

Introduction

The crush of thoughts that do not get out, because they all push forward and get wedged in the door.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein (1979: 3)



IN WHAT IS PERHAPS THE MOST celebrated sketch of all time, a peeved customer (John Cleese) returns a faulty product to a local shop, seeking recompense for the item that he bought just half an hour before. The item in question is a parrot, and the fault in question is that it is dead. Stone dead. Expired. Passed on. It is an ex-parrot. All of which the shopkeeper (Michael Palin) casually refutes. The show is, of course, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (BBC, 1969–1974, S1:E8). John Cleese has recounted the genesis of the Dead Parrot sketch:

Michael [Palin] started to tell me about taking his car in to his local garage. He would ring the guy there and say, “I’m having trouble with the clutch.” And this guy would say, “Lovely car, lovely car,” and Mike said, “Well yes, it is a lovely car, but I’m having trouble with the clutch.”

“Lovely car, lovely car, can’t beat it.”

“No, but we’re having trouble with it.”

“Well, look,” he says, “if you ever have any trouble with it, bring it in.”

And Michael would say, “Well, I *am* having trouble with it and I *have* brought it in.”

And he’d say, “Good, lovely car, lovely car, if you have trouble bring it in.”



Figure 0.1. The Customer (John Cleese) is always right, except when he's wrong. Michael Palin is the Shopkeeper (left). *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (BBC, 1969–74, S1:E8).

And Michael would say, “No, no, no, the clutch is sticking.”

And he would say, “Sign of a quality car, if you had a sticky clutch first two thousand miles, it's the sign of good quality.” He was one of those people you could never get to take a complaint seriously.

Michael and I chatted about this, and I then went off and wrote a sketch with Graham [Chapman] about a man returning a second-hand car . . . That was early '68, so when we started to write over a year later for *Python*, I remember we looked at the sketch again. Both Graham and I agreed the car was much too hackneyed, and within a moment we were in a pet shop and we said, “Which is funnier, could it be a dog or a parrot?” We argued the toss—well, not argued, chewed that around a bit—and decided it was the parrot. (Chapman et al., 2003: 146)

If you put your mind to it, and it's quite a fun game, you can think of a dozen half-decent variants on this basic scenario. A rubber hammer being returned to a hardware store. A real hammer being returned to a

joke shop. Two hats being returned to a shoe shop. A warhead returned by a minor-league dictator to his local munitions shop. So, why the pet shop, and why the parrot? Most obviously, perhaps, second-hand car salesmen have a (no doubt unfair) reputation for exploiting customers, whereas we might assume (perhaps also unfairly) the typical keeper of a pet shop to be an honest, congenial type. A pet shop is also more likely a neighborhood store than an impersonal chain or out-of-town locality where full-throated complaint would be easier to muster. Moreover, a pet shop is a peculiar type of shop since the “products” are (ideally) alive at the point of purchase and are expected to stay alive long enough to become companions. For reasons of sympathetic attachment, the exchange of an unwanted pet is not like the exchange of a faulty machine. These factors, along with no doubt several more, add richness and spice to the recipe of the brushed-off complaint.

Why, then, a parrot? Why not a dog—or, for that matter, a fish or a lizard? A dead dog, perhaps being dragged back into the pet shop on a lead, would doubtless create a grotesque quality. The mixture of disgust and sympathy, perhaps even distress, inspired by that image would threaten to overwhelm the premise. A dead fish, on the other hand, even an elaborate tropical fish, is not enough of a big deal, perhaps because pet fish are expected to be primarily decorative rather than companionate. Parrots, to split the difference, have lovely plumage, but they can also interact with you—which makes them companionate and decorative in roughly equal measure, or perhaps slightly more companionate than decorative. They can talk, after a fashion. In other words, they are not so companionate that the death of an unknown parrot could be felt tragic, but also not so simply decorative as to make it an impersonal matter of return-and-replace. There is also the matter of movement, which pertains to credibility. It’s somewhat too credible, given the metabolism of the cold-blooded, that a dead lizard could be mistaken for a live lizard, even credible that the issue might, for a moment or two, be genuinely debatable. The same could not be said of a dead dog; we could scarcely believe Fido’s new owner to have been so hoodwinked. A belly-up fish, on the other hand, for the uninitiated, might just about be mistaken for a live fish with the charming habit of swimming at the surface, upside-down. In terms of whether a customer could conceivably have gone through with the purchase and taken a full half hour to come back, it’s got about the same degree of credibility as a nailed-to-the-perch parrot. That is, it’s *barely* credible, but capable of being entertained—which is all that (and no more than) we need.

There is also the matter of the *sound* of the word “parrot.” When John Cleese utters the phrase “Now that’s what *I* call a dead parrot,”

having demonstrated his point by yelling at it, bashing it on the counter, and throwing it on the floor, he is able to slightly trill the “r,” which draws out the character’s haughtiness. “Dead dog” wouldn’t allow this. There is also the rhythmic advantage of “parrot,” with its equally stressed pair of syllables, over multisyllabic pets like “guinea pig” or “tarantula.” The phrase “Now that’s what *I* call a dead parrot,” as delivered by Cleese, has an end-of-chorus feel. It caps his brutal demonstration with the cadence of a music-hall ditty.

As the above remarks hopefully start to suggest, playing the hypothetical alternative game is one of the best ways to start analyzing instances of humor. It is also one of the more productive methods of aesthetic analysis in general. If you want to understand why something is funny—or, more generally in art, why something is *right*—the surest way to edge towards it, once you’ve found an instance that *feels* right, is to imagine how the thing might have been done slightly differently. The issue of moving parts invariably arises, since, in reality, if an artist changes one thing in the design, consequences follow, such that other things would probably have to be changed too. However, trying to trace the chain of these consequences can also be instructive. In fact, precisely because it mirrors the creative process, there is no more direct route into the artistic (in this case, comedic) imagination. Think of Cleese’s reference to “chewing it around.” As the next chapter will argue, however, this approach runs counter to that typically suggested by comic theory, which historically has tended to see humor in terms of a single psychological trigger point, or dualistic binary clash, rather than as the combination of countless things in concert.

Against the view that humor has an essence, it is the argument of this book that humor is irreducibly compound, and our historical failure to see it as such means that, for all these years, we have barely started to understand what makes something funny. E. B. White and Katharine S. White, in an oft-recited statement, declared that “humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the purely scientific mind” (1941: xvii). This aphorism is often taken to cast doubt on the very possibility of analyzing humor. What it suggests to me, however, is that we need to abandon the idea of dissection altogether and engage in more careful field observation, to study how comedy behaves “in the wild.” If analysis kills humor, then, to my mind, it suggests a faulty approach that fails to pay due heed to its object. Rather than considering the way multiple elements are variously selected and combined, the standard practice has been to theorize the essence of humor and then to ransack actual instances of humor for confirmation of the theory. This is a case of flogging a dead parrot.

Indeed, it is the very *density* of comedy that rewards being “chewed around.” Here is another example from the same *Monty Python* sketch, a line delivered by John Cleese’s now thoroughly exasperated customer in response to the shopkeeper’s insistence that the parrot is either “resting” or “stunned”:

CUSTOMER: Look my lad, I’ve ’ad just about enough of this. That parrot is definitely deceased, and when I bought it not ’alf an hour ago, you assured me that its lack of movement was due to it bein’ tired and shagged out after a long squawk.

There are important elements of performance that contribute to the humor here, including the curious accent Cleese adopts for his character, who sounds like a Cockney inexplicably putting on a posh voice, reminiscent perhaps of the la-di-da tea lady (Joyce Carey) in *Brief Encounter* (1945). The oddness of it is especially strong at this point, since the line combines starchy language (e.g., “you assured me,” “due to it”) with telltale colloquialisms and the habitual dropped “h.” There is also the man’s strange costume, an unencumbered medium closeup view of which is for the first time available as he delivers the line. It consists of a grey translucent Macintosh coat buttoned up to the neck, complementing his obsessively combed, side-parted hair to complete the appearance of a



Figure 0.2. “It’s a stiff!” John Cleese, *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* (BBC, 1969–1974, S1:E8).

fastidiously neat fellow on the verge of mania. There is also an important rhythmic component to the way the line has been crafted, with self-conscious literariness, and in the way it is delivered, culminating after all with the blunt and onomatopoeic word “squawk.” But I want to call special attention to the density of suggestion in a couple of phraseology choices in the line I’ve just quoted.

What does it mean to say that a parrot is “deceased,” for instance? One of the sketch’s side ventures is to give Cleese more than a dozen elaborate ways of saying that the parrot is dead:

CUSTOMER: It’s bleedin’ demised . . . It’s passed on. This parrot is no more. It has ceased to be. It’s expired and gone to meet its maker. This is a late parrot. It’s a stiff! Bereft of life, it rests in peace. If you hadn’t nailed it to the perch, it would have been pushin’ up the daisies. It’s run down the curtain and joined the choir invisible. THIS IS AN EX-PARROT!

Why is this done? There’s an idea here about the redundancy of literary expression, a needless array of separate phrases for the same blasted thing—death! Each of these euphemisms, standing together in a kind of circle, faces inward toward the empty center to which they all, somewhat hopelessly, point. But there’s also a contradictory suggestion that every word means something different—we might even say that there is no such thing as a synonym. It’s not the same thing at all; hence it is funny to put them in the same sentence, to say that a parrot has “expired” and that it has “gone to meet its maker.” The former typically refers to the perishing of food and other consumables, where the latter invokes ideas of divinity and the afterlife. The idea that a parrot is like a tin of beans is as absurd, in a different direction, as saying that a parrot will be received at the pearly gates. The word “deceased,” to return to our earlier quoted line, contains a faint idea of the worthiness of an individual life, a sense that is manifestly not available in “bleedin’ demised” or “pushin’ up the daisies.” The token respectfulness in “deceased,” with its odor of the funeral parlor, is then immediately set at odds with reference to the transaction (“when I bought it not ’alf an hour ago”) that casts the dearly departed as nothing more than a commodified beast. The incompatibility of commemoration and commerce is brought into play here. Then there is the phrase “shagged out,” another beleaguered synonym, the redundancy of which is even more marked since it is structured as an addition (“tired *and* shagged out”). Notionally, “shagged out” is simply another way of saying “tired,” its literal sense of sexual exhaustion having, at some historical point, moved to the background.

Perhaps the customer is directly quoting the shopkeeper's earlier excuse for the bird's lack of movement, an explanation improvised on the spot where the extraneous use of colloquialism might rhetorically have served to indicate that avian languor is quite normal (a joke in itself, since birds tend not to be languorous at all). With this attribution ("shagged out"), we are once again in the realm of anthropomorphism. The English tend to speak of human beings, not animals, as "shagged out," normally in the first person, most usually with reference to a hard day's graft rather than in the literal sense of sexual fatigue. The ideas commingle. The phrase "shagged out after a long squawk" combines the notion that a long squawk would be the parrot equivalent of a long day in the office with the equally pungent suggestion of the squawk as a mating cry, even as an orgasmic outburst, an ejaculation so violent it has laid the old bird cold—postcoitus as *rigor mortis*, a "stiff."

All of this is meant to do no more than to inaugurate the project of this book and what it wants to inspire in its readers: the inclination to pay due heed to the laughable, the faith that multitudes are contained within a comic nutshell. It should hopefully by now be obvious why sketch comedy is the ideal test case for this project. The compacting of ideas that I take to be a feature of all humor is most especially pronounced, even more compacted than usual, in this short- or micro-form genre. The term "sketch" could, for some, I suppose, suggest something dashed off in distinction to (or in preparation for) more substantial work. But, to my mind, the term "sketch" stands more positively for an intense economy of ideas borne from something ostensibly casual: the capacity to conjure a whole philosophy, no less, from a few choice lines and gestures.