a rare natural comic) describes her "final solution" for AIDS patients, she's being merely superior:

> *"If we can put a man on the moon, then we should be able to put a man with AIDS on the moon. And then we should be able to put all men with AIDS on the moon."*

It's double entrapment disguised as transgression. The joke is a dialogue based on sudden cognitive shifts, with one part written in invisible ink. Here are the missing lines:

> *"If we can put a man on the moon* ["Oh no, what cliché is coming next?"], *then we should be able to put a man with AIDS on the moon* ["Huh? But, hey, why not? cool of you to think that way"]. *And then we should be able to put all men with AIDS on the moon."* ["Will laughing make me a jerk, too?"].

The denied anticipation is brutal. But why the cruelty? Because Ms Silverman wants to tell you that she, unlike you presumably, is so accepting of AIDS victims that she'll treat them like anybody else. You won't catch her babytalking seniors. That her stand may be, beyond its odious ways, honorable is entirely accidental. Her jokes work because they are clever (and she delivers them well), but her role model is Michael Jordan, not Mother Teresa. Her aim is superiority, not morality. As it should be. The only thing more amusing than the tactical positioning of a comedian on the moral chessboard is that anyone should take it seriously. Ms Silverman seeks no one's moral edification other than her own. There, she is only being true to the narcissistic essence of comedy.

Comedy's normative mode is ecologically parasitic. It feeds off society's darker compromises by making social commentary its primary *vehicle*, not its primary *function*. Of course, social commentary as an end in itself can be funny, too (eg, Swift, Wilde, Twain). Humor, indeed, can be used as universal seasonings. But whether served as comedy or condiments, humor's ambition is to change facial expressions, not society. The contextual dependency can hardly be overestimated. Some humor is universal but most of it is not. George Carlin's nightmare probably featured a New York Times announcement that the "F-word" would now be spelled "fuck." Hans Christian Andersen was lucky not to live in a nudist colony, or his story about an emperor having no clothes might not have gotten the same attention. Puritanism and sexual humor are the two sides of the same coin. Get rid of one and, poof, the other's gone, too. Juvenile societies like ours, ie, sexually repressed and anatomically obsessed, fuel their comedy with bodily functions, but for bonobos I suspect the humor gets lost in translation. (Mere speculation on my part, of course.) OK, it wouldn't be fair to leave this statement gender-neutral since it's without a doubt the Y-chromosome that drags down the average emotional age of comedy. It's not even cultural (pace male comics)—it's molecular.

Satire exposes the absurd in the social and political spheres while leaving the nonabsurd

hidden. Eye-opening and inspiring though it may be, it is still based on a deception: just because A is bad does not mean that not-A is better. In fact, A might be an ugly compromise that allows humans to get by, whereas world B, unexplained and unchallenged, might be hellish. A society without white lies would be unlivable—when a homely girl asks you if she's pretty, are you supposed to say no? Uncompromising humor can be quite funny, but its pleasures are tainted. Jon Stewart's comedy is innocuous but the authoritarian temptation in Bill Maher's anti-religious rants is unmistakable. Mr Maher knows that religious belief is so world A. But then he goes on to postulate a world B of metaphysical common sense, as though there were such a thing. He forgets that the obvious is not the sole alternative to the absurd. Why is religious belief, which he rightly calls superstition, any less world B than the myths that claim squatter's rights in his own psyche? Doesn't Mr Maher celebrate birthdays and frown upon cannibalism? What's rational about *that*? His selective, wholesale ridiculing of the sacred stems from a totalitarian impulse. And I say this as someone who appears to share most of Mr Maher's views on organized religion.

Humor is an alarm bell, an attention-grabbing signifier with no particular signified. Bill Maher and Sacha Baron Cohen (Borat) make the same mistake of imparting a comedic signified where there is none. Jon Stewart makes the opposite mistake: an unwillingness to follow through with noncomedic substance. As he readily admits, he won't let a serious thread run for more than 2 minutes without killing it with a joke. In his own words, it's "only" a comedy show. Indeed, and Paris Hilton is "only" a bimbo. Selling short is still fashionable in some circles, I guess. Humor will not make you think: it will merely suggest that you should do so. Good comedy should be an appetizer that stimulates your appetite. But late-night TV comedy is digestive, dessert-time humor. To go to battle, you need compassion, courage, outrage, and, preferably, a plan. And, oh yes, please bring humor along just in case you lose.

III. Reflexivity

My third point is existential. Human beings are deeply ridiculous creatures. The ultimate joke is our very existence. The majesty of horses, seagulls, and house cats reminds me that dignity and laughter don't go together well, do they? Superiority theory tells me humor is suspicious and a guilty pleasure. Yet is there any doubt that it empowers? Humans can't fly on their own but they can be funny, which is the closest approximation. And don't forget that humor is universal: one can laugh about *anything*.

Sweet. I've managed in these last 3 sentences to shatter my entire cosmology of humor. For example, I argued earlier that immorality couldn't be funny. At first blush, this seems plausible. How many Hitler jokes mock his height, moustache, and barking oratory rather than his unfathomable evil? (Hint: evil can't be mocked.) But reflexivity changes everything: that is the self-awareness that allows us to inject ourselves into the narrative of humor, fully conscious of the embedding. It elevates humor to heights inconceivable without it.

> A friend walks into Niels Bohr's office and spots a horseshoe hanging on the wall: "Niels, you don't believe in that sort of thing, do you?" "Of course not, but I hear it works even if you don't believe in it."

Humor is like sneezing. It's brief and hard to control. (Laughing is a different matter altogether. Comedians with no recorded ability to craft a funny line have been known to keep audiences in stitches with a creepy "laugh or you die" shtick.) Like a Charlie Parker solo, a lonely joke or a witty quip can pack a lot of drama. Although the punch line tends to be "atomic"—it's really a punch point—the clash behind it can be ambiguous and multi-threaded. The buildup may contain a multitude of intertwined strands. A joke is a tiny (counter)revolution as well as a tiny play. I mean "play" in both senses of the word: theater and game.

When Ricky Gervais pokes fun at the Book of Genesis for having us believe that God created the heaven and the earth before light, who is he mocking? The joke is that it's hard enough to build the cosmos out of nothing; now imagine doing it in the dark! Is Gervais mocking the bible, Christian fundamentalists, himself (reflexively), his audience? Where is the clash? Is it between the fantasy of Genesis and the commonsensical difficulty of working in the dark? Perhaps. Yet, at the instant of laughter, it is you, the audience, not God, who's trying to build that cosmos. So maybe the clash is about the irrelevance of worrying about such a trivial matter as lighting conditions when your job assignment is to build the planets. The point is that there is a clash somewhere, or perhaps several of them, and it doesn't matter a whit if we don't know for sure.

Rowan Atkinson, as the devil, welcomes the dead to hell:

> *"Atheists, please move over here. Perhaps feeling a bit like a bunch of nitwits, no?"*

Many "wars of the worlds" there: the falsifiability of theology; the arrogance of atheists; the superstition of believers; the incongruity of a humorous Satan; etc. Some jokes can be read in many different ways and still be funny. Reflexivity relies crucially on that attribute. But what is it? First I'll tell you what it's not. Tony Blair once said:

> *"I don't make predictions. I never have and I never will."*

The statement is self-referential but the humor (such as it is) is not reflexive. Reflexivity requires self-awareness (which would be asking too much of Tony Blair). A Broadway play contains this line:

> *"Bye-bye, hope to see you again soon."*
> *"Well, it's a small cast."*

Cute, reflexive humor. Unlike self-deprecation, where the clone of yourself enters in no particular dialectical interplay with the original, reflexivity depends critically on a tightly coupled interaction between the mirrored image and its source. The best kind of reflexivity is suggested, not explicit as in the Broadway play.

> A man is led to execution on monday morning and sighs, "What a way to start the week!"

This joke is the template for hundreds of others. (Too bad Bill Clinton forever crippled it by attending to the execution of a retarded death-row inmate in Arkansas, who famously requested that the pudding served at his last dinner be saved for later.) It is reflexive because the primary interpretation, abject foolishness, quickly gives way to a second one, the feigning of abject foolishness, so the joke becomes a joke about a joke. A more potent brew from the same pot:

> Chaim and Shlomo are being asked by the SS officer to dig their graves before being shot. Chaim says to his friend: "I am not going to dig my own grave!" Shlomo replies to him: "Come on, Chaim, we're in enough trouble as it is. Dig that grave."

The horror of the backdrop is entirely plausible, yet the humor is irresistible. So, is the SS officer the only monster here? What about the narrator? What about us? The joke is a mirror that reflects a disturbing image of ourselves. There is the obvious clash of the worlds. Like in the monday-execution joke, world A is ruled by Shlomo's flawed logic. But then there's the added poignancy of a child's voice. Shlomo may be an adult but his logic is unmistakably that of a schoolchild. Anyone fearful of getting a higher-up cross can still hear in his head the voice of his mother on his first day of school: "Make a good impression on your teacher. Do just as she says. Promise?" That the "teacher" is, in this case, a murderous sadist is spine-chilling. Shlomo's childish fantasy planet collides with a world B where appeasing monsters is futile.

The joke features a particular brand of self-deprecation that is a signature of Jewish humor. Although I suspect this is an updated Yiddish joke that predates the Holocaust, the context of the self-deprecation matters greatly. It's a "double-down" slam against the charge that Jews walked to Auschwitz like lambs to the slaughter. One can almost hear the narrator riff off the anti-Semitic trope: "Actually, we didn't just dig the graves; we also bought every SS officer in the Fatherland a shovel for Christmas." (As in the car crash joke, imaginary follow-ups, whether conscious or not, play a key supporting role.)

Then there's the implicit reflexivity. The humor is so *outré* that the listener can only laugh in a state of self-awareness. This, in turn, forces a recasting of Shlomo from his role as an endearing simpleton into an avatar for the heroic narrator. Why heroic? Because gentle nitwits with maternal voices in their heads just can't be allowed to dig their own graves before being shot. So, the narrator is really mocking the scene. (Without reflexivity, this transformation is absolutely impossible: there's not a hint of mockery in the text.) But only a hero jokes while facing death. In the world A of warfare, he who decides death has the last word. In this world B, he who can joke before dying has the last word. You may kill me but I will laugh while you do so. There is a qualitative difference with the cossack joke. This is no longer about scoring points. I ridicule the killing, not the killer; I do so not to diminish it but to vanquish it. Illusory though it all might be, we're back in survival territory.

This new, reflexive world B is evolutionarily absurd. Does this contradict my claim of humor as survival practice? No. Granted, to have the last joke before it's all over does not exactly give you a selective advantage (as is fully expected of world B). But to live aware that you can just might. A good analogy is Stoic philosophy, which promoted the idea of suicide for the power it bestowed upon its holder. That does not mean Epictetus ran up and down the Appian Way urging people to jump out of windows. He simply pointed out the benefit of keeping the option open.

The SS joke features both superiority and abjection. But reflexivity doesn't stop there. You can easily step back again and wonder what kind of vain heroism you've just constructed. This produces an iterative dialectic that can go on as far as your imagination allows. Reflexivity gives humor its universal power by making it its own subject matter. The humorist *always* has the last word—I'm looking at you, Lenny Bruce and Bill Hicks. You can take anything, even a joke, shrink-wrap it, joke about it, and then rinse and repeat, fully conscious of the recursivity.

In Atkinson's hell skit, we get to *play* God. In the SS joke, we get to *be* God. By looking death in the eye and cracking a joke, we declare a meta-victory over all that stands in the way. Humor is no longer *about* world B, it *is* world B. Through the sheer power of reflexivity, humor itself has become the unassailable force. And that's no joke.

— Bernard Chazelle