

1996

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Recommended Citation

Limon, John (1996) "Journey to the End of the Night: David Letterman with Kristeva, Céline, Scorsese," *Journal X*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jx/vol1/iss1/3>

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Journey to the End of the Night: David Letterman with Kristeva, Céline, Scorsese

John Limon

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1. David Letterman

Intelligence

David Letterman is baffled and balked by intellection; he is heaped by it. Wherever it manifests itself, he is awe-stricken. Like most Americans, he is unsure where to locate it — Ted Koppel is his idea of an intellectual¹ — but wherever he finds it, he is unmoored to the point of hysteria. Disconcerted, but freed of his inhibitions by her unwittiness, he bel-lowed at Marilyn vos Savant: “I’m as smart as you!”

David Letterman thinks as quickly as anybody in America — as fast as William F. Buckley, Jr., in one field, or Stanley Fish, in another. The conundrum that he seems to confront every day is how it is possible to think dangerously fast yet possess no ideas at all. His condition is the intellectual equivalent of priapism among mannequins. It seems to make him furious.

It makes him, also, the best comedian of his time, since jokes are successful to the extent that they impose the form of thought on disarray. Therefore Letterman’s jokes are, disproportionately, meta-jokes; they are *about* the formal intelligence with only dreck for substance.

Female Intelligence

What David Letterman is least able to comprehend, of all forms of mind, is a particular type of female

intelligence, as manifest in such personages as Jane Pauley, Ellen DeGeneres, or Teri Garr. He told an interviewer that “there is something very appealing about smart women, intelligent women. And you can see the problem there: if they’re smart enough for me to be interested, then they’re not going to have anything to do with me” (Zehne 101).

Letterman is apt to refer to such women as “witty.” By this, I think he intuits the following. Pure comedy is Euclidean form imposed on debris. Insofar as the shape of humor is congruent with its material, on the other hand, it is classified as wit. Of course, neither Pauley nor DeGeneres nor Garr is exactly an aphorist along the lines of La Rochefoucauld or Wilde. What gives their humor an unexpected integrity is gender: their femaleness is both the substance and shape of their humor. Letterman cannot fathom this, but he adores it.

Speed

In his purity, in what I wish to call his abject purity, Letterman can seem like a disembodied intelligence. Women on his show may fawn on him, but when they do, Letterman is often repelled — any Letterman theory would have to begin with the national seductiveness of his encircled, beleaguered, castellated comic mind. We hear that he watches his weight to the point of anorexia (on a show he said he was 6’2”, 170 lbs.); a study of the jaws of afflicted Americans would force the conclusion that anorexia is the last wilderness of American Puritanism, where will nourishes itself on its own negation, where self-abasement is the only licit form of self-fashioning, where heroic bleeding is the only sanctioned form of heroism. On “Good Morning, America,”² after his Academy Awards show failure, Letterman said that you learn by “ingesting the negative,” which is unintentionally a bulimarexic pun (the negative once ingested, Letterman’s most negative emissions are in jest).

You can conceive of Letterman almost as pure velocity. A really great comedian has a demented time sense: the world appears to be moving too slowly for his mind. (For a great comic actor, it may be moving too fast.) To the extent that time is psychological, a comedian is forced to live in concentric spheres, revolving at different rates. The scraping throws off sparks, but it makes Letterman crazy. The effort to put the two worlds in gear may involve alcohol or drugs; for Letterman, it entails speeding.

“To annihilate both space and time” was the hype of American Protestant technological millenarianism. The dream of pure soul — or pure mind — is, at its most intense, to be everywhere at once. The mode of American apocalypse proceeded from train to telegraph (the increase in speed was a progressive animation) naturally to TV. TV apocalypse is the American style of abjection.

Car-son

The paradox is that Letterman is the loudest American comedian since Sid Caesar. He yells an astounding fraction of his jokes, with a leonine roar like the

start of an engine, as if his first Indiana jokes had to shout out the whole Indianapolis 500. He is also oddly physical: he does facial shtick (the skunk eye, for example); he plays with his suit; he imposes his body even as far as the camera.

Yet all the time you feel that there is a mind at the center of all this physical demonstration, driving it like a machine, like a car, trying to call itself into the world *as* the car. The great Protestant comedians turn jokes into violent, swift, efficient, beautiful mechanisms. Johnny Carson was Letterman's predecessor in this pursuit, securing a kind of rock-age technical perfectionism from the jazzy improvisations of his Jewish coequals, Mel Brooks, Buddy Hackett, or Lenny Bruce. Carson's mind would plant itself within costumes; costumes would mortify Letterman; but Letterman's suit and his body itself, and his face itself, are contraptions, like Walt Disney's automated Presidents on steroids.

Letterman's height does matter. You feel slightly disoriented and depressed when his guest is taller than he is. But I read Letterman's height, as I shall argue with respect to a peculiar moment in Céline, as pure verticality, a single ideal dimension.

Lettermania

Almost everyone is willing, in Letterman's presence, to play at abjection: his audience grovels in order to be part of the show and sensibility. They submit to his thinking of them as his "kids." Yet when you observe him in the company of those he respects — Pauley or DeGeneres or Garr (who, like mothers, are adored and unattainable by tacit consent) and Carson (among fathers) — you fantasize a similar familiarity, by which I mean that he could be, with you, similarly abject. The Letterman anecdote that any essay on him has to repeat concerns the note he passed to Teri Garr before a commercial: "I hate myself." With respect to Carson, the abjection is more balanced (you are not *supposed* to be the man your father was): "That's the guy. Maybe I could work at it, but I'm not the guy."³

The TV relationship, which the Academy Awards audience resisted, is not a meeting of subjects and objects, as at the movies, but an intimacy of abjects.⁴ David Letterman makes our abjection visible — he puts it before the camera — but visible in a twice-disowned body, once by self-disjunction, twice by the technologies of fame; and a corollary is that exposure to the dreck of New York that Letterman loves to dwell on and in leaves us feeling almost absolved. The "abject," as Kristeva calls it, is sloughed like snakeskin.

2. Kristeva/Céline/Letterman

Kristevan Abjection

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or

inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful — a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself. (Kristeva 1)

So begins Kristeva's "Essay on Abjection," and I believe it is, so to speak, empirically correct. However you take Kristeva's neo-Freudian etiology ("abjection" is a reminiscence of the condition of the subject, unseparated from the maternal body, before it is a subject, the adult affect of which is horror of the indiscrete), it is certain that she knows how abjection is experienced. It is experienced, first of all, as a negative ecstasy — you are "literally" beside yourself; it may be summarized as your failure to know what is inside of what, to find your own synecdoche, the homunculus that stands for self. This entails a series of incongruities.

(1) "Abjection," whose posture ought to be prostrate, is capable of resistance, of "revolt," in fact. (2) Revolt leads to resistance (or else the revolt *is* the resistance — it is characteristically unclear), which is not *to* desire, it is *of* desire. This is understandable enough, except that desire's willfulness and uprightness seem oddly (for desire) Puritanical. (3) If desire acts like restraint, the object of abjection — the "abject," as Kristeva calls it — must resemble, at any rate, the object of desire; one is summoned by it. Desire is pseudo-conscience because abjection is pseudo-desire. (4) If desire acts like restraint, it can be a source of self-pride. But instead of "it [desire] holds on to a certainty of which it is proud," we get, "a certainty of which it [desire] is proud holds on to it." Desire feels, somehow, as if its power to resist comes from elsewhere; yet the feeling of self-disenfranchisement must be exactly what, in abjection, desire is resisting. If abjection is pseudo-desire, desire plays the role of conscience abjectly.

This flux of will and victimage — such that what is tempting is not desired, and desire in turn restrains, and desire in turn is proudly held — seems to me exactly apt as a social diagnosis of Puritanism (only in the presence of the abject will desire convert itself into conscience, surviving by self-betrayal). Yet it is safe to say that Kristeva is not the theorist to appreciate the *comic* possibilities of deriving uprightness from prostration.

Abject Historionics

The person who is "beset by abjection" (Kristeva 1) puts on, I should think, daily infra-dramas, actor before audience and vice versa. You are, after all, literally beside yourself, watching your faculties — desire, for example — play unaccustomed roles, always authored by someone else. Kristeva, however, does

not quite say this. *Her* abjected subject is caught in a vortex, is haunted; even its power to resist is merely susceptibility to sickness and repulsion; it is much more acted upon than active. Nowhere before her culminating section on Céline does Kristeva focus precisely enough on the histrionic aspect of abjection; and in the Céline passages, I think, she does not contemplate it so much as just accurately note it, the result being a desideratum for David Letterman studies.

“Abjection” has, in English, an uncollapsible performative dimension. All of what follows is listed in one dictionary as a single meaning of the term “abject.” “Sunk to a low condition; cast down in spirit or hope; degraded; servile; groveling; despicable; as *abject* posture, fortune, thoughts; base and *abject* flatterers.” The oddness is how this meaning silently turns at “servile”; and how the theatrical dimension of the second example (“abject flatterers”) is already ambiguously present in the first (“base and abject flatterers” will assume an “abject posture”); and how the apparent redundancy of adjectives in the second example (“base and abject”) fudges the question of whether at the root of abject performance is abject being.

The term “abjection” itself is falsely, therefore appropriately, Latinate and upright. This would be telling if everyone who was abject was aware that he or she was “abject” — which may be the case, for all I know. There may be no abjection without a frustrated definitional literacy. At any rate, all those who identify themselves as abject, for example Céline, will feel the telltale self-dramatization of the word. Even if we posit a victim of abjection who is psychologically illiterate, nevertheless it may be a symptom of the ego at the edge of its defenses, scouting for even a counterproductive self-definition, that any extreme state will be enacted with hostility and lobbed like a grenade to the back row.

Comic Abjection

Not sufficiently registering the histrionic assertiveness of abjection is not sufficiently featuring, I want to argue, the essentially comic dimension of abjection.

Abjection and Laughter in Kristeva

Laughter ought to have more to do with Kristeva’s nosography. There are moments when its exclusion seems almost perverse. Following her initial association of the abject with unthinkable permeabilities, Kristeva specifies vaguely, defines abjectly, that it is a “‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me” (2). If it crushes her, it cannot be taken lightly; yet the presence of significance without meaning seems comic in general, and like David Letterman’s comedy in particular. Its symptom is verbal speed: “The speech of the phobic adult is also characterized by extreme nimbleness. But that vertiginous skill is as if void of meaning, traveling at top speed over an untouched and untouchable abyss, of which, on occasion, only the affect shows up, giving not

a sign but a signal" (41). Here the crushing weight of meaninglessness seems to take the form of levity; surely in Kristeva's oxymoron we are approaching laughter: "But with the borderline patient, sense does not emerge out of non-sense, metaphorical or witty though it might be" (50). Not quite there, however. "On the contrary, non-sense runs through signs and sense, and the resulting manipulation of words is not intellectual play but, without any laughter, a desperate attempt to hold on to the ultimate obstacles of a pure signifier that has been abandoned by the paternal metaphor" (50-1).

Occasionally one is sure that, for Kristeva, it is simply the case that laughter palliates the abject condition. Discussing Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, Kristeva asserts that "Verkhovensky is abject because of his clammy, cunning appeal to ideals that no longer exist, from the moment when Prohibition (call it God) is lacking. Stavrogin is perhaps less so, for his immoralism admits of laughter and refusal" (19). This would appear to set up a disjunction: abjection or laughter. Yet when Kristeva goes on to describe the modern world, what she finds is abjection and laughter undivided: "The worlds of illusions, now dead and buried, have given way to our dreams and deliriums if not to politics or science — the religions of modern times. Lacking illusions, lacking shelter, today's universe is divided between *boredom* (increasingly anguished at the prospect of losing its resources, through depletion) or (when the spark of the symbolic is maintained and desire to speak explodes) *abjection* and *piercing laughter*" (133).

Which is it: *or* or *and*? Laughter would seem to be an ambiguity within a confusion. But there is a way to be more precise about the relationship. When Kristeva defines sin as "subjectified abjection" (128), you might feel inspired to refer to laughter as "objectified abjection." Kristeva finds abjection unfunny when signifiers have been "abandoned by the paternal metaphor," when "Prohibition (call it God) is lacking," but piercingly funny "when the spark of the symbolic is maintained," which may be the difference between an enervated and an electrified absence. Absent objectivity is funny when it "sparks," perhaps, because a joke is dreck enflamed by form, that is, by a standard it inhabits but to which it cannot aspire. Thus it becomes clear why laughter, disjoined from abjection generally, attaches to it when Kristeva comes to describe modernity: in our century, apocalyptic yet Godless, abjection is a psychopathology that happens to be realistic. When you cannot abject your abjection, according to Kristeva, as filth or sin (the God of Jews and Christians alike being dead) — when objectivity lingers in the world only as a measure of abjectivity — you laugh.

This move allows Kristeva to value Céline without embracing him: an abject person may show a symptom, but in an abject world, a person may *be* a symptom.⁵ But I still do not think that Kristeva — by positing that Céline's laughter makes him a symptom of an objectively abjectifying world — has gotten his humor exactly right. She arrives at the topic at long last in the brief culminating section on Céline.

With Céline we are elsewhere. As in apocalyptic or even prophetic utterances, he speaks out on horror. But while the former can be withstood because of a distance that allows for judging, lamenting, condemning,

Céline — who speaks from within — has no threats to utter, no morality to defend. In the name of what would he do it? So his laughter bursts out, facing abjection, and always originating at the same source, of which Freud had caught a glimpse: the gushing forth of the unconscious, the repressed, suppressed pleasure, be it sex or death. (205-6)

Céline is an apocalyptic writer without revelations; his “language of abjection” merely “topples” into “nothing more than the effervescence of passion and language we call style” (206). The unconscious gushes; the laughter bursts; the language topples; Céline is overwhelmed. The paradoxical willfulness of abjection drops out: some have degradedness thrust upon them. Yet even Kristeva’s Céline is capable of knowing that abjection may be histrionic. The two Henrouilles women in *Journey to the End of the Night*, which should have been the name of the David Letterman show, embody in Kristeva’s phrase “calculated abjection” (168). It does not gush, burst, or topple: it manipulates and maneuvers. Abjection may be a recrudescence of the pre-mirror stage, but it practices before a portable mirror. (Kristeva implies at various points the relation of abjection to anorexia — food is feces in the abject ethos — but the gagging nausea she describes is not the anorexic’s willful self-sculpting.)

Céline

What is funny about *Journey to the End of the Night*?⁶ Partly its humor resides in local excesses; but the greater, antithetical joke is *Journey*’s refusal to ascend or decline: its perfect horizontality. You feel mounting hysteria (under particular circumstances, a condition confusable with hilarity) from the book’s failure to ascend or decline with you. In the first place, Bardamu seems to preserve just enough innocence — just enough vulnerability to goodness — to keep horror fresh, from World War I to Africa to New York to Detroit to the insane asylum back in France and his own old age. But even the uniformity of that movement — in which goodness is a blip — is not constant enough. Bardamu’s horror is always ready and prepared; it precedes existence. Even before the Great War, a young Bardamu describes God as “sensual” and “grunt[ing] like a pig. A pig with golden wings, who falls and falls, always belly side up, ready for caresses, that’s him, our master” (*Journey* 1983, 4). This God is a bourgeois even before Bardamu has the experience of impoverished resentment. Bardamu knows him by inverse empathy, because his own destiny is to fall and fall, belly side up, ready for abjection.

“You can be a virgin in horror,” Céline or Bardamu notoriously proclaims, “the same as in sex” (*Journey* 1983, 9). As a matter of fact, one is never, in *Journey to the End of the Night*, a virgin in horror, if that means unacquainted with it. I call attention to the possibility that one may be “innocent . . . of Horror” (Marks’s translation [*Journey* 1934, 9] of “on est puceau de l’Horreur” [*Voyage* 21]), nonetheless: the point is that *something* in Céline takes the place of innocence, that is, the place before experience. Whatever that something is, it must have the following skewed characteristics. It must precede experience (so that

the experience of horror is definite); it must figure experience proleptically (so that Bardamu can recognize horror as the correlative of what horrified him even before he encountered it in World War I); it must continue during experience (so that horrors, anticipated and never-ending, will nevertheless stay fresh).

The trivial American name for that thing is "attitude," as when Jerry Seinfeld says that David Letterman "has a great attitude." The humor of attitude is that it judges all the time but is strictly non-judgmental; it is not, as Kristeva says, apocalyptic or prophetic, insofar as there is no experience that precedes it to judge; and when experience does accrue, it is powerless to make a case, mocked by its own superfluity. The same attitude greets every eventuality. This is significance without meaning, intelligence without ideas: attitude is a way to be of the world but not in it. Starting with attitude means that there is nowhere for a journey to *get*. Bardamu arrives at horror immediately, and spends the rest of his journey — undertaken on the assumption that there is an end to the night — rediscovering it, until the peripatetic immobility abruptly shuts down.

Céline says brilliantly that "one has to be more than somewhat dead in order to be truly a wisecracker!" (quoted in Kristeva 138). Death is, technically, infinite repetition without intervals, which makes Bardamu's travels an approximation of an after-death experience in continuous disgust. What is the humor of this? How would *The Divine Comedy* be comedic if there were only *Inferno*? Invoking the trite term "attitude" is only meant to call attention to a quality of *Journey's* abjection: its chronic inexperience. The novel may be described as a monologue that occasionally intersects not experience or other humans but other monologues. When Bardamu, in the first chapter, describes God as a pig, he is performing at the time his poem on the subject, before the history that can only justify it.

And wherever Bardamu's monologue crosses another, there abject histrionics cross. The monologue is the privileged technique of attitude: it comes first, but it confines reality such that nothing else comes second. And attitude is abjection on a roll, abjection exuberant in its basic exhibitionism. Tania, a woman whose beloved has just died, is "intent on her tragedy, and still more intent on exhibiting it to me in full flood" (*Journey* 1983, 315). In this respect, she resembles the newly blinded Robinson, who "groaned under his bandages as soon as he heard me climbing the stairs" (*Journey* 1983, 281). It is important to locate the performativity *within* abjection, not outside it and compromising it. Robinson is in fact abject — recumbent — but he is also performing abjection. "People live from one play to the next," Bardamu says, always ready with the aphorism that is his own emblematic performance (*Journey* 1983, 224). Thus a "tragedy" such as Tania's feeds comedies such as Céline's.

When Bardamu arrives at New York, he shares a laugh — unique experience, since most communal laughter in this book is of a piece with horror, merely smut amid smuttiness — with his fellow voyagers.

Talk of surprises! What we suddenly discovered through the fog was so amazing that at first we refused to believe it, but then, when we were face to face with it, galley slaves or not, we couldn't help laughing, seeing it right there in front of us. . . .

Just imagine, that city was standing absolutely erect. New York was a standing city. Of course we'd seen cities, fine ones too, and magnificent seaports. But in our part of the world cities lie along the seacoast or on rivers, they recline on the landscape, awaiting the traveler, while this American city had nothing languid about her, she stood there as stiff as a board, not seductive at all, terrifyingly stiff.

We laughed like fools. You can't help laughing at a city built straight up and down like that. But we could only laugh from the neck up, because of the cold blowing in from the sea through a gray and pink mist, a brisk sharp wind that attacked our pants and the chinks in that wall, I mean the city streets, which engulfed the wind-borne clouds. (*Journey* 1983, 159; Céline's ellipsis)

This is a peculiar passage: not only does Bardamu — uncharacteristically socialized — share a laugh, but the laugh goes on and on; it is a unique moment of *helpless* laughter. Nor is it immediately explicable: what is so funny about skyscrapers?

It is almost an obvious smutty joke. The city is erect in public; it is an urban exhibitionist. Or say that the joke is trickier than that, because the European cities that “recline on the landscape, awaiting the traveler” would seem to be female (though immobile and inorganic as mannequins), making the grammar of the translation appropriate, even if its biology is not: “*she* stood there as stiff as a board, not seductive at all.” If the woman repossesses the phallus, will this be perceived as comical? But the joke is only half-funny, only funny “from the neck up,” because the “sharp” wind “attacked our pants.” Castration is not funny when it can be felt; it is only funny insofar as the head can be separated, for the sake of intellectual amusement, from the body that suffers it. This separation, of course, is not merely a retreat to the intellectual; it is a retreat from castration to the intellectual by means of an act of self-castration. The joke here would seem to be the proud reenactment of castration in order to escape it.

I am not quite satisfied with this exegesis, because the European cities that lie down assume the abject posture, which is a position normally assumed, in Kristeva and Céline, by men. I do not think that Bardamu is laughing at a phallic woman so much as at a phallic abjection: the wind attacks both the voyagers' pants and the permeability of the wall. This makes the femaleness of cities into a metaphor of the abjection of the men who inhabit them, enslaved. So the joke is not the sort of smut that Bardamu scorns; it reveals the point of that smut.

When Bardamu goes ashore, he walks down Broadway — in three of the sensible four dimensions he walks by the Ed Sullivan Theater, where David Letterman performs. On Broadway, the truth of New York reveals itself to be horizontal after all: “That street was like a dismal gash, endless, with us at the bottom of it, filling it from side to side, advancing from sorrow to sorrow, toward an end that is never in sight, the end of all the streets in the world” (*Journey* 1983, 166). Broadway, for all the castrated disgust of this passage — we are imagined less as castrated than as the blood of an objectified castration — has the precise, endless automobility of Céline's novel. The castration, so

long as it is objective, is still funny. New York is always the land of the joke in Céline: below ground, where men excrete, they “laughed and joked and cheered one another on”; “the new arrivals were assailed with a thousand revolting jokes” (*Journey* 1983, 169). But this is the sort of smutty joking that Bardamu despises, as opposed to the real humor of the vertical. New York is the intersection of perpendicular hilarities.

One of the few uses of the term “abject” in *Journey* (at least according to the Marks translation) is in the description of blinded, criminal Robinson who “lay in . . . bed upstairs in an abject state of mind” (*Journey* 1934, 322; “Lui, dans leur lit de la chambre d’en haut menait pas large” [*Voyage* 290]). Yet this is only a page before we are told that Robinson “groaned under his bandages as soon as he heard me climbing the stairs.” Abjectness is proneness seeking an audience. Whenever there is abjectness, there is performance; whenever abjectness is exposed as exhibition, it is comic. It is comic because it should be prone but it is upright. “I was a hundred-percent sick,” says Bardamu, “I felt as if I had no further use for my legs, they just hung over the edge of my bed like unimportant and rather ridiculous objects” (*Journey* 1983, 148; “commes des choses négligeables et un peu comiques” [*Voyage* 158]). What is comic is that the essence of verticality should make itself visible as the sign of a complete horizontal impotence.

Napoleon said that a heroic speech would become comic if the orator sat down while orating. Céline implies the inverse: the abject monologue becomes comic when it stands up. David Letterman, stranger in New York, caffeinated when he should be sleepy, vertical when he should be supine, panning New York from the Empire State Building down, is the stand-up comedian par excellence. The gestalt of *talk show* stand-up realizes the implicit added dimension: Letterman is vertical when *we* are prostrate, but we take his attitude as our own. All Americans are now funny, not just Jewish comedians and gag writers straining for weekly material. (The average gag on the worst situation comedies now is funnier, judged in isolation, than the best gag on, say, *The Honeymooners*; and the terrorized look on Groucho’s contestants has faded from the face of the earth.) This eventuality — the comedification of America — is the most astounding fact about the American sensibility from 1960 to 1996. Where Bardamu meets America — in the New York illuminated night, on Broadway, at the Ed Sullivan Theater — is the stage on which, at the millennial end of his century, its abjection erects its last cross.

3. The King of Comedy

What is the fate of abjection in Martin Scorsese’s scarily intelligent film, *The King of Comedy*? It ought to be everywhere in the film, but seems to be nowhere. The pathetic comedian Rupert Pupkin (Robert DeNiro) should be abject but is utterly buoyant, directed, and simple in his psychosis. He knows where to seek the end of his night. Talk show superhost Jerry Langford (Jerry Lewis) should be symmetrically abject — if I have justified applying the term to David Letterman — but shows few signs of having any of the requisite boundaries whose permeability would horrify him. A first approximation of the

psychocomic situation is that neither has abjection because they have each other. Rupert Pupkin begins the movie in an exact copy of Jerry Langford's suit, and Jerry Langford ends the movie staring at multiple images, in multiple TVs, of Rupert Pupkin. When Rupert looks at Jerry, he sees his own body thrown off and replaced by an image, out of all time and space; when Jerry looks at Pupkin, he sees at a distance his own rejected body, rejected identity, rejected home.

One of the jokes of the movie is that to all appearances Jerry Langford is the real host of *The Tonight Show* and Rupert Pupkin the pretend host, yet the film gives Jerry Lewis the opportunity to pretend to be Johnny Carson (and along the way gives Tony Randall, playing "himself," the opportunity to pretend to be Jerry Langford). What does it mean to conclude that Jerry Lewis is to Johnny Carson as Rupert Pupkin is to Jerry Langford? It is almost precisely true to say that what Jerry Lewis gets to pretend to be is Protestant. When I first saw *The King of Comedy*, my initial reaction was: but don't they understand that Jerry Lewis cannot under any circumstances be the *Tonight Show* host? Its host must be a pseudo-hick with attitude arriving in New York from the heartland; he meets Jewishness there, and the chiasmus (stranger host from the provinces meets native guest from the home city) is the genius of the genre. He cannot be a Jew himself: one has only a distant memory of the ill-conceived *Joey Bishop Show*, whose only upshot was the subsequent glory of Joey's second banana, Regis Philbin.

My second reaction, however, is that the fate of Jerry Langford's Jewishness is the fate of his abjection. Not that Jewishness is the royal road to abjection — rather that Jerry Langford's own body is treated like pork in his desire for pure imagery. Jerry is installed, in *The King of Comedy*, in layers and corridors of WASPitude (played by Shelley Hack); like the heart of the Pentagon, he is protected from invasion not by locked doors or impregnable walls but rather by an aseptic maze. At his network office, or at his penthouse, or at his country home, Langford's life is a Nordic iceberg.

But when Pupkin penetrates Langford's country home, Jewishness reappears, though it is entirely unclear where. The Asian butler, Jonno, summons Langford home from his golf game, exclaiming over the phone, "I'm getting a heart attack, already." For the moment, only the Asian is a Jew. Yet when Jerry arrives on the scene, he manages to be, for perhaps the only moment of the film, expressively Jewish himself. Jerry kicks Rupert out of the house; making the pathetically tardy inference that Jerry (at a previous encounter) had only feigned kindness, Rupert says, belligerently, "So I made a mistake." "So did Hitler," Jerry counters. This riposte, I believe, could not have been in the script — it makes too little sense. It has all the marks of what passes in Jerry Lewis's mind for a witticism: it is cruel, sharp, and fast, it has the form of a joke, but it has no humor. Does Jerry Lewis (or Jerry Langford) forget at the moment who is in power? What mistake of Hitler's is he thinking of? All that is clear is that something that has been repressed returns: what Jerry Langford expels, Jerry Lewis ingests. This is a moment of abject reversibility, only possible if abjection is the sort of rotatable axis I have described. Céline claims to be the true victim of World War II, and Heller and Roth (and the Jewish comedians of their generation) enlist themselves as Céline's truest disciples.⁷

Meanwhile, Rupert (along with his accomplice, Masha, played by Sandra Bernhard) resolutely distances himself from all the New York nobodies and crazies with whom he manifestly has everything in common. As opposed to Jerry, who in this film is never anywhere in particular, Rupert is always somewhere. His comedy routine returns compulsively to his place of origin, Clifton, New Jersey; so does Rupert, who still lives in his mother's house. But Rupert has an insight: in the world of the media, other people may carry your body for you, like your golf clubs.

What Rupert does to Jerry is give him a body and a place. In Rupert's aura, Jerry's body turns out to be bizarrely locatable, his world bizarrely pregnable. In Rupert, at long last, Jerry must ruminate on what he has ejected. Rupert and Masha capture Jerry, sit him down, mummify his body; for one night he is in one home, not every home. When Jerry is ensconced in tape, the film cuts to the network office where Rupert's blackmail offer (in return for Jerry's body, he is to be allowed to appear on *The Jerry Langford Show*) is being discussed: "Suppose we tape him," somebody says, meaning, "suppose we agree to videotape the show with Rupert before committing ourselves to broadcasting it." The pun is really an anti-pun: tape locates Jerry in one chair and one body but displaces Rupert from his image. When the tape is, in fact, aired, Rupert stands proudly beside his own face; Jerry is looking at many identical images in a department store window; then Rupert's face begins to multiply across hundreds of copies of *Life*, *Newsweek*, *Rolling Stone*, and *People*. Mechanical reproduction is squared idealism: a machine is intelligence without content, insofar as it disembodies and dislocates on behalf of no value.

In fame America, you can lose your body (in images), your voice (when Jerry Langford phones the office and says that he is being held hostage, it is assumed that an impressionist is staging a gag), and your name (the movie begins with a distribution of autographs, some of them pseudonyms). Here is the logic of abjection taken to its grandest joke: at the end of the night, when we are on the verge of sleep, when our bodies seem so massive that sleeping itself seems an unfair burden, David Letterman conspires with Jerry Langford to stand up for velocity and lightness of being — all intelligence, no meaning. The dream is of a world that makes a joke of class, ethnicity, origins — of all situations. The American joke, 1960-1996 — which should not be thoughtlessly dismissed as a joke — is that, faced with the alienation of body, voice, and name, we perform it.

Notes

1. The *Family Feud* audience was asked in the early 1980s to "name an intellectual." The winners of the poll were Henry Kissinger, William Buckley, Joyce Brothers, and the host of the show, Richard Dawson, himself.
2. May 11, 1995.
3. I am not sure how everyone is in possession of the first anecdote; for the remark about Carson, see Schruers 32.
4. From Frankfurt to Birmingham, TV criticism has increasingly propped up its object, the TV audience. First proclaimed to be absorbed and catatonic,

then peripatetic and distracted, the TV audience is now conceived of as interactive and contumacious. For variations on the Birmingham view see Hall et al.; Fiske and Hartley; and Press. The point of my own essay is to explain how the TV audience as well as the TV star can be symmetrically and simultaneously absorbed, peripatetic, and interactive.

5. For Céline as symptom in Kristeva, see Hill.

6. Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit*; references to this edition, abbreviated *Voyage*, will be inserted parenthetically in the text. All translations, unless otherwise stated, are from the Manheim translation; references to this edition, abbreviated *Journey* 1983, will be inserted parenthetically in the text. Occasional reference is made to Marks's translation; references to this edition, abbreviated *Journey* 1934, will be inserted parenthetically in the text.

7. See the special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* entitled "Céline, USA." One of the recurring themes is the pervasive Jewishness of Céline's American audience; the phenomenon is first remarked by Dickstein, who notes the influence of Céline on Heller, Roth, and the sick comedians.

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