

Un Clown Biologique

Author(s): CARLO ROTELLA

Source: *The American Scholar*, Vol. 73, No. 4 (Autumn 2004), pp. 50-56

Published by: The Phi Beta Kappa Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41221325>

Accessed: 08-10-2018 18:09 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



*The Phi Beta Kappa Society* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The American Scholar*

JSTOR

# Un Clown Biologique

CARLO ROTELLA

When I was growing up in Chicago in the 1970s, a story persistently made the rounds in the usual way—it had happened to somebody twice removed from you, or somebody once removed from you had seen it happen—that a kid had cursed out Bozo the Clown on TV. It made sense to me. When you're too young to put away childish things and too old to continue enjoying them on their own terms, your choices narrow: cultivate ironic detachment, take up precocious dope smoking (did I mention that this was the 1970s?), or rail against fate. Cursing out a prominent clown in front of hundreds of thousands of witnesses would be an excellent example of option three.

The orange-fringe-coifed, blue-suited Bozo had a long-running live show on WGN, Channel 9, which prided itself on being Chicago's family station and sought an audience of small children, old people, and those in between who would rather be one or the other. WGN's programming included Cubs games in the afternoons, Sunday reruns of *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, and *Bozo's Circus* at noon on weekdays. Bozo's show meandered through rudimentary clown routines—"Well, if you forgot to put water in the bucket again, then there's no reason I shouldn't turn it upside down over my head like *this!*"—and an eleven-dollar cartoon (I see an animated Bozo on a scooter against a de Chirico backdrop, then my memory whites out) before arriving at a shattering climax in the form of the Grand Prize Game, in which contestants would stand behind a line on the floor and try to pitch a little ball into a row of six buckets extending away from the tosser.

---

~ Carlo Rotella, an associate professor of English at Boston College, last wrote for the SCHOLAR about Chicago blues (Autumn 2002). His most recent book, *Cut Time: An Education at the Fights*, grew from a SCHOLAR essay (Spring 2000) that was both the co-winner of the 2000 American Scholar Award for Best Essay and the winner for Best Work by a Younger Writer.

Even though the ball was prone to dubious aerodynamics and disappointing bounces, landing it in even the farthest bucket appeared to be absurdly easy, especially if the tosser leaned over from the waist. That's why the show's producers tended to pick little kids, too short or uncoordinated to manage the more distant buckets, to compete for the Grand Prize. Every once in a while, the selection process went awry and they picked a kid by mistake who was just too big, too competent. It made you feel slightly sick to watch a proto-adult nail the buckets one after another with the tight, swift certitude of a pool player running the table with money on the line.

One day, the story went, they picked a kid who was clearly too old for the Grand Prize Game. I pictured him as small for his age, which would have made him especially testy about being mistaken for a little kid, as he may have been by the producers. Once he had been picked, though, it was too late; there are no do-overs on a live show. As he descended from the stands to the stage and toed the line, it was obvious that the game would be beneath him. All he had to do was drop the ball in one bucket after another, like putting something in the trash. But he short-armed a toss and missed a bucket, and not the sixth one, either; more like the third or fourth. Once you missed, you were out. He muttered an audible expletive: "Shit," in most versions of the story. Different versions disagreed as to whether the next line, "That's a Bozo no-no," was delivered by Bozo himself or by his capon-like sidekick, Cooky. All versions agreed on that precise wording, and on the fact that the kid addressed his response to Bozo, but they disagreed about exactly what he said: "Shove it, clown," or "I got your Bozo no-no right here, clown" (with index finger pointing to his own crotch for emphasis), or, as most had it, "Fuck you, clown." I can't remember what, if anything, happened next in the story, but I picture auxiliary clowns arriving onstage to give the bum's rush to the kid, who sags in their double elbow grip, the bitter vigor having gone out of him all at once.

It all seemed plausible—the kid's mortification at having failed at a younger child's game, his anger at having to play out this humiliating scene with what poor grace he could muster, and perhaps his shame, too, at having secretly burned for the fleeting celebrity accorded a conqueror of the buckets. He had probably spent the previous week fantasizing about winning the first ovation of his young life. Perhaps he could not admit this ambition to his friends, or even to himself, but the clowns had brought the hidden load of feeling to the surface, as clowns will.

Plausible, but untrue. I am reliably informed that the story is a much-repeated urban legend, with distinct variants reported in Chicago, Boston, and Southern California, each of which had its own live Bozo show, its own Bozo. Two pieces of evidence purporting to confirm the truth of the story turn out to be false: somebody recorded a fake version of the episode for a compilation of TV bloopers (the kid says "Cram it, clownie"), and an unconvincing liar has come forward on the Internet (imagine that) claiming

to have been the foul-mouthed kid. Even when I first heard the story, when I was ten years old or so, I probably knew it wasn't true, but—like a lot of other people, which is what leads to urban legends—I consented to believe it was true. I *wanted* it to be true, because it spoke of feeling little and big at the same time, of being two things at once, itchily sharing space within a single changing skin.

**B**ack then I had a friend, Tom C., who seemingly bypassed adolescence and young adulthood entirely, emerging fully formed at the age of twelve—beefy, hirsute, with a taste for pipe tobacco and a nascent smoker's cough—as a parodic knockoff of the sort of fifty-two-year-old character who publishes poetry in obscure quarterlies, shows his paintings at galleries owned by his cronies, and adjuncts in theater arts or creative writing at local colleges. Tom C. lived on the next block, and we took the same bus home from school sometimes. In junior high he went through a phase in which he would walk a few blocks along the bus route after school to a bookstore, where he would set himself up on the sidewalk by the front door and thump on a small bongo drum while declaiming original verse—the whole performance intended as a friendly mockery of such things more than as an earnest instance of them. He began with a croaking singsong invocation: “Play the bongos of love! Play for love!” I liked riding the bus on those days. The driver would open the doors in front of the bookstore and Tom C., having bewildered passersby with his bonggoing and declaiming, would get on and become just another kid on his way home from school.

Tom C. cultivated a morbid fascination with clowns. Instead of merely doodling in class, he created obsessive dossiers of clown types: the savage Jester, the crocodile-teared Sad Clown, the enigmatic Bowler Hat, the rare Plume Clown, the annihilating Whiteface. He practiced different stylized ways of saying the word *clown*—drawing it out, barking it sharply, stretching his rubbery features to make a demented face while he said it, adopting a strangled or a booming voice—as if he could figure out what was hiding in the word by turning it inside out. He drew up clown scenarios and composed clown ditties, and invented ancient traditions to which they belonged. He tried to figure out if it would be worse to wake up one night to find a clown at the foot of your bed or to think you had dreamed it and then find a deflated balloon in your room the next morning. Once, at a street festival, we spent hours fleeing a clown on stilts who Tom C. felt was after him.

“This is freaking me out,” he would say at such times. “I’m freaking out because this is a freak-out.” He maintained a Freak Out Box at home, filling it with images he had found or made, masks and other bits of costume, scraps of poetry, and his masterpiece: a drawing known as “The Be-At,” featuring a Jester rampant on a field of diamond shapes, executed according to an original perspectival system of Tom C.’s own devising that made everyone who looked at it afraid. Tom C. trained himself to wake up in the night

and tape-record descriptions of his clown-filled dreams while they were fresh in his mind, and he kept his dream tape in the Freak Out Box, but one day he decided that listening to the tape might do him irreparable harm, so he destroyed it without ever playing it.

During freshman or sophomore year of high school, our French teacher assigned us the task of writing a short story; nothing special, just a narrative written in French. Most of us dutifully cobbled together something semi-grammatical that a child one-third our age might find tedious—“*Il était un chat qui s'appelait Henri . . .*” etc.—but not Tom C. He penned a stark little postmodern fable about an investigation into the murder of a clown, the kind of thing that Robbe-Grillet and Borges might have thrown together while listening to “*Houses of the Holy*.” All I remember of it with any certainty, besides that the French was high-flown and mostly wrong, is the final scene. The Inspector orders one of his assistants to remove the dead clown’s makeup so that the decedent’s identity can be ascertained, but the assistant reports back that it is impossible to remove the makeup because, as the story’s last line puts it, “*Il est un clown biologique.*” My familiarity with the collected works of the young Tom C. encourages me to assume that there had been an earlier scene in which the hyper-rational Inspector staked his reputation and his very sanity on the notion that penetrating the whiteface to discover the clown’s true identity would allow him to solve the case. I wonder what our French teacher thought when she read it. It being the 1970s, chances are she told her husband that this clown story her student had written was freaking her out, then took chemical steps to get mellow.

Twenty-two or -three years later, the April 9, 2001, issue of *The New Yorker* featured a short story by Michael Chabon titled “The God of Dark Laughter.” In that story, told with pitch-perfect command of the portentous mock-scholarly style appropriate to the form (in which phrases like “certain sacrificial artifacts pertaining to the worship of the proto-Urartian deity” serve the same function as compulsory figures once did in ice-skating competitions), an improbably erudite small-town district attorney in western Pennsylvania investigates the murder of a clown. During the course of the investigation, much of it conducted by reading arcane books, the DA stumbles upon an ancient cult of clown worshipers whose own clownish appearance is the result not just of makeup but of inbreeding that has produced hereditary natural whiteface. The coroner’s report theorizes that a depigmentation disorder known as vitiligo might have caused the white patches of skin he found on the dead clown’s nape and throat (the rest of the face being unavailable, as the murderer had peeled his victim’s head with a long, sharp knife). “Let the record show,” the DA adds, “that the contents of the victim’s makeup kit, when it was inventoried, included cold cream, rouge, red greasepaint, a powder puff, some brushes, cotton swabs, and five cans of foundation in a tint the label described as ‘Olive Male.’ There was no trace, however, of the white greasepaint with which clowns daub their

grinning faces.” In other words, *il est un clown biologique*.

How to reckon with this congruence of tales? (In addition to the *clown biologique*, Chabon’s story also features a baboon, a scholar who may or may not be a charlatan, a clown-slaying intruder who pays a visit to the hero in a dream, and other figures who would be cozily at home in Tom C.’s oeuvre.) I can see how two writers of the same generation, sharing not only some of the same esoteric interests but also perhaps the same fear of clowns, might have arrived separately at the same idea and given it similar expression, one in precocious adolescence, the other in the early middle period of a distinguished writing career in which he has lately turned for inspiration to childhood enthusiasms like comic books and coulrophobia. I can even entertain the possibility that *les clowns biologiques* might actually exist, and that Tom C. and Chabon might have separately encountered them—knowingly or not—and rendered the encounters in fictional form.

Then there’s this: Chabon is married to Ayelet Waldman, who attended Wesleyan University in the 1980s, where in her freshman year she lived on the same hall as one Wilson “Bob” McDermut of Chicago, whom I have known since nursery school and who has known Tom C. almost as long. Bob remembers telling her about Tom C.’s French story at some point during that freshman year of college, so it may be that the *clown biologique* traveled by word of mouth from Tom C. to Bob to Waldman to Chabon, who would, according to the practical give-and-take of the storytelling trade, be welcome to make what he could of it. We cannot compare the texts in greater detail because the only copy of Tom C.’s story has been lost, presumably destroyed, and neither he nor I can remember much about it—other than that it was written in a crabbèd script and employed certain curious usages and spellings of an arcane nature that have long since passed from the knowledge of humankind. I do feel obliged to observe, though, that the story of the *clown biologique* really loses something if you don’t read it in the original French.

I guess I do not honestly believe that Tom C. influenced Chabon. But I like to think he did, because it would please me to know that the precocious aesthete and poetaster with whom I grew up persists as a literary subtext, even if the adult Tom C.—an insurance man and financial planner with a disused Ph.D. in early modern German intellectual history, who has not drawn a Plume Clown or tossed off a rhymed couplet in many years—no longer bears much trace of the kid who believed it incumbent upon a thinking person to maintain a well-stocked Freak Out Box.

**P**hil, another hulking childhood friend from Chicago, actually became a clown in adulthood (which would make him *non-biologique*, of course). After years as an actor and improv comedian, he moved to Toronto and began studying with Sue Morrison, who apprenticed under Richard Pochinko, Canada’s great clown teacher, who died in 1989 and still com-

mands a worshipful following in certain pratfall-taking circles. Pochinko studied with Jacques Lecoq, a French red-nose classicist, and with an American Indian clown sensei known as Jonsmith. Pochinko-derived clowns abound in Toronto, exploring variants of the master's synthesis, which trails centuries-deep roots in the *commedia dell'arte* as well as in Old World and New World folk traditions.

The Pochinko school places therapeutic emphasis on finding your inner clown and ideological emphasis on tricksterish truth seeking, neither of which necessarily subsumes itself to the showbiz priority of making 'em laugh. Pochinko clowning can get itchy with the tension between different imperatives coexisting in one greasepainted skin. Phil told me a distinctively Torontonian war story about a soiree held at the performance space operated by Mump and Smoot, a duo known as "Canada's Clowns of Horror," who are Pochinko's most successful students and also—not coincidentally—his most practically showbiz-minded. Phil was slated to go on late in the show, which made for a trying backstage wait. "You have to be in your clown before you go onstage," he told me, "but it's hard to be in clown backstage for an hour; it's too tiring. So you don't get into your clown, you just sit around, and you're just you. Meanwhile, everybody else who's on before you is in their clown, and they're messing with you, because they're *clowns*. And you're like, 'Okay, Jingles, whatever you say.'" The emcee clown for the show, an unpredictable fellow who prized his self-image as an edgy performer, took a break offstage during the first half of the show. During this break he reported a sudden inspiration: Phil, whose clown was a gentle stooge named Bunce, should come onstage just before intermission and hit him with a folding chair. Phil was hesitant, but the emcee insisted that it would work brilliantly, pulling together certain dramatic threads that had developed in the show's first half. There was no time to explain further. They hurriedly rehearsed the chair routine before the emcee had to rush back onstage again.

When it came time to do the chair stunt in earnest, they missed connections and Phil-as-Bunce ended up whacking the emcee flush on the temple, rather than conking him lightly across the back. The audience gasped as the emcee went down like a steer under the stunner's tool at a slaughterhouse. "I go offstage," Phil told me, "then I come back a minute later—I'm still Bunce—and check him out. Under my breath I ask if he's okay. No answer. The audience is freaking out. So I signal for intermission." A few minutes later, with concerned clowns grouped around him, the emcee leaped up and exclaimed, "That was great!" as if he had been playing possum the whole time. Phil didn't buy it. "I think he was out cold for a while—I felt it when I hit him—but he tried to play it off like it had all been part of his idea." The moral of the story? "A little more Mump and Smoot would have been good there. More theatricality, more rehearsing, not so much going by the seat of the pants for a big moment of psychological

truth, or whatever he was after.”

A few years ago, when I was playing hooky from an academic conference held in Toronto, Phil took me to a party hosted by Sue Morrison. After visiting the refrigerator to get myself a beer and poking around the house a bit, I suddenly realized that everybody there except me was a clown. I had known there would be clowns present, of course, but an evening in bars had somehow distracted me from considering that there would come a moment when I found myself among them. In street clothes they looked like graduate students, and they seemed self-consciously arty, like actors in experimental theater or serious mimes. (I figure Bozo or Cooky in mufti, by contrast, would act like a plaid-jacketed Rotarian.) Still, they were clowns, and they talked shop. Somebody was saying that he had done a turn at a children’s show that had gone especially well because he had experienced a breakthrough onstage, a cathartic reversal of inner polarities—terror and joy, innocence and experience. The therapeutic triumph seemed to be the point of the story, although he did not fail to make clear that the kids had in fact loved him. “I killed,” he said. “I totally killed.”

Where was Tom C. when I needed him? Writing second-to-die life insurance policies. I could have used the Van Helsing-like assistance of the inventor of the Freak Out Box earlier that day, too, when Phil scared the hell out of me by putting on his nose. “Check this out,” he said, and turned away to fit it over his face. It was just a hollow red plastic ball on a thin white elastic, but when he turned to me it had transformed him. His features grew still and opaque, rearranging themselves around the nose. I was struck by the sudden quiet; we were in his apartment, and I could hear traffic sounds outside. The clown before me, a giant stranger who had devoured Phil, gave me a “What next?” look, distressingly full of possibility. If his tongue had unfurled sixteen feet out of his mouth while making an ah-ooga sound, or if his head had swiveled all the way around and then sailed off his neck at a crazy jack-in-the-box angle, I would have been frightened but not particularly surprised. Phil always liked softball, I was thinking, so I could probably find a bat somewhere in the apartment. Would aluminum or wood work better against a clown? It gets cold in Canada, so there might be a fireplace, and if there’s a fireplace there ought to be a poker. Or perhaps a steak knife from the kitchen. Or garlic—no, garlic doesn’t work against clowns. Nothing works against clowns. Then he took off the nose and he was almost entirely Phil again.