

# The Last Laugh

*Grief, Death, and the Comic*

By

Will Daddario

The Last Laugh: Grief, Death, and the Comic

by Will Daddario

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## **Dedication**

For Jay, and your laugh

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## Introduction

# Laugh at Your Own Risk

### **What's this book doing?**

Put simply: There's a laugh that people are and have been laughing that I want more people to know about and understand so as, perhaps, to instigate social change. I call this primary object of inquiry the last laugh. This is not the last laugh that marks the best laugh, as the popular expression goes. Rather, it is a laugh that announces an end to or exit from being-as-usual. The last laugh pierces the shield of numbness that protects many people—especially in the United States—from the pervasive pain and suffering in the world today. Once pierced by laughter, the laugher's shield falls away to reveal an invitation to reckoning. Then, a question arises. Do I continue to act as if I am unphased by the pain and suffering I feel and that I feel around me, or do I let that pain and suffering change my disposition in and movement through the world? These questions open the door to grief, which, as a social force alike in strength and ubiquity to the force of gravity, typically also gets locked out by the defense mechanisms people construct around their emotions to protect themselves from perceived harm. If the last laugh coaxes the laugher through the reckoning into a mode of life where active grieving takes place, the laugher effectively dies a death in life. Thus, death, grief, and the comic (which occupies a family resemblance to the comedic, the comical, the humorous) reveal themselves as constituent and constitutive parts

of the last laugh. That, distilled into one paragraph, is the argument of this book.

In terms of methodology, this book is odd. I am a scholar of theatre historiography and performance. I am also a grief worker, a clinical mental health counselor, and a clinical addictions specialist. I have encountered the last laugh in all these different walks of life. What is the best way to make the laugh sensible, audible, palpable, visible? If I were to explain what I have experienced, then I would run the risk of provincializing the laugh or sentencing it to solipsism. If I were to historicize the laugh, I would run the risk of assuming its existence and then reifying the assumption of the laugh through scholarly language. Ultimately, I decided on a different method. I have “set dates,” encounters, for the reader, so that you may face the last laugh in the wild, so to speak. My hope is that the last laugh will grab you at the same time that I begin analyzing it deeply. This is a rhythmic gamble. I have prepared each meet-up in a certain way, rhetorically, so as to increase the likelihood of a *frisson*. Imagine Nathan Fielder there, watching, analyzing in an attempt to unfurl the inner workings of the laugh and the encounter, thereby making visible the “what,” the “how,” and the “so what” of the experience. I play Nathan Fielder. And with these maneuvers, I offer my fidelity to the field of Performance Philosophy and its commitment to doing what it says as it says it.

Chronologically speaking, I first recognized the last laugh by the way it erupted unexpectedly and tore through the laughter. Then I noticed how its emergence startled or surprised the one who laughed it. The eruption plus the surprise gave way, in turn, to a rest, like the musical rest that helps to structure a composition. In a therapy session, for example, clients breathlessly recounted a series of horrendous crisis events only to spill over into laughter



before falling completely silent, staring out in the distance, as if in thrall to some mystery. Or in academia, colleagues lamented what appeared to be the sheer impossibility of meaningful learning in the classroom due to a lack of student readiness or volition, or perhaps due to external rules and regulations that prohibit specific types of classroom discussion from taking place. But then the colleagues become quite creative and imagine ways to surreptitiously conjure learning into the classroom by showing some bizarre film clip and then speaking about a prohibited topic from a parallel position, thereby evoking curiosity from the students. The colleague starts to laugh and teeters at the precipice of tears but falls silent and stares outward. Or in grief, a person will share about the death of a child and make a comment like, “well, at least he didn’t have to live through this fucked up shit [gesturing toward the world].” Then laughter, then falling silent, and then staring. This was its signature. What is this laugh? That question poked at me for a number of years.

For a while, I dwelt on the phrase “fits of laughter.” “Fit,” here, means “paroxysm, sudden attack” and also “conflict, struggle.” Then I considered “paroxysm” and its etymology of “goad,” as if being poked by a pointed stick. Then, I stepped back and imagined the seeming impossibility of jabbing someone with a pointed stick and watching as they responded with laughter. It didn’t make sense at first. But the phenomenological experience of a “fit of laughter,” that is, of an uncontrollable and maybe unexplainable bout of laughing, can, it turned out, in fact feel as if one is beset by pointy sticks. Scholars have even identified concrete instances of these fits of laughter in the archive of Franz Kafka’s fiction, nonfiction, diary entries, letters, and friends’ anecdotes that relay stories of inexplicable laughter erupting from within him at different times. Benno

Wagner briefly mentions Otto Příbram, a German industrialist, in whose presence Kafka “was seized by protracted fits of laughter in his presence” (2009). Anca Parvulescu (2015) quotes from a letter from Kafka to his fiancée, Felice Bauer, in which Franz, already by then occupying an important position as a lawyer within the bureaucracy of Austria, described the laughter thusly:

First I laughed only at the president’s occasional delicate little jokes; but while it is a rule only to contort one’s features respectfully at these little jokes, I was already laughing out loud; observing my colleagues’ alarm at being infected by it, I felt more sorry for them than for myself, but I couldn’t help it. . . . And now that I was in full spate, I was of course laughing not only at the current jokes, but at those of the past and the future and the whole lot together, and by then no one knew what I was really laughing about. (cited in 2015, 1422–1423)

The laughter Kafka describes is one that seems to pre-exist. That is, it exists prior to the laughter through whom it expresses itself. In this way, laughter takes possession of Kafka, or, as he himself says, it infects him. It fits him.

Stanley Corngold points out that Kafka never referred to himself as an author or even as a writer. Instead, Kafka invented the term “*Schriftstellersein*” (“the being of a writer”). “The sense of this term unfolds from the word *sein*, which means, as Kafka wrote, ‘being’ and also ‘belonging to him.’ Kafka felt possessed by the being that craved to write” (2009, 1). That is, he is owned and enthused by that being. In the episode with the German industrialist, by comparison, Kafka is *Lachensein*, the being of a laughter.

The last laugh is a “mode” of laughter in this same way. It is the expression of the existence of laughter as something that precedes a unique instance of laughing. More attributes that gather around the mode of the last laugh show themselves as Kafka’s description continues. A colleague of his who was also in the room tried to suppress his own laughter by barring the laugh from escaping. This amounted to more pointy sticks goading Kafka:

At that moment this struck me as quite incomprehensible; my laughter has made him lose his composure, he had stood there with cheeks blown out by suppressed laughter—and now he embarked on a serious speech . . . it was too much for me: the world, the semblance of the world which hitherto I had seen before me, dissolved completely, and I burst into loud and uninhibited laughter of such heartiness as perhaps only schoolchildren at their desks are capable of. (Parvulescu 2015, 1423)

Once possessed by the being of a laugher, it was hard to stop laughing. But just as quickly as he was possessed, so too did he become unpossessed: “A silence fell, and now at last my laughter and I were the acknowledged center of attention” (Ibid.). Had Kafka heeded the invitation of the silence that befell him, perhaps some insight would have arisen. That didn’t happen. “I produced innumerable excuses for my behaviour, all of which might have been very convincing had not the renewed outbursts of laughter rendered them completely unintelligible” (Ibid.). By attempting to talk (disavowing the silence), he was repossessed. He exited the room as *Lachensein*.

In this episode, Kafka’s laughter is not (yet) fully exemplary of the last laugh, perhaps, as I noted, because he did not heed the silence

that befell him. In his fiction, however, Kafka managed to achieve what he could not in his official capacity. The silence that befell him there did not so much emerge within the stories themselves. Rather, the silence (maybe even *The Silence*), showed up where Kafka broke off his stories. Instead of reading the abrupt endings of his stories and novels as leaving the works unfinished, perhaps the endings averred the silence that befell him during his paroxysmal laughing in the presence of Otto Přibram. On a grander scale, perhaps Kafka's request to Max Brod to burn all of his writings after his death was issued in order to ensure that a grand silence would fall after the laughing finally ceased.

Kafka's official fits of laughter, combined with the vibe of his stories that would become known as Kafkaesque, and placed in proximity to the silence of his stories' abrupt cessations, coax the last laugh into the registers of the audible, knowable, and sensible. The last laugh is a mode of laughter that acknowledges the always-already existing laugh of the great *commedia della vita*. It acknowledges something oppressive in its hugeness: "it was too much for me; the world [...]" And the silence that enters the scene upon the heels of the laugh presents an opportunity to continue on...differently. The last laugh scores the Earth, as if to draw a threshold that, once crossed, commences a commitment to honoring the confluence of grief, death, and the comic.

Unfortunately, many people lack Kafka's ability to describe life in such exquisite detail and, therefore, most fits of laughter arise and then pass unremarked upon. To find the last laugh elsewhere, it became important to me to tarry with every laugh I encountered that seemed to have some stake in grief, death, and the comic. Philosophers' deaths, for example, often fit these descriptions:

Chrysippus, the Stoic philosopher: died from laughter after giving wine to his donkey and seeing it attempt to eat figs.

John Argyropoulos, the so-called Byzantine Humanist: died from eating too much watermelon.

Francis Bacon, “founder of modern science”: died of pneumonia, contracted while stuffing snow into a chicken as an experiment in refrigeration.

Diogenes of Sinope (on whom I have much to say in Chapter 2), died in multiple ways. There are 3 reports. 1.) He died while holding his breath; 2.) He contracted an illness after eating raw octopus; 3.) A dog bit him on the foot (as it attempted to eat the octopus from scenario 2). The wound became infected, and the great Cynic died.

We, people, laugh at the dead and the dying, or at certain imagined deaths. Instead of arguing about that, I wondered what thinking would emerge if I started from that fact, the fact of that particular laughter. What purposes does it serve? What does this laugh enable? What adjectives best modify and enhance it? Cynical? Sardonic? Dark? All three of those adjectives spawn their own adventures into forgotten histories and emotions habitually avoided. In the light of those adjectives, the laugh makes us face our histories and thus ourselves, especially now, when many horrors of the world are hypervisible and overreported, a fact, which, in turn, makes the invisible and underreported horrors more horrifying. A dialectic of the abject spins out of our mouths when we laugh this laugh, which I call the last laugh, last because it both endures and also helps us glimpse finality and the finite.

Eventually, all that became necessary was to write the book. Another hurdle arose straight away in the act of writing. Explaining jokes and other comedic expressions, which philosophers often do when discoursing on this topic, really kills the vital part of the laughs emerging from those jokes and expressions. David Foster Wallace—writing on Kafka, nonetheless—lays bare this truth:

We all know that there is no quicker way to empty a joke of its peculiar magic than to try to explain it—to point out, for example, that Lou Costello is mistaking the proper name “Who” for the interrogative pronoun “who,” etc. We all know the weird antipathy such explanations arouse in us, a feeling not so much of boredom as offense, like something has been blasphemed. (Wallace 2011, 42)

Some will object straight away and point to Stewart Lee’s comedy as a refutation of the “old saw that explaining comedy kills it” (Berlant and Ngai 2017, 246). I do not disagree, but there is a difference between a live performance that emphasizes the enacting of stand-up comedy and a philosophical book that explains the mechanics of that enactment. *The Last Laugh* moves away from the latter and emulates elements of the former by presenting instances of last laughs and working out from them to illuminate the social and historical processes that make the last laughs possible. In every case, these processes, in order to understand them, demand readers to confront discourses on grief, death, and the comic. Defining “grief,” “death,” and “the comic” also becomes necessary. All this labor yields at least two substantial insights. First, by offering numerous opportunities to momentarily capture, hold, and inspect what is otherwise a fast-moving and at times bewildering affective expression, the last laugh becomes more familiar and knowable. Second, grief, perennially pathologized by medi-

cal professionals and avoided—plague-like—by the majority of the population (more on which, see Chapter 3), earns itself a front and center seat in the discussion of laughter, generally, and the last laugh, in particular. To approach grief through laughter is to reorient the common relationship with grief, often feared for its power to unzip people, empty out the totality of their certainty, and rezip them with hardly a clue as to how to proceed. Laughter, already kin with joy, becomes kin with grief, thereby forging a liaison between loss and the possible. I say “the possible” and not “hope” so as to stay within the key set by Kafka: “Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us” (see Benjamin 1968 [1934]).

## Laughter and opening

I mention Stewart Lee above not simply in passing but because he is certainly on to something. As scholars have pointed out, Lee’s experimental stand-up comedy is aggressively affirmative. Through relentless explaining of what’s happening as it is happening, and by comparing and contrasting what’s happening to what audience members might have been expecting to happen, Lee cultivates exaggeration into a magnifying glass that exposes the molecularity of the event called laughing. In a sense, Lee makes each of his audience members aware of their status as being-of-a-laughter. In this case, affirmation becomes, as Sharpe, Dewsbury, and Hynes explain, “openness to the future, the shape of which is as yet unknowable” (2014, 116). Lee’s comedy reveals that this openness always exists but, and this is why the comedy is needed, people forget that they know about the opening. The draw of the Same is so alluring and reassuring that it becomes safer to laugh at jokes that do the laughing for you (as Adorno would have it). By

distinction, to laugh in such a way that you become hyper-aware of the radical potentiality of the present moment would likely feel unsafe, unsafe but requisite for affirming difference and change.

The ability to produce such awareness is one facet of comedy's political capacity. Sharpe et al. continue:

If humour can serve as a micropolitical intervention it is because of the ways it plays with the capacities of the bodies through which it acts. It can solicit [...] "a heightened attunement to the variations of the body", revealing the body "to be something that is always teetering on a change of direction, a change of formation and thus twist of its constitution, however slight, fabulous or seemingly inconsequential." (Dewsbury 2013, cited in Sharpe et al. 118)

Like the laughs Lee is able to elicit, the last laugh announces that something new is possible. While Lee often dips into grief and death, his routines emphasize the form of doing comedy and the precarious role of the audience within a comic event. The scope of the last laugh is narrower. It arrives by way of complex historical processes, but what it announces is urgent, of the moment, and a matter of life and death. Where Lee guides his audience—like Dr. Yu Tsun—to the ongoing forking of paths where the present digresses into all possible futures, the last laugh affirms novelty and potentiality so as to invite one *to do being differently now*. If there is a political opening made visible through the last laugh, it requires bodies to affirm novelty now by choosing not to return to sameness. (This is the focus of Chapter 7 and the conclusion, which is Chapter 8.)



Sharpe et al. summarize their interest in Lee thusly: "For us one of the crucial aspects of his humour, and the politics it presents, is the way he gets the audience to do a lot of the work" (122). I would modify this statement and suggest that the audience, any audience, or even the average person going about their life, is already doing a lot of work. What that work is doing, however, whether, for example, reifying the status quo or challenging the conventions of operative paradigms, does not become apparent until certain interventions take place. Comedians like Lee intervene by shifting the awareness of audience members to the work they are already doing, which, in turn, forces a decision about whether to continue that work or not. Lee's persistent affirmations prod and prod so that audience members can no longer *not* consciously choose. To return to the work they started—of, say, remaining aloof from a political topic or situation—becomes a choice to negate the potential of social change. In this way, my interest in the last laugh, that I hope becomes your interest, overlaps with scholars of Lee. People are engaged in a lot of work all the time, but the nature of the work is something crucial to investigate if any challenge to the status quo is to be mustered.

Another slight point of contention: "performance is considered as one of those rarer spaces where we might question our laughter in an act of self-reflection precisely because we are experiencing it alongside the shared commentary of the audience's laughter as a whole" (122). To the contrary, performance studies scholars have, for decades now, adequately demonstrated that "performance spaces," typically understood as theatre venues, are not rare. Since Erving Goffman's work in the 1950s, it has been possible to point out the theatrical structure of numerous spaces encountered throughout daily life. As such, it is possible to adapt Sharpe et al.

When the last laugh emerges, it reveals the imagined community and invites a question about who all will laugh at such a thing (e.g., a joke about violent death, a wry comment made during a grief support group). This invitation then coaxes self-reflection, which can tip over into novel thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, which is to say new behaviors as opposed to habitual behaviors, “those dangerous habits of prejudice where we already act without thinking” (123).

This brings us to John Ó Maoilearca, immanence, being, and becoming. “[F]or Continental philosophies of immanence,” he writes, “monism is always ontological; it concerns *kinds* of things, even when what it says is that the only kind of thing there is is physical process, or affectivity, or sets, or the Real” (2016 n.p.). This presents a problem right away, one that François Laruelle spots: “Let’s suppose that there exists a book called ‘What is philosophy?’ and that it claims to answer this question by virtue of its own existence or manifestation. Thus it is impossible to talk about it: because this book is at the center of philosophy and philosophy is at the center of this book” (cited in *Ibid.*). If Deleuze, or whoever, accidentally doubles as doer of philosophy and explainer of that doing, then something is amiss. Philosophy is often amiss in this way. Non-philosophy, however, argues Ó Maoilearca, “does do what it is saying.” “For Laruelle,” he continues, “there is a constitutive disingenuity in (any one) philosophy given its ongoing desire to explain reality from its position.” Here is where the last laugh comes back into play. Just as Laruelle’s project is to elaborate an outside-philosophy thought, so my project in this book is to elaborate an outside the last laugh thought, albeit one capable of summoning, commenting on, and laughing the last laugh all at the same time. Is this possible? And is it possible for you, reader,

to participate in the last laugh while also reading my philosophy of it?

Yes, these things are possible, but only if I and you allow for the horror of the enterprise. That is, by adopting a position that is somehow both within and outside of the laugh in question, we will take up a quasi-alien and monstrous position. What the last laugh makes palpable is that the world, while accommodating, is not for us. The last laugh launches out of the mistaken belief that *this* is all for us and that *this* couldn't be any other way than the way it is. The laugh brings us outside and lets us momentarily look in to observe the strange and sometimes horrifying reality of our social world. The methodological aim of the book then, astride Laruelle's non-philosophy, is to travel in and out at the same time, to ride the laugh that makes that possible, and then to determine our next move.

Ó Maolearca is already ahead of me. He brings to the conversation a series of beings that are immanent in and transcendent to, in this case, water. Laruelle's *poisson-eau*, Jean-Luc Nancy's *méduse*, Bernard Stiegler's flying fish, and one last strange fish, that of the stand-up comic Stewart Lee. This fish reveals his audience to be in the water with him and himself to be outside the water of status-quo stand-up at the same time. The positions get confused, actually. What precisely is *this*, anyway? And does *this* need a *that* to define itself? Or is *this* good enough?

For one of his stand-up specials, Lee book-ends the recording with an interview—conducted by comedian Chris Morris—in which he demonstrates the issue:

Lee: This is this, right?

Interviewer: No, this is trying to be this and failing

Lee: It's not failing to be this (*smiling*) it...under its...this is this. This is this.

[...]

Lee: This is this. You go, "it's not that." They can say it isn't this but it is...this is this (*Lachensein*)

Interviewer: You spent 25 years honing your craft and you're just reduced to saying this is this (*hand gesture that indicates this \*hand\* is this \*hand\**)

Lee: This is this, yeah.

Interviewer: And you can't even really prove that, can you? You just have to insist that this is this. You've written loads of material and you've done loads and loads of gigs all over the country and the best you can offer anyone is "what I'm saying is this is this."

Lee: There will be people sitting at home and saying, "Oh, look at that, it isn't that." I go, "it is this."

Interviewer: That's a strawman. Who on Earth is sitting at home going, "Look at that, it isn't that"?

Lee: (*laughing*)

Interviewer: What evidence have you got?

Lee: They might be.

Interviewer: They might be? So I'm going to build a whole career to refute what I imagine somebody might be thinking?

Lee: (*laughing*) This...This is This.

Interviewer: You keep saying that. It doesn't sound any better.

Lee: There are all sorts of things I can, you know, (*laughing*) This is happening again now?!

Interviewer: Wait. But is this happening? I've lost track of what this is now. (Lee 2016)

Ó Maoilearca's point, as well as those who follow and write about Lee, is that Lee's laughter—having its way with the comic in this interview—occupies and floats above the precise *this* that subsists as the stand-up comedian's inquiry. The laugh that laughs him, and that spreads, virus-like, to the interviewer, is enacting the immanent movement that makes the scene amazing to watch. The laugh, which I think is an instance of the last laugh in the wild, is what Ó Maoilearca calls “an internalization of the transcendental into the Real,” a mutated immanence that transcends itself.

This book aims to set the conditions for similar mutations and “immanentist” moments to arise. The proof, as the saying goes, will be in the pudding, which is to say that you will know *this* is happening when it happens. I hope it happens often, by which I mean that the last laugh grabs you frequently throughout these pages. If it doesn't, then the alternate experience will hopefully be some good new-fashioned performance philosophy of the interplay between grief, death, and the comic. But I will offer a warning to accompany this laughter. Just as Kafka found himself overtaken by the world as he was seized with his laughter, so too do laughs of the last laugh open themselves up for a shock. What's more, the shock may be one that can't be undone. As such, laugh at your own risk.

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## Chapter 1

### How This Is Funny

# 8-Year-Old Makes Adorable Presentation To Parents About Why He Needs Gun To Kill Classmates



**Figure 1.1** “8-Year-Old Makes Adorable Presentation to Parents...” *The Onion*. Sep 19, 2023. Permission to reprint provided by Global Tetrahedron.

“I did it [...] I shot the bitch dead.” These were the words of the 6-year-old student at Virginia’s Richneck Elementary School who shot his first grade teacher, Abigail Zwerner. The child spoke the words to Amy Kovac, a reading specialist, who was the first person to the scene of the shooting and who subsequently held the child until the police arrived (Jouvenal 2023).

This is America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Headlines like this appear with such frequency that while they might dismay, depress, dispirit, or downright derail readers, they certainly don't shock them. Consider, by way of analogue, the recent congressional hearings convened to investigate the veracity of whistleblower claims that the government has concealed the existence of extraterrestrials for decades. On national TV, David Grusch, a former employee of the Pentagon's Unidentified Aerial Phenomenon task force and lifelong civil servant, testified soberly "that the government has recovered 'non-human' 'biologics' at the scene of various crashes" (Timsit 2023). The response of the general public to these disclosures was captured succinctly in the headline to the *Washington Post's* coverage of the hearings: "Congress asks: Are aliens real? Many Americans respond: Meh." As one X (Twitter) user put it, "Are aliens going to fix inflation, cancel student debt, end worker exploitation, pay any of these bills, turn the temp down on this planet; and all around bring happiness to me and my friends miserable lives? No? Then yeah - they can get tf" (cited in Tolentino 2023).



# Dozens Dead In Least Of America's Problems Right Now



**Figure 1.2** “Dozens Dead...” *The Onion*. June 21, 2024. Permission to reprint provided by Global Tetrahedron.

Notice that children’s access to guns and school shootings didn’t make it into that tweet’s list of complaints. Not only is it absent from the list, but there’s evidence to suggest that many people *want* kids to have guns. There’s a healthy marketplace aimed at recruiting young people as buyers of firearms. See, for example, the JR-15. “The JR-15 is a .22 Long Rifle that functions like a modern sporting rifle, however and most importantly its small size, lightweight rugged polymer construction and ergonomics are geared towards smaller enthusiasts” (Wee1 2025). Google “Pink guns for girls” to see other approaches to the same “consumer base.”

Chances are good (bad?) that kids and guns will once again have their day at the top of the complaint list. One problem is that the

list is quite long. It's long and rotates, as if it was on a treadmill or a spit. People seem capable of expressing outrage—not the same as emotional processing—toward two to three majorly depressing (or, as we'll see later, grief-stricken) topics at one time. Outrage will sometimes climb so high as to erupt in protest, but usually not. It seems to be the case, rather, that U.S.Americans have become numb to—or *have produced* numbness because of—the endless string of devastating interpersonal conflicts that punctuate newspaper headlines daily, including school shootings, whether those shootings are perpetrated by 6-year-olds, teenagers, or adults off the street. Legislators certainly don't seem prepared to take any significant action on any of these issues. Americans will have to face the fact that kids with guns, and sometimes kids with guns who kill other kids, are absolutely a part of who “we” are as a country. (The scare quotes around “we” is the focus of a later chapter.)

This is where the above headlines from *The Onion* start to provoke some thought. How exactly ought one describe those headlines? Are they humorous? Are they funny? Are they comedic? Grim? Oddly accurate? Just plain sad? Might all those adjectives be different sides of the same affective experience? The short answer to all those questions is yes. Writers of *The Onion*, and multiple other figures I will introduce throughout this book, have the ability to produce a mode of laughter of astounding complexity, one that produces a moment of emergence in which the human subject encounters itself as object. With this claim, Simon Critchley's work calls out, particularly this passage: “The object of laughter is the subject who laughs” (2002, 14). When this takes place, one commonly asks, What's so funny? What are you laughing at? One response that I want to repeat is that it's you. You're laughing at you. Or, to turn the issue on myself: I'm part of the problem. This is

absolutely true in the case of *The Onion* headline about the 8-year-old making a case for shooting his classmates. I am somehow implicated in that situation, though I don't yet know how. If I learn to interpret my laughter as an invitation to explore that question, then a certain kind of transformation can take place. All of this—laugh, puzzlement, invitation, self-reflexivity—takes place in the wake of encountering certain types of laugh-provoking discourse. This book aims to map the terrain that houses all those things.

*The Onion* has had its finger on the pulse of this complex laughter for decades. Some refer to it as “fake news,” but that's not an accurate label, as I'll explain below and in the next chapter. For now, I'll simply call it a “comedic” publication, and I highlight it because, in a sense, it hides in plain sight. Camouflaged by terms like “fake news” and “satire,” both of which have become watered-down due to frequent use, *The Onion* produces complex laugh after complex laugh, thus making it hard to recognize in this steady stream of production a startlingly astute mode of social commentary. If we pair the above two headlines with a third one, the depth of social observation and sharpness of the critique begins to come into focus.

# English Teacher Already Armed With Deadly Weapon Called Shakespeare



**Figure 1.3** “English teacher already armed...” *The Onion*. March 1, 2018. Permission to reprint provided by Global Tetrahedron.

Appraise the three headlines I’ve presented thus far as a triptych, and what becomes visible? On the level of tacit argumentation, there is a clear, though multi-part thesis. Nobody authorized with the power to do so is taking steps to protect schoolchildren from mass shootings, shootings which take place with horrifying regularity. By some estimates, 1,676 children and adolescents have died from such shootings since the year 2000 (USAFacts Team 2022). That’s a big problem, but since Americans face a number of big problems—ongoing racism, LGBTQ-phobic legislation aimed at marginalizing further the already marginalized, staggering inflation, sleight-of-hand shrinkflation, economic injustice and inequity, bald fascism in the government, politicized Supreme Court Justices, and maybe also secret extraterrestrials, just to name a

few—the number 1,676 starts to look somehow small, or at least small enough to be removed from front-page news. Except for when the shootings take place, which, again, they do with seasonal frequency. We, as a country, although, again, “we” is a problematic word, aren’t learning from our mistakes. Worse than that, we might not even be learning much of anything. Enter Shakespeare. What’s more “deadly”? Automatic weapons or English class? On the one hand, the former. Kids are actually dying, often at the hands of other kids. On the other hand, the latter. If you want to interrupt adolescent consciousness, start telling them that the play’s the thing to catch the king. But if you say those words, be sure to explain where they come from because none of the students will know who Hamlet or a “player” is or even who Shakespeare was. Maybe teachers should be armed with guns—see, “Trained, Armed and Ready. To Teach Kindergarten” (Mervosh 2022)—or maybe they should be armed with the Classics. Bottom line: Gun Violence and Boredom have somehow merged into one conceptual cataract that prevents the American public from seeing clearly. Life and Death is no longer a pressing paradigm.

At the level of discursive strategy, *The Onion* offers that argument not in the form of rational debate (*logos*) but, rather, in the form of jokes (*bathos*). This is an age-old strategy. The family of “joke” to which *The Onion* headlines belong, however, has a specific genealogy. These headlines are relatives of jokes told by folks like Dario Fo, the Nobel laureate who “emulates the jesters of the Middle Ages in scourging authority and upholding the dignity of the downtrodden” (Nobel Prize 1997). When Fo’s *Mistero Buffo* aired on Italian television in 1977, the Vatican denounced it as “the most blasphemous show ever transmitted on television” (*The Times* 2016). What unites Fo and *The Onion*, however, is not “blasphemy,” but, rather,

the public-ness of the transmission of the humor. Fo preached to the masses, as did the *jongleur* before him. *The Onion*, by extension, pronounces their jokes through the dialect of the news, thereby aiming to activate their own “imagined community” who, though perhaps separated by physical distance, laugh in harmony with one another (Anderson 2016 [1983]).

## Massive Earthquake Reveals Entire Island Civilization Called ‘Haiti’



**Figure 1.4** “Massive Earthquake...” *The Onion*. January 25, 2010. Permission to reprint provided by Global Tetrahedron.

Stay with this brand of joke and turn toward the headline from 2010 that brought attention to the devastation caused by a massive earthquake just off the coast of Haiti. If the headline itself doesn’t provoke laughter, then the caption to the lead image (seen above) should: “Americans laid eyes on actual Haitians for the first time on Jan. 12 [2010].” If you find yourself laughing and then falling silent,