Towards a Formal Ontology of American Comedy

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> *Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies.*
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> —E. B. White

There was a time, not even a long time ago, when comedy was a record. You could hold it. It sat in the rack between the music, a flat square sleeve with a man's face on it, and you put it on the turntable or you fed the disc into the slot in the dashboard, and the man told you jokes for forty minutes, and then you ejected him and put on AC/DC. The two objects were indistinguishable in form. They were the same size, sold

in the same shops, filed in the same crates under the same alphabet. A comedy record was a record. Nobody found this strange, because it was not strange. It was simply true that the funny and the musical arrived in the world wearing the same clothes.

This is the right place to begin, because the clothes were never a coincidence. Comedy has a structure, and the structure is close kin to the structure of music: a nested architecture of containers and units, descending from the largest vessel down to a single irreducible thing, governed by rules about what may hold what, and by other rules, stranger ones, about how a thing said early may reach forward and touch a thing said late. What follows is an attempt to name the parts. It is a sketch and not a science—hence *towards*—assembled mostly in conversation, the way most true things about comedy get assembled, which is to say by two people pointing at jokes and saying, look, there, that one, do you see what it did.

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The largest container is the album. We keep the word even now, when the vinyl is gone, because it names something real: the bounded release, the whole that a body of comedy is published as. The album was once

literally an album, and that literalness is worth holding onto, because it tells us what kind of object we are dealing with. An album is defined by its edges, not by its contents. It is a release. What goes inside it can vary enormously, but the thing itself is a unit of publication, the comic equivalent of the gatefold double LP.

The album had children. The first was the special, which is only an album that learned to be seen as well as heard—the hour filmed in a theater, broadcast, streamed, the definitive statement a comic makes once they have an hour worth defending. The second child, and the strange one, is the podcast. The podcast is also a container at roughly the album's level, but it is a container of a wholly different temperament, because it is built almost entirely out of the connective stuff between jokes rather than out of jokes themselves. We will need a word for that stuff shortly. For now it is enough to say that the podcast is a kind of degenerate set: a vessel that holds hours of a comic being a comic, talking, riffing, half-forming bits and abandoning them, in which an actual finished joke surfaces only occasionally, like a fish, and is not even the point. It is comedy reduced to its medium and its personality, with the manufactured product almost entirely removed—and audiences love

it, which tells us something we will come back to about what they were ever really buying.

Underneath the album sits the set, and here the musical metaphor stops being decoration and starts being useful. A set is a performance: a single continuous run at an audience, with a beginning, a shape, and an end. It has the architecture of a musical set, and comics use the musical words without irony. There is an opener, a thing strong enough to earn the room's attention but not the best thing, held in reserve. There is a build. There is a closer, the strongest piece, saved for last the way a band saves the song everyone came for. There is rhythm, and tempo, and the thing comics call the act-out—the sudden shift into voice and body, the played character, which functions exactly as a drum fill functions, a burst of a different texture that punctuates and propels. A set, like a set of songs, is paced. It breathes. It is not a list.

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Before we go down into the set, two distinctions that comics themselves draw, and that an outsider mangles if he is not careful.

The first is between the comic and the comedian. The old vaudeville formula, usually handed to Ed Wynn,

runs: a comic says funny things; a comedian says things funny. It is a real distinction and not a snobbish one. The comic is the writer, the architect, the person whose authority lives in the construction of the joke itself—the engineering of setup and turn. The comedian is the performer, the persona, the presence; the authority lives in the saying, in the face and the timing and the established character, such that the same words that would die on the page detonate in the mouth. Most great ones are both, but the proportions differ, and a comic can tell when another comic is leaning on the writing and when on the self.

The second distinction is not between two things but inside a single word, and it is the most important word in the whole vocabulary. The word is *funny*. In ordinary speech it is a throwaway, a mild and slightly tired compliment. Among comics it is none of those things. When a comic says of another comic, flatly, *he's funny*, that is grave praise, close to the highest available, and it is meant with the seriousness of a structural engineer certifying a bridge. It is assessable. It is a standing, almost a moral one, conferred and withheld with care. There is a quiet paradox folded into this, which we will not try to resolve here: comics treat funniness as a real property, rankable, possessed in degrees, knowable by

the trained eye—and yet there exists no instrument to measure it, no unit, nothing but the laugh of a particular room on a particular night, which is a notoriously unfaithful witness. The craft proceeds as if funny were a fact about a person. It may be wiser than the doubt that says it is only ever a fact about a room.

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Now down into the set. A set, it turns out, is defined entirely by its edges and almost not at all by what fills it, and the proof is a man named Mitch Hedberg.

The intuitive picture says a set contains routines, and a routine contains bits, and a bit contains jokes, a tidy descending tree in which every level is populated. Hedberg demolishes the tree. His set was a flat sequence of one-liners, each its own small complete thing, with no narrative spanning them, no bits assembling them, no routine organizing them into movements. Just jokes, laid end to end, like stones. And it was unimpeachably a set. From which we learn the governing fact about the whole interior architecture: everything below the set is optional. The layers are zero-or-more. A set may have routines or have none. A routine may carry bits or carry none. The middle of the structure is scaffolding, and the scaffolding can be struck entirely, and what remains—a

boundary with jokes inside it—is still a set. What makes it a set is that it is bounded as a performance, exactly as what makes an album an album is that it is bounded as a release. The unit is the edge, not the furniture.

When the furniture is present, it goes like this. A routine is a stretch of set organized around a single sustained subject or narrative—a through-line, a story or a territory the comic works for a while before moving on. A bit is smaller and more local: a single comic premise developed, which is to say tissue interleaved with jokes. And here are the last two terms we owe. *Material* is the general name for content—the stuff a joke is about, the situation it draws on. *Tissue* is the connective speech between the jokes, the narration and the patter and the framing that carries the audience from one detonation to the next without itself detonating. The podcast, recall, is almost all tissue. A tight bit is tissue stretched thin between dense charges. A routine is a longer architecture of both. None of it is required, and that is the point. It is all optional weather around the one thing that is not optional, which is where we go next.

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The joke is a setup, then a punchline, then zero or more tags. And of those, exactly one is obligatory.

The setup can be almost anything in size. It can be a single clause, a half-second of context. It can also swell until it is nearly a routine in its own right, a small architecture with its own internal scenes and even its own minor jokes along the way, provided it still reads as a windup—the moment it stops feeling like preparation and starts feeling like the thing itself, it has quietly become a story and is no longer a setup. The tags, we will treat in a moment. Strip both away and a joke can still stand. Strip the punchline and there is no joke at all—not a reduced joke, not a joke missing a part, but simply not a joke. The punchline is the atom. It is the single mandatory production in the entire grammar, the floor the whole apparatus is built to deliver you to. Album, special, set, routine, bit, story, tissue, setup, tag: all of it optional, all of it strippable, and at the bottom, indivisible, the punchline.

Which produces a beautiful limit case, though the name wants care, because it is easy to abuse. Call it the *a priori joke*: the joke that needs no premises supplied to it from the world, that leans on no experience, that arrives self-complete and could in principle be grasped in advance of any particular occasion. What makes it a limit is not that it is short, and not that it is only a punchline—length is beside the point, and a thing can have this

character with no punchline at all. What makes it a limit is its independence from supplied material.

But here the joke betrays something about its own nature, for there is one thing the a priori joke can never be, and that is *analytic*. An analytic statement keeps its predicate folded inside its subject—a triangle has three sides—and discloses nothing that was not already given, and no one in the history of the world has laughed at a tautology. The laugh demands that something be added, that the turn deliver what the terms did not already contain. So a joke must be *synthetic*; syntheticity is very nearly the definition of the thing. A joke can lean toward the analytic, and we will shortly meet one that leans nearly the whole way, but it can never arrive, because arrival is silence. And the proof of all this is the strangest and most persuasive proof in the field: someone laughs. The laugh is brute evidence that a synthesis has occurred, that the conclusion was not folded into the premises beforehand—for had it been, the face would have stayed still.

Which sets the joke down in the most difficult room Kant built, the one he reserved for mathematics. If a joke must be synthetic to be funny, and the a priori joke owes nothing to experience, then what we are really naming is the *synthetic a priori joke*: the thing that adds

something genuinely new and yet draws on no world, that is complete in itself and still lands as a surprise. How a judgment can be both at once was the hardest question he asked, and the joke answers it without argument, merely by being told and getting its laugh. The self-completeness is the a priori. The laugh is the certificate of the synthesis.

Most jokes that look a priori are not, quite, and the gap is instructive. Take Hedberg's most famous: *I used to do drugs. I still do, but I used to, too.* This is not a priori, because it does rest on material—his drug use. But notice how nearly nothing that material is. It is the most generic content a comic could possibly reach for, the null value of comic subject matter, a placeholder so inert it does no work of meaning at all. The actual machine of the joke is grammatical. It runs on the tense logic of *used to*, on the way that phrase implies a thing has stopped, and then keeps the implication alive while cancelling its content, so that *I still do but I used to too* comes out simultaneously true and self-erasing. It is a joke about the past tense. The drugs are not its subject; they are merely the surface the grammar needs to stand on. We can give that surface a name. Call it the *peg*: the minimal scrap of material a formal joke has to hang itself on in order to be sayable at all, chosen precisely because it

is interchangeable and weightless, contributing nothing but a place to attach. Hedberg's drugs are a peg. The joke is otherwise pure form, almost analytic—kin to *a bachelor is an unmarried man*, true by the structure of the words rather than by any fact in the world.

So material is not a single thing but a gradient. At one end it is rich and irreplaceable, content the joke could not survive losing. At the other end it thins to the peg, the last vestige of content before content vanishes. And just past the peg you fall off the edge of material entirely, into the a priori joke, which has dispensed even with the place to stand.

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After the punchline, the tag. A tag is a second strike on the same nerve, thrown while the first laugh is still in the air—a further line that needs no fresh setup because it lives off the structure the punchline just built. The economy of the tag is severe and is the whole of its art: maximum collapse for minimum input. A good tag is shorter than the line it follows and gets a bigger laugh, because it is spending capital the punchline already deposited.

The fighter's vocabulary fits it better than any other, and comics reach for it on their own. The punchline

is the cross, the committed blow the whole setup was loading. The tag is the hook that lands right after, before the guard comes back up, while the opponent is still reacting to the cross. Tag upon tag upon tag is a combination—a flurry off a single opening, each landing because the last one did. And there is a clinch version, what we might call the grapple: the comic who stays in close on one premise, refusing to let the audience reset, working tag after tag off the same idea, denying the room the breath it needs to recover its composure, until they are laughing as much from the relentlessness as from any single line.

The cleanest specimen I know comes not from a comic at all but from Geoffrey Hinton, telling, in an interview, the story of the night he won the Nobel Prize in physics. The setup is long and is itself nearly a routine: the call in the middle of the night, the Swedish number, and then, instead of joy, three days of probability estimates about whether the thing was real. He reasons it out. There is no Nobel for computer science, so what are the odds a psychologist wins the physics one—one in two million. And what are the odds that, if he were dreaming, he would dream exactly this—high, because who doesn't dream of the Nobel, it is the flying dream of the ambitious. The worksheet returns its verdict: he

is almost certainly asleep. The punchline lands there—that if it were all a dream, at least he would wake to find the nightmare of Donald Trump's presidency was not real either. The audience laughs. And then the interviewer throws the tag. One word does it: *unfortunately, you did win.* The straight man, the reality principle, puncturing the comedian's elaborate architecture with a single deadpan adverb that re-confirms the whole bad world in four syllables. Setup, punchline, tag. The tag is a fraction of the size of the setup and it is the biggest laugh in the bit. That is the form working exactly as designed.

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There remains a family of devices that do not fit the containment tree at all, because they are not about holding—they are about reaching. A callback is a reference: an element late in a set that points back at an element earlier in it, and lands because the audience remembers, so that the pleasure is the pleasure of a closed loop, a circuit completed. The callback is not a container and is not contained. It is a property an element can carry: the property of pointing backward to something already laughed at.

And the callback has two boundaries, and crossing either one renames it. The first boundary is scope. A callback ordinarily lives inside its set; it reaches back across minutes, not across years. Let it reach further—across sets, across the whole body of work, so that it lands on an audience because they know the comic, not because they were present earlier tonight—and it has become a catchphrase, the signature phrase a comedian carries from room to room, a callback whose target is the persona itself. The second boundary is size. You can call back a joke; you can call back a bit. But a thing as large as a whole routine cannot be called back, because to invoke something that big is no longer a wink—there is too much of it to glance at in passing. It stops being a callback and becomes a theme: structural, load-bearing in the architecture rather than darting and referential. Recall a whole routine and you have not winked at it; you have merged with it, made it part of the spine of the set. So the callback is the unit, hemmed by two edges—too far in scope and it is a catchphrase, too large in size and it is a theme—and within those edges it does its quick backward-pointing work.

This is the device the architected hour is built on. The comics of the engineered set—Birbiglia, Mulaney, Burnham among them—construct an hour in which the early

jokes are seeds, planted to be called back at the close, so that the final minutes detonate everything laid down in the first, and the whole set resolves like a single enormous joke whose punchline is the recollection of its own beginning. Pushed that far, the callback approaches the theme; the hour becomes one structure rather than a sequence of them. It is the most satisfying shape in comedy and the hardest to build, because it requires the comic to know the ending while writing the beginning, which is to say it requires the whole thing to have been a design and not a discovery.

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We have been describing a machine that climbs. Setup gathers, punchline turns, tag rides the turn, callback closes the loop—every part of it bent toward a payoff, a discrete event of release that the whole structure exists to deliver. We called the punchline the irreducible atom, the one thing a joke cannot do without. That was honest about one tradition. We must now qualify it, because there is a tradition built precisely on the atom's absence.

The Russian joke—the anekdot, to transliterate it—frequently has no punchline in the Western sense at all. The climb is declined. There is no turn, or the turn is flattened so far that it passes unnoticed, and yet

the comic charge, which is unmistakably present, lives somewhere other than in a structural release. It lives in the pragmatics: in the relation between the listener and the joke rather than inside the joke. To understand an anekdot is to belong; the thing sorts its audience by comprehension, and getting it is a kind of membership, a password recognized. And the form will often lean, on purpose, on the listener's failure to understand—incomprehension designed in, not a fault of the telling. The bafflement is part of the effect. You are meant, a little, to be left standing outside it, and the standing-outside is itself the joke, or half of it. This is the same engine we meet again in the prayer specimen below, whose punchline is completed not by the comic but by the room, and whose cousins are all the jokes whose payload is the audience's response rather than any internal device. The pragmatic joke is not a Russian curiosity. It is a whole continent.

What this produces is not a punctual joke but an ambient one—the funny spread across the duration of the telling, a weather rather than a lightning strike, a sustained sense that something hilarious is underway which you cannot quite locate and could not extract and quote. There is no line to repeat. There is only the having-been-there.

The strain surfaces in American mouths as well, though I would not file it under American comedy in the mainline sense; it is the Russian temperament speaking English. Its great practitioner was Norm Macdonald, whose long stories resolved into nothing, or into a deflation so total that the ending failed to register as an ending at all, leaving the listener to ask, after the fact, why the thing had been told—and half of why it was funny was precisely that you could not fully say. The monument is the so-called Moth Joke, a shaggy interminable thing whose payoff is a non-payoff, hilarious in a way that survives no transcription. The mechanism is pure comedian and almost no comic. The authority is entirely in the telling, in Macdonald delivering the whole of it as though it were the funniest thing he had ever heard, laughing along, certain—and that certainty, the ambient delight of the teller, is the actual signal, doing the office a punchline does in a built joke. He says things funny in the exact sense of the old formula, leaning the structure on the persona because there is no structural payoff left to lean on. Strip the comedian away and nothing remains; there was never a comic's machine underneath. Which gives us the clean limit case from the far side of the peg: where the a priori joke

is all atom and no material, the ambient joke is all telling and no atom.

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Three specimens, to point at the parts in living tissue. They are jokes I was handed and then took apart, and taking them apart did not, I think, kill them.

The first:

> So there's two Jews up in heaven—or wherever it is Jews go when they die, I don't actually know if it's the same heaven as everybody else or if they've got their own one, I'm not a theologian, I'm sorry—but wherever it is they go, they're up there, the both of them, and they're up there because they died in the Holocaust. And they're just relaxing, telling each other funny stories about it, eating grapes, drinking wine, doing whatever it is you do up there, I don't think they've got virgins or anything but honestly I don't know, it's none of my business. And one of them goes, hey, David, remember when you were going into the gas chamber, and you slipped, right there on the way in, went down and hit your head and died before you

even made it inside? And the two of them are just losing it, laughing, slapping their knees. And God walks by and says, that's not funny. And one of them puts his arm around God and goes: I don't know, maybe you had to be there.

This is a long narrative setup, a scene fully furnished, and furnished in particular with its own small jokes—the theological shrugging, the uncertainty about the grapes—the minor jokes we said a setup can carry as it swells toward a routine, each a little release laid in to keep the windup alive before the real one comes. And then it resolves into a single punchline, no tags, the purity of that one line being the whole effect. The mechanism is that the most ordinary sentence in the language, the thing anyone says in defense of a joke that didn't land, gets dropped onto the one listener who by definition could not have been there, who was absent, who was nowhere to be found in the place in question—so that the entire weight of the problem of a silent God collapses into a shrug about comic timing. And note the structural license: the joke is survivable, is even tender, because the ones telling it are the dead, and the butt is God. The victims hold the material; the authority is the target. Change who is laughing and the joke becomes

unspeakable. Left as built, it is one of the kindest cruel things I have heard.

The second is a joke whose construction and whose content are the same event:

> Can someone please—I don't care who, Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, the Pope, Jesus, Elon Musk, whoever's running this simulation, whoever has the nukes, whoever is in charge of all of this—can someone please, and I know you can do this, I know you can, so don't be a coward, just do it, I know you can do it, so please, please, please, please: make me gay.
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> And if you can't do that—if that's too big an ask, though I know it isn't, I know you can do it, so really, just do it—but if you genuinely, truly can't, then please, at least, can you just make women funny.

It lands the first time on *make me gay*; the room laughs; it appears to be over. But that was a decoy. The continuation is the real punchline, and it works by demoting the apparently enormous first request to the lesser tier, ranking the rewiring of a man's own desire as the achievable miracle and the other thing as the impossible

one. Told live to a mixed room, it does something a joke on a page cannot: it sorts the audience. The men choke; the women go cold; the single performance returns two opposite readings at once, split clean down the middle, and that split is the actual punchline, completed not by the comic but by the room. As to its premise—that women are not funny—the honest structural note is that the premise is an engine and not a thesis. The joke runs on a stereotype that is culturally live, the way a struck bell rings only if the bell is there; you could not build the mirror joke about men, not because of any fact about men but because the answering prior does not exist to be struck. It is transgression doing the work, the violation of the sayable, not the truth of the claim. A great many of the best jokes are exactly this, and would be worse, not better, if their premises were facts, because then they would be observations, and an observation is not a joke.

The third is Galifianakis's, and it is the inverse of the peg. Where Hedberg hangs a whole joke on the thinnest possible scrap of material, this one buries its joke under the most elaborate material imaginable:

> The other day I was at dinner with some friends, and there was this guy there—my

friend's husband, I don't even really know who he was, I'd never met him before—and he said something, and I really don't want to repeat it, I don't even want to say it, it was just about the most terrible thing I'd ever heard. We were talking, and he was talking about this Middle Eastern fellow, and he called him—and again, I really don't even want to say this—he called him a "sand nigger." And I was so shaken. I had never heard anyone say a thing like that in my life, and I couldn't understand why anyone would ever say it. And it stuck with me.

And then the next day I was in the shower, and you know how it is in the shower, you have all these thoughts, and I started thinking: is there any situation, any situation at all, where I could ever say a thing like that? And I thought about it, and I thought about it. And then I thought, well—what if I had this beautiful beachfront property, and I'm out there one day, sitting on the beach, drinking a piña colada. And I've got this neighbor, an African American gentleman, and he's walking down the shoreline with his

dog, then maybe I would shout something like: "Hey, get off my sand, nigger, this is my beach!"

The punchline mechanism is purely orthographic. The whole joke turns on a comma. He has spliced the compound slur in two, set a comma between *sand* and the word, so that what would be a single ugly term becomes instead an innocent noun followed by a vocative—*get off my sand*, then a name. That is the escape hatch the obsessional mind in the shower has spent all this architecture building. And the joke knows the hatch fails: break the compound with the comma and you lose the pun that was its only cover, and what is left is a man on a beach addressing his neighbor with the bare word, which is worse, not better, than where he started. He has out-clevered himself into the plain offense and does not notice. Because the joke was never about race or the neighbor at all. It is a self-portrait—of a particular obsessional mind, so disturbed by a word that it cannot let the word pass, that it must build a whole licensed world in which the word becomes sayable. And the world it builds, if you follow it down, is a small sad utopia: rich, sunlit, a good friend close enough to rib, a life of ease the man plainly does not have. The slur was the pretext. The wish underneath it

was for the piña colada and the friend. Setup swollen to a mini-routine, a single orthographic punchline, no tags, and at the floor of it a loneliness the teller never meant to show us.

That is a great deal of joke, and the man who wrote it retired it—because audiences began to hear only the surface and stopped following it down, which is its own quiet tragedy, the joke about a man too fastidious to say the word killed off by a room unwilling to extend him the three minutes of trust the descent requires.

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