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<CT>When Is a Joke not a Joke? Reading (and Re-reading) Stewart Lee's 'Rap Singers'

<AU>Emma Bennett

<H1>'The Rap Singers' as Process

<NP>'The Rap Singers' is a joke. It featured in the first-ever episode of comedian Stewart Lee's BBC2 series *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle*, in which Lee performs stand-up routines onstage, in front of an audience. Ever since 'The Rap Singers' was first broadcast, in March 2009, I have watched this four-minute segment repeatedly, both on DVD and on YouTube. I have transcribed Lee's rambling, repetitive, wilfully inarticulate words, and then read this text over and over again. I have corrected, tweaked and quibbled over the details – for academic purposes and also, increasingly, for my own fixated pleasure. I have spoken about the joke at conferences. I have quoted, paraphrased and described it. I have gone over it in pubs, discussed it in lecture halls and recited it in my bedroom. And now I will attempt to do it again, now, in this writing.

<TEXT>Jokes and repetition go together. In its simplest form, the joke deploys a formula that can be re-used, over and over again, such as 'knock-knock; who's there?'. And, just as children insist 'again, again', as adults we are often drawn compulsively to repeat the utterances we find funny. Our relationships are often enacted playfully through the 'running joke' or the 'in-joke'. I am put in mind here of how my friend's mother, of diminutive stature, cannot but answer the phrase 'see you shortly' with a cry of 'don't call me shortly'. Jokes do not always rely on surprise; it is the very predictability of this utterance that makes it laughable.

In this chapter, I will reflect on the silly irresistibility of comic repetition. I am interested in where this might happen to coincide with what we might think of as the more 'serious' qualities of academic study: attentiveness, meticulousness, rigour. If, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, 'obsession is the most durable form of intellectual capital' (2003: 2), then the compulsive return to an object of study is the mode by which it operates. What we might call a 'close reading', in practice, is achieved via *repeated* acts of reading, returning again and again to the text. After Sedgwick, we might think of this kind of reading as driven by, and generative of, a certain emotional closeness, one that can be risky, as in 'too close for comfort'. In this chapter, I am interested in how the repeated, compulsive re-reading of a text might begin to undo the reader's ability to 'see' what is before her, at least in a clear or singular outline. And, I am interested in the way that, unexpectedly, Stewart Lee's stand-up comedy offers occasions for reflecting upon the dangers – and pleasures – of reading closely and reading repeatedly.

According to Oliver Double's definition of the art form, stand-up comedy 'happens in the present tense, in the here and now' and depends on the idea that the comedian is responding to the audience in real time, 'with energy flowing back and forth between stage and auditorium' (2014: 19). In light of this, we might ask: should stand-up comedy even *be* read, let alone read closely, carefully or repeatedly (as a literary or theoretical text asks to be)? It is widely accepted that the liveness of stand-up performance is key to its meaning and value. At the very least, this places a certain amount of pressure on the would-be theorist of comedy to capture a sense of a joke's performance on the page. I use the word 'now' as if this writing were taking place in the present tense, in one go. But, in fact, I have written this chapter many times over. I have drafted and redrafted, copied and pasted, edited and rephrased. Many acts of writing have gone into the text you are now reading. The task of accounting for 'how a joke works', if that is

indeed my job here, is by no means straightforward. The more I watch it, read it and think about it, the more ways to watch it, read about and think about it emerge. 'The Rap Singers' is in no way a stable object, and the pressure it exerts on any attempt to produce a 'definitive reading' is itself a kind of comic subversion. Indeed, as this chapter will demonstrate, the repetitive return of my too-close reading has produced its own kind of comedy. The difficulty of writing about 'The Rap Singers' is not so much that it resists explanation, but that it invites it. And invites it and invites it and invites it.

Stewart Lee himself has responded to this invitation, explaining the workings of his comedy in his 2010 autobiography *How I Escaped My Certain Fate*, which included extensively footnoted transcripts of three of his routines. However, as we shall see, when it comes to conducting a scholarly reading of 'The Rap Singers', Lee's explanatory writing does not necessarily help. More immediately, it raises the question of how I should to refer to him here: 'Lee' the author, or 'Stew' the stage persona? The divisions are by no means clear-cut; I have often found myself writing 'Lee' one moment, 'Stew' the next and at other times 'Stewart Lee'. Finding these inconsistencies somehow useful as a marker of my shifting engagement with 'The Rap Singers', I have allowed them to remain.

The words Stewart Lee speaks in his televised routines will be cited here at length, some passages repeatedly, to reflect my restless return to the text, and its performance. I will refer to the delivery of these words in the present tense: Stewart Lee is on television, on a stage, in an intimate, well-lit venue. This is how 'The Rap Singers' begins: he is holding a book, showing it to the audience and to us at home. He tells us that this book is an autobiography of someone called Asher D from So Solid Crew and, in case anyone watching remains nonplussed, adds:

> *And he's one of these er… these rappers they have now, the rap singers. I don't know if you've seen them…*

<NP>Of course, Stew's onstage presence – the way he speaks, his gestures, his appearance, his timing – is integral to 'The Rap Singers'. Part of my task, then is to 'restage' 'The Rap Singers', as if it were happening now, before your eyes. What can I tell you? That he speaks with an air of casual authority? Yes, he speaks as if he were referring to something that was both entirely self-evident and somehow a marker of specialist knowledge. He puts the book down, as if warming to his theme:

> *Yeah you've seen them about the rap singers. Yeah you've seen… you've seen the er… rap singers on the er on the 'Top of the Pops' they have them now don't they. They used to come on there didn't they the rappers the rap singers come on the Top of the Pops. You've seen them, on there, the er… a young woman singing and then er… one of the rappers would come on and er… he'd talk and er… do a little dance you've seen them the rap singers. On…*

<NP>Pause here. Lee's casually authoritative air seems to be deserting him. Or, no, his delivery is still casual, slow, nonchalant even. But his reference – his ability *to* refer – seems to be unravelling. His casual assertion seems to be demanding an inordinate amount of effort to substantiate. Resume play:

> *On the er… the Top of the Pops they have them and on the er… on a lot of the adverts now they might have a rap singer on one of the adverts might be er… a sausage or some wool or something and there'll be er... a rap about it, about how good the sausage*

is. You've seen them on the er… on the, on the Top of the Pops and on the adverts. You've seen the rap singers you've seen them. Yeah, you've seen them, you know what I'm talking about, the rap singers and… on the films they have them now, you might see a film in the pictures and er… James Bond or somebody might go in one of these nightclubs and there'll be a – er… a rapper in there… doing a rap.

<NP>Pause again. We are a minute-and-a-half in, and the joke is about to shift. Or, at least, my reading of it is. Let us pause to consider the joke as a text Reading it, you might have noticed that the continuation, perhaps even the escalation of this attempt to refer is accompanied by a contraction of vocabulary. Lee has mentioned rap, rappers or rap singers thirteen times so far, stating and restating his theme. Rap, rappers, rap singers doing a rap. And that phrase 'you've seen them', framing each sentence, and then repeated on its own is of the kind that might be called 'empty': it does not itself refer to anything. Its function could be thought of as primarily rhythmic: again and again 'you've seen them, yeah, you've seen them'. But, when spoken, is it not also a kind of interpellative chant? The 'you', or the 'we' who are addressed, Lee's audience, are put in our place, reminded that we are in no position to answer or interrupt, affirm or deny. The address is rhetorical; it neither requires nor makes space for a response. And so it goes on, and on. This is part of the joke. Lee, apparently undoubting of his authority to speak, continuing, unhurried and uninterrupted, proliferating referential aberrations that none of us can contradict or correct.

As Lee's audience, we may very well be asking ourselves at this point: where is this going? Stewart Lee's reputation is built on this kind of wilfully drawn out sequence in which he plays with the possibility of 'losing the room' (Lee 2010: 61). In spite of the acclaim with which this is met in some quarters, many are exasperated by what they perceive as Lee's 'longwinded, formless style'. The words are comedian Joe Daniels', writing for comedy website *Chortle*, where he responds to the 'oft-banded claim' that Lee is 'the future of comedy'. On the contrary, Daniels argues: 'This is comedy in a vacuum. It can go nowhere as it exists only to deconstruct itself'. He admits to finding Lee's 'self-referential shtick' amusing, but sees it as a 'deadpan dead end' in terms of stand-up as an art form (Daniels 2011).

Pushing aside the broader questions of stand-up's 'future', for now at least, could it not be argued, somewhat pedantically, that the 'dead end' is itself a powerful comic trope? Think of Immanuel Kant's famous analysis of jokes as 'a sudden evaporation of expectation to nothing' as cited by philosopher Simon Critchley in his 2002 study *On Humour* (2002: 7). The suddenness of the bathetic ending is also instrumental in Critchley's own, quite compelling 'phenomenology of time in a joke':

> <EXT>In being told a joke, we undergo a particular experience of duration through repetition and digression, of time literally being stretched out like an elastic band. We know the elastic will snap, we just do not know when, and we find the anticipation rather pleasurable. It snaps with the punchline, which is a sudden acceleration of time, where the digressive stretching of the joke suddenly contracts into a heightened experience of the instant. We laugh.</EXT>
> <SRC>(Critchley 2002: 7)</SRC>

<NP>So comedy itself may well 'go nowhere', but it is precisely this 'nothing' that can 'snap' with the force of impact. A 'dead end' can itself function as a sort of punch line, and time, it seems, can be attributed elastic properties. But can we go so far as to state, as Critchley does, that jokes can 'literally' stretch out time? This confusion of terms is telling, not to

mention comical. Indeed, perhaps what is at issue here is the relationship between time and literality, duration and speech. Consider it another way: how does 'comic timing' relate to the idea of 'a figure of speech'? Both are somewhat difficult to narrate from the outside, and liable to be ruined by logical explanation. Indeed, I would argue that in this way comedy and figural language are inescapably bound together; neither 'tells it straight'. Of course, that is commonly thought to be the task of the critic, the theorist. It might well be my task here. But as Stewart Lee repeatedly demonstrates, there might not actually be a way to 'tell it straight', to get out of the joke, just as there is no way to escape language in order to write about language, or step out of time to describe it. Take a sequence from a recent episode of *Comedy Vehicle* (series 3, episode 4, broadcast March 2014) in which, having reported a clever retort he gave in an exchange with bigoted taxi driver, he cuts in with:

> *But I didn't think of that at the time because I'm not … I'm not funny in real life.*
> *I thought of it when I got home and I wrote it on my desk and I learned it and then I've come and said it to you tonight and I'm … I've learnt this that I'm saying now and written that … and* this *now, I've written that and learnt that … and* this *just going* [inarticulate noise] *like that I've learned that and I've written that … and this now I've written this … and this now … and this now … and this …*

<NP>Lee's comedy could be thought of as an extended exploration of the 'particular experience of duration' Critchley is attempting to characterize, one that stretches the elastic band to its very limits. Or maybe he refutes the elasticity itself. He lets it go limp. Or somehow makes the snap, the 'heightened experience of the instant', go on for minutes on end. This metaphor is by now getting a little over-stretched, and this is not incidental to what I am trying to say: Lee's stand-up, and perhaps verbal comedy in general, might be all about the metaphors through which we narrate our experience: being 'in' them, stretching them beyond their limits, so that we can, momentarily, get 'out' of language.

<H1>'The Rap Singers' as Theory

<NP>I want to pause the joke for a few minutes now, and make the possibly unexpected move of turning to literary theorist Paul de Man. The latter became synonymous, in the 1970s and 1980s, with 'rhetorical deconstruction' – a method of reading that emphasized how the devices by which a text appears to create meaning can, equally and at the same time, obscure it. I think this could shed some light on Lee's reported habit of 'deconstructing comedy' (Daniels 2011). As Cathy Caruth acknowledges in her essay 'The Falling Body and the Impact of Reference' (1996), de Man and his fellow deconstructionists are often accused of wilful obscurantism, and worse: as she reports, the constant focus on the obstacles to meaning seems 'to amount to a claim that language cannot refer adequately to the world and indeed may not refer to anything at all, leaving language, literature and even consciousness in general, cut off from historical reality' (Caruth 1996: 74).

<TEXT>Caruth responds to the charges by arguing that de Man rigorously problematized rather than denied reference; his critical project sought to debunk the various theories of language and literature that modelled 'the principles of reference on those of natural law'. In doing so, his work seeks not to deny access to history, but to find a way of 'keeping history from being swallowed up by the power of abstraction' (Caruth 1996: 74). Crucially, Caruth asserts, such a complex and ambitious project can be read 'not only in de Man's statements about language' but 'most concretely' in the 'particular performance' of his texts.

The ‘theoretical knowledge’ of these texts has to do with the ‘resistance of language’, the concrete connotation of which they not only conceptualize, but enact. Most particularly, Caruth argues, this can be felt in de Man’s use of examples, which tend to go off in odd directions, fold in on themselves or seem to get stuck on images that are unhelpful or irrelevant to the topic at hand.

Most interestingly for the current discussion, Caruth argues that the original insight of de Man’s work is enacted through the ‘transformation of a specific example – the example of falling – and through the appearance of a specific figure – the figure of a body’ (Caruth 1996: 77). And de Man does seem to be preoccupied with the bodily figure, which recurs throughout his work, and is often instrumental in the peculiar subversion of his examples. I suspect that the confusion of that very phrase, ‘the figure of the body’, has something to do with this. Bodies are often referred to *as* ‘figures’, but in the context of theoretical discourse, ‘figure’ can also denote an illustration or diagram: an example. So an illustrative figure is supposed to make things clearer, but in certain instances that illustrative figure also happens to take the form of a body, one that is liable to trip, slip, or stumble, with all the comic ungainliness of a human body. In such cases, Caruth infers, the smooth clarity of theoretical discourse is itself likely to be compromised. What is interesting in the context of the current discussion is Caruth’s re-designation of reference as a kind of forceful ‘impact’. Rather than being about a straightforward connection between a word and ‘the external world’ object it represents, this referentiality is the concreteness that can, momentarily, be *felt* through and as a result of language. Specifically, for Caruth, this occurs when the language of theoretical abstraction is brought suddenly down to earth, with the force of a ‘very literally falling’ (Caruth 1996: 74).

Perhaps comedy and theory are not so different after all. Stewart Lee may be a self-theorizing comedian, but, according to Caruth, the theoretical enterprise itself is prone to a peculiar kind of comedy. That is, if one reads and writes theory in the meticulous, slightly maddening way Paul de Man suggests. What if we were to watch, and read ‘The Rap Singers’ again with this in mind, as if it were the work of a theoretician? The opener:

> *…these rappers they have now, the rap singers. I don’t know if you’ve seen them…Yeah you’ve seen ‘em about the rap singers…*

<NP>might come across not so much as an attempt to refer, casually, and comically, to a cultural phenomenon, but as the proposition of an abstract concept: ‘the rap singers’. And the ‘references’ – the *Top of the Pops*, the advert for sausages or wool, the nightclub in the James Bond film – are in fact examples given to support and illustrate the generalized concept (would it be called *rap singer-ness*?). This is not so much a joke as a definition, a paradigm: you ‘see’ examples of ‘the rap singers’ in any of these hypothetical instances. And it is by figuratively ‘seeing’ these textual images that you are to understand the concept. Perhaps this is why Lee is so insistent that ‘you’ve seen the rap singers. You’ve seen them. Yeah, you’ve seen them’. He is instructing, or impelling, his audience to *see*: to visualize, and by visualizing to understand.

According to de Man, the proper function of an example is ‘to inscribe the particular in the general’ (1984: 276): examples are supposed to ‘mean’ the generalization, and in turn, the generalization is embodied by the examples. But, identifying an inherent tension between the ‘abstract’ or theoretical discourse of generalization and the particularity of the example, he goes on to ask:

<EXT>Can any example ever truly fit a general proposition? Is not its particularity, to which it owes the illusion of its intelligibility, necessarily a betrayal of the general truth that it is supposed to support and convey?</EXT>
<SRC>(de Man 1984: 276)</SRC>

<NP>Arguably, this is a question of reading. Throughout his work, de Man insists on the material difficulty, as well as the material rewards, of reading as a temporal unfolding. Reading is subject to a certain human fallibility, one that scholars often loathe to admit:

<EXT>from the experience of reading abstract philosophical texts, we all know the relief one feels when the argument is interrupted by what we call a 'concrete' example. Yet at that very moment, when we think at last that we understand, we are further from comprehension than ever; all we have done is substitute idle talk for serious discourse.</EXT> <SRC>(de Man 1984: 276)</SRC>
<NP>At these moments, our 'perception of the particular' is liable to displace the general proposition within our minds. For de Man this is more than a simple case of a reader finding a little welcome distraction or entertainment before they get back to the serious business at hand; it is an unavoidable flaw, a break that has the power to fatally undermine the theoretical unity of any text.

<TEXT>If there is a flaw, a break in 'The Rap Singers', it occurs with the fourth example, which Lee introduces after 'the *Top of the Pops*' and 'the adverts' and 'the films'. After a short pause, he adds:

And erm – In the shopping centre you see them as well don't you the rappers on the err… they run along on the er… there's like a bannister – a handrail – along the… along the steps there, they run along the – along the handrail don't they and they get to the end they go 'oh' like that. By the er… er.. where the multi-story is – they run along the handrails don't they by the shop – by the er… where the multi-storey is, where the Corn Exchange is… You've seen them and they're on the, they're on the ramp aren't they on the disabled ramp. And they jump up off there onto er… it's like a little wall about that high… but it's not made out of err.. conc-… it'll be like logs that are sawn in half and put up. And they jump up on there – where there's flowers in – they jump up on there…

<NP>It is as if Stew (or the language itself) becomes stuck on the task of referring to various items of street furniture – the bannister or handrail, the 'little wall about that high', the disabled ramp 'where the wheelchairs go' – and thus our attention is diverted from the figure itself towards the fixtures and fittings of the figural space. In other words, the object of Lee's description is no longer that elusive 'rap-singer-ness', or the figures that personify it, but a series of items related to it by contiguity only. This shift, from the metaphorical to the metonymic, is subtle yet significant. For de Man, whereas metaphor is 'a paradigmatic structure based on substitution', metonymy is 'a syntagmatic structure based on contingent association' (1979: 15). Metaphor promotes the idea that any given example could be replaced with any other, and thus any one of these examples could stand as 'definitive', the totalized image of the text itself. If metaphorical structures lend themselves to textual closure – to finality, stability, a feeling of 'rightness' – metonymic structures make no such claim to transcendence. Metonymic relations are those of proximity, or habit. And so one thing can, and often does, lead to the next, and the next, and the next:

…by where the Corn Exchange is by ther er… by the multi-storey they run along – they run along the bannister by the er… the steps and they go like that and they jump down on the er… it's not just for wheelchairs – prams as well can go on it – and they jump up on the er… the little wall thing – and then they flip off there don't they and they run along the rappers to where there's er – you know where the – the shopping trolleys come out from Sainsburys and there's like a Perspex kind of cover over it …

<NP>In this way, what I have styled as the 'theoretical' project of 'The Rap Singers' runs into difficulty when the examples, especially this final example, overreach themselves with the force of their particularity. By this point, the effort involved in describing fixtures, such as those Perspex-clad shelters where they keep the trolleys, has overtaken the initial discursive task. It is as if making the rap singers appear, making us 'see' them in the context of this example, has taxed Stew more than he anticipated. Considered in these terms, 'The Rap Singers' could be thought to stage what de Man calls 'the self-consciousness of the representational mode within the hermeneutic context of a persuasion' (1984: 269).

<TEXT>Of course, 'The Rap Singers' is *not* theory, it is some comedy off the telly, and the idea that the famously inscrutable literary theory of de Man could be grafted onto it is itself a sort of joke. But, in all seriousness, I think 'The Rap Singers' can be thought of as a (knowing) demonstration of how the figural dimension language can undo the explicit claims of any text. And, in fact, this corresponds with de Man's understanding of *what literature is*: unlike theoretical texts, literary texts 'by no means take the legitimacy of their considerable illustrative powers for granted. Much rather […] they will take this problematisation for their main concern' (1984: 276). This is the basis of de Man's claim that, rather than being in need of deconstruction, literature is always already deconstructing itself. It is not so much that literature knows what it is doing; instead, it knows that it *cannot know* what its language is doing. This inner conflict becomes its theme, and on one level (the 'rhetorical' level at which de Man reads), this is also the story it tells. Thus (to end this paragraph with a very de Manian flourish), a text can always, at some level, be read as an allegory of its own impossible closure.

<H1>'The Rap Singers' as Allegory

<NP>Despite the ironic note of conclusiveness with which I managed to imbue the above paragraph, I find I am not quite willing to let it stand. Enjoyable and persuasive as it may be, a de Manian reading does not necessarily help us get out of the self-referential, tautological bind in which Lee's work is said to land stand-up comedy. Indeed, in many ways it compounds the problem. This is what can happen when you get involved with de Man: you risk getting stuck in a maddeningly pleasurable 'mise en abyme'. Alice Kaplan, a former student of his, likens this effect to 'a cocoa can with a girl on it holding a cocoa can'. The question is: 'where does it stop?' (Kaplan 1993: 150).

<TEXT>Where *does* it stop? Or, to put it another way, where does it leave us, with relation to the problems of reference, figuration and dead ends? If we read 'The Rap Singers' in de Manian terms, as an allegory of its deconstruction of the concept or category of 'rap singers', then where does that leave Asher D, the initial referent, who is, after all a real human being? Is the joke in any way 'about' him, or his peers? It is at this juncture that we see how the question of reference is, in all sorts of ways, an ethical one. It opens onto the troubling question of what, exactly, it is that Lee's audience are laughing at. What, or indeed *who*? Undoubtedly, part of what is funny about 'The Rap Singers' is the belittling way its figures are described – doing 'a little dance', or advertising quite silly-sounding things like 'sausages' and

'wool'. We might argue that it is the *language* itself that makes us laugh, but does comedy not also require bodies? Not only a body to deliver it, and bodies to laugh, but also bodies to laugh *at*? Is all this figural play merely a way for making us feel OK to laugh at Asher D, and by extension at rap culture and the hooded youths by the shopping centre?

Lee's onstage persona plays on the fact that he is a middle-class, white, Oxford-educated, London-dwelling and self-confessedly intellectual man. If humour, as is often thought, is a way of affirming social superiority, then his stand-up plays on both the guilt and pleasure associated with his position of privilege. As Daniels writes:

> <EXT>The enjoyment of Lee's act is conditional on the audience running with his muddied elitism, oscillating between various types of snobbery (he hates in equal measure: the media-saturated young, the politically incorrect elderly, the dunce half of the room that doesn't get it, and the boffin half that does).</EXT> <SRC>(2011)</SRC>

<NP>With this in mind, 'The Rap Singers' might start to sound like a description of the 'media-saturated young', narrated by 'politically incorrect elderly', and ultimately a mockery of both. And, if this double-pronged snobbery is indeed a facet of Lee's onstage persona, his 'act', and not necessarily to be taken seriously, then how might we locate Stewart Lee himself in all this? Perhaps we need to look beyond the stage work, to the self-contextualizing statements Lee offers in his 2010 book. In the opening pages, he explains how his attitude to stand-up was shaped by the so-called Alternative Comics of the 1980s, who defined themselves by their opposition to both the political and entertainment establishments:

> <EXT>Back then, under a shadow of an ideal of unattainable ideological purity, nobody, not bands or stand-up comedians … wanted to be seen to 'sell out to the Man' by doing an advert or appearing on *Top of the Pops* or achieving any level of commercial sustainability.</EXT>
> <SRC>(Lee 2010: 6)</SRC>

<NP>So those glibly generic reference points – 'the *Top of the Pops*', 'the adverts' – have a clear association for Lee. They are precisely the symbols of 'selling out to the Man'. Onstage, directly after 'The Rap Singers', Lee appears to clarify his position, this time in his own voice:

> *Cos it was different wasn't it when we were young the rap, the rap singing there was Public Enemy and Ice T and NWA and it was all social comment and political and about the police and all that.*

<NP>Remember, the impetus of this routine was not Asher D himself, but his book, a so-called 'celebrity hardback'. As Lee goes on to point out, this kind of book tends to prioritize glossy pictures over words. Later still in this episode, he will bemoan the fact that 'publishers sell hot titles at massive discounts to supermarkets driving independent publishers out of business'. This brings us right back to the shopping centre, and what Lee appears to be telling us that the supermarket is where all culture is, quite literally, liable to 'end up', somewhat hopelessly, 'by the Corn Exchange round the back of the multi-storey'.

<TEXT>It would seem that the shopping centre is somehow both literal and figurative 'end' of 'The Rap Singers'. And Lee's oddly evocative depiction of its space does, in a way, present a reassuringly solid world, a space outside language. On the other hand, who would

want to end up here? It is a dead-end place in a dead-end town. In fact, this outside world is itself a generic copy, a regional town with the same shops and the same mass-produced mobility assistance hardware as in any number of regional towns. So, far from having lost sight of what the joke is about, when we are drawn into the minutiae of this bleakly concrete example, have we not here begun to understand precisely what it is 'about'? It's not so much (or not only) that the joke 'goes nowhere': it is the allegory of this 'going nowhere'. This is what it does, and what it 'means'.

Has the task of reading, mine and yours, also reached its end here? Have we not reached an understanding? We even seem to have managed to work out what that whole shopping centre bit was all about. In this reading, the place next to the multi-storey is restored to meaning precisely, and ironically, by becoming a metaphor for meaninglessness. It is a single epiphanic image that explains the text in its entirety, and it releases us from the task of thinking, reading, wondering what the joke is all about. Job done.

<H1>'The Rap Singers' as Bodies

<NP>But no, this is not the end. There are several reasons I am not willing or able to stop here. In the first place, the supposedly 'serious' statements of Lee's book are by no means as reliable as I have made them out to be. As I argued earlier, there is not only one Stewart Lee on whom we can rely to fully 'mean' what he says, and this applies equally to what he writes and publishes. On second reading, his comment about the rap music 'when we were young' being 'all social comment and political and about the police and all that', rather than an antidote to the 'behind the times' shtick of 'The Rap Singers', sounds like a continuation of it. This is not necessarily a literal statement, but is itself a trope, a manner of speaking. But I read it literally, and having done so, I re-read the trickier parts of the text as if they in some way illustrated or 'meant' those statements.

<TEXT>The second reason I am dissatisfied with this reading is that it in no way accounts for how I, as a (repeat) viewer, *feel* about 'The Rap Singers', how I feel when I watch it. 'The Rap Singers' does not make me feel pessimistic, cynical or blithely superior. When I watch it, I feel as if I am on the verge of a great flush of recognition, one which is being held back by a strange, delighted sort of perplexity. Even now, when I watch it I feel physically affected by it. It is as if some latent hilarity, of the kind that is inherent in all speech, were being released in waves. How can I attend to this in the space of this writing, this reading? It is what propels me to continue, and yet it threatens to override everything else with the critical dead end of: 'that's just how I feel'.

What if I try to break it down? I am watching Stewart Lee on a screen. He is speaking, and his words make me think of things. Stew's voice goes on, rhythmically, repeating, and then every so often something takes form, unexpectedly, in my mind's eye: an image, a familiar scene or object. At certain moments I am aware I am looking at Stewart Lee, the side of his face, the cuff of his shirt. At others I am 'seeing' the imagery of his language. And at first this imagery, curiously, consists of screened images: bodies performing on televised stages, just as Stewart Lee is performing on a stage on my screen. One moment I feel like I am 'in' this image, the next I am reminded I am not.

What this makes me realize is that bodies are proliferating in and around this joke. In the second half of the routine the descriptive mode shifts, becoming somehow more physical and three-dimensional. Stew now increasingly resorts to gesture:

> *…like a little wall about that high* [bends to gesture knee-height] *but it's not made out of er conc- it'll be like logs that are sawn in half and put up…*

<NP>It is almost as if he has stepped into the figural space, just for the purposes of explanation. It is no longer a question of seeing (and the insistence of 'you see them' drops off in this section), rather it is one of grasping, or trying to grasp:

> *...you know where the – the shopping trolleys come out from Sainsburys and there's like a perspex kind of cover over it… they jump up on there don't they. Yeah and they go* [a limp flourish of the arms] *like that…*

<NP>When Stewart Lee performs this physical and verbal gesture: 'and they go [*a limp flourish of the arms*] like that', how is his body appearing to us? As a figure for another, absent, body? It is comically half-hearted, less a performance of the movement than a vague gesture towards whatever it is the rap singers do. Stew does this twice, and the second time he also makes a vocal sound, a bit like 'wah': 'they go "wah" [*a limp flourish of the arms*] like that'. Does this mean we should look beyond the half-arsed nature of this movement, to imagine something more balletic? As if Stewart Lee were the stand-in for another body, a body we imagine, in flight?

<TEXT>I want to bring Caruth back in at this point. Recall the confusion of terms: the figure of the body, the figure within the example, the example of the falling body. As Caruth argues, this confusion it reflects the way in which, in the aesthetic tradition, the body is often taken to be a figure for meaning itself. A critique of 'aesthetic ideology' is the core of de Man's intellectual project, hence his 'insistence on the centrality of the body', which is how Caruth suggests 'we can best understand how his own theory both conceptualises and enacts a mode of referential resistance' (1996: 77).

According to Wendy Steiner, in so-called 'organicist' literary theories, the body stands as a figure for the self-contained meaning of the literary text. The poet W. B. Yeats offers a vision of this aesthetic wholeness in his famous line: 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' (cited in Steiner 1995: 100). But, as de Man argues, the moment at which it adopts the body as a figure for unity and coherence, the aesthetic tradition gives up the ability to refer directly *to* the body; in order to become a figure, the body suffers a 'loss of referential particularity' (Caruth 1996: 81), and in the process ceases to really be a body at all. But, as de Man discovers again and again throughout his work, these aestheticized textual bodies are liable to stumble, clumsily back into all-too-human referentiality at the most unexpected moments. In Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, from which the aesthetic tradition draws much of its theoretical grounding, de Man locates 'an oddly unassimilable model of reflection' accompanying an example of the body as a 'system of nonpurposive parts' seen, as Kant writes, 'without regard for the purposes which all our limbs serve' (Kant in Caruth 1996: 88). The attendant listing of bodily parts has a 'force of enumeration' that undoes the representational mode, meaning we 'no longer perceive a unity, but read a kind of disarticulation' (Caruth 1996: 88). Crucially, this breaking down of the body is not stated as knowledge, but *occurs* as practice. In de Manian terms, 'disarticulation' is double dismemberment: a verbal disjointedness that also takes the body apart.

Let us replay the final section of 'The Rap Singers' with this in mind:

> *… they run along the handrails don't they by the shop – by the er… where the multi-storey is, where the Corn Exchange is… You've seen them and they're on the, they're on the ramp aren't they on the disabled ramp. And they jump up off there onto er… it's like a little wall about that high… but it's not made out of err.. conc-… it'll be like logs that are sawn in half and put up. And they jump up on there – where there's flowers in – they jump up on there…*

<NP>Lee is no longer instructing us to 'see' the bodily figures of the rap singers as images within the frame of a TV screen. Instead he is describing, or failing to describe, the way they move. And the movement itself is not an unbroken trajectory, just as Lee's reference to the movement is repeatedly broken by descriptions of the physical space that surrounds it. Indeed, he is attempting to describe the movement, to break it down for us, *in terms* of the things it touches, and which shape it. And, in turn, these objects are themselves broken down into nonpurposive parts: rather than 'a wall', it is 'a little wall about that high made of logs not concrete'. This mode of description, we imagine, could go on and on, disarticulating itself and its objects, bit-by-bit, with the 'force of enumeration': 'the stutter of an endless, but not infinitesimal, enumeration that never goes anywhere (de Man 1984: 266).

<TEXT>There is an end, of sorts, to this distended description, and to the movement it describes. The end comes with that gesture, or that gesture-towards-a-gesture:

> *…they run along – they run along the bannister by the er – the steps and they go like that and they jump down on the er – it's not just for wheelchairs – prams as well can go on it – and they jump up on the rem the little wall thing – and then they flip off there don't they and they run along the rappers to where there's er – you know where the – the shopping trolleys come out from Sainsburys and there's like a perspex kind of cover over it… they jump up on there don't they.*

[pause]

And they go [a limp flourish of the arms] *like that.*

<NP>Now there is a pause. We are held in suspense. This is not only the suspense of 'what happens next', but a suspension of meaning. Questions hover: is this one body or many? Whose is the agency behind this movement? When Stew goes '[*a limp flourish of the arms*] like that' what, precisely, is being represented? It is difficult to visualize, and it is difficult to conceptualize. What does it mean? What does it symbolize? It is unclear whether Stew's limp flourish is supposed to evoke a body as it jumps up, or a body just landed. Is the movement in question acrobatic and fluid, or ungainly and comical? Its comedy perhaps lies in the fact that, in this moment, it is both and neither. In this moment, the body in the example resists being reduced to a 'mere' figure, as it cannot be made to 'stand for' anything. The rap singers will not stand still. But equally, Stewart Lee's body resists being elevated to the status of a figure; balletic as his linguistic feats may be, as a 'stand-up' comedian, he is pretty much rooted to the spot. As a stand-up, Stewart Lee cannot *but* stand still.

<H1>'The Rap Singers' as Stewart Lee

<NP>I may have appeared to settle on an epiphanic moment of my own, thinking of the moment at which Stew goes, or they go, or the whole thing goes 'wah [*a limp flourish of the arms*] like that'.

But not everyone sees it like I do. In fact, a lot of people never saw it at all, as (according to Lee himself), viewing figures record that 300,000 people switched off during 'The Rap Singers' when it was broadcast on BBC2 (Lee 2010: 262).

Does it end here? No. It does not end here because, after all that, 'The Rap Singers' does in fact end with a punch line, of sorts.

Before it comes, there is a pause. A few stray, slightly bewildered laughs. Stew remains still. And then repeats himself one last time: 'the rap singers. You've seen them'. He pauses again. He bends slowly to pick up Asher D's book, *My Dangerous Life with So Solid Crew*, contemplating it for a moment, before looking up and addressing us once again:

Now … this book's not really aimed at me.

<NP>In the room, this line is met with a gradual but emphatic response, laughter of the kind that spreads slowly around the audience, then spreads again, a wave that goes back and forth. What is so funny about this line? In fact, why is it funny at all? Is there an element of relief in the ensuing laughter? In Critchley's terms, this could be thought of as the moment the elastic band of the joke's temporality snaps back into its relaxed shape, relieving the audience of their suspense – the suspense of 'where's this going' and 'when will it end'?

Now … this book's not really aimed at me.

<NP>This line, with its air of a casual, ironic understatement, is Stewart Lee saying, effectively, 'I knew what I was doing all along'. It is a reassertion of authorial control, a reassertion *of* Stewart Lee; whereas in the preceding moment we had been not entirely sure who or what we were supposed to imagine we were looking at (a youth outside a shopping centre, a recording artist on TV, an acrobatic skateboard stunt, a half-arsed mime), this line makes us see the body before us again; as Stewart Lee the clever comedian who knows what he is doing, and as Stew the grumpy middle-aged cultural elitist. The two are the same.

Perhaps the funniness of this line has to do with the absurd idea that these eight words would count as a punch line in the first place, as if the preceding three-and-three-quarter minutes were nothing more than a 'set-up' for what appears to be, after all, a fairly obvious statement. As if, somehow, all of that repetition, that insistence, that distended attempt to refer, to articulate, that ended up disarticulating both its referent and its own mode of referring, were nothing more than a set-up for some casual assertion of self-identity.

But – here's the thing – by the time this punch line arrives, Lee's performance of casualness has already undone itself. Arguably, what has become absurd is the notion that speaking – saying a few words – could ever be a simple, casual matter. Over the last four minutes, the gesture of referring to a body, making a body available to perception, has been rendered strange. I can no longer accept that referring to a body – any body – is merely a case of casually speaking a few words; it is a rhetorical act, a powerful act, one that must be performed with care. And this act of referring to a body is also somehow absurd. As if words could fix a body down; as if words themselves could be fixed to bodies. The punch line is not

an escape from the play of language, the comic performance of the self in language. It is not and cannot offer a 'let-out' into the 'real world' of straight-talking, in which people really mean what they say and are who they say they are, where time is not stretchable and things happen only once. Perhaps, the real joke is that anyone would think this let-out were ever possible.

I'll see you shortly.

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