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My Satirical Self

By WYATT MASON

Lately, my father has been angry. Seventy-nine, a veteran of the U.S. Navy, a lifelong dues-paying member of three labor unions and now a collector of Social Security, my father, temperamentally a gentle person, is often filled with rage. The news does this to him, not so much the stories of tsunamis or hurricanes or any instances of environmental malice that lawyers call "acts of God." No, acts of God fill my godless, liberal father with melancholy, if not sorrow, over the inequity of the world, whereas it is the iniquity of the world, what you might call "acts of man," that are, these days, driving him to distraction. My father's solution to such furies, dependable as the daily newspaper, to the anger that sets upon him when he learns of the latest folly in the corridors of power, is to turn to the op-ed pages. For our purposes here, it hardly matters who is writing, though, naturally, he has his favorites. What matters to him is that every day, in those well-reasoned column inches, he finds a mirror for his rage.

Whereas, over the same period, his son has managed not to be angry, not in the least. Thirty-seven, a veteran of nothing, a subscription-paying reader of two magazines, a person whose Social Security pay-in, so far, is a sad little sum, I am, just as often as my father is furious, filled with mirth. Yes, I am aware of the disasters of the world, and they affect me no less deeply than they do him. What's more, my father and I are of one mind about the inveterate folly, craven hypocrisy, unchecked greed, rampant abuse of office, ugly abuse of trust, vile abuse of language and galloping display of ignorance that has become a daily standard. And yes, I should admit that when I happen to think about such matters -- when, say, my father phones me to chew over some morsel of maddening news -- I find myself overtaken by a most unpleasant feeling. I imagine it is not unlike what must be suffered by a man who returns home after a long day's work to find, in his absence, that his lovely house has been looted. And whereas my father, standing, as it were, at the front door of that plundered house, has come to find temporary shelter nearby, in reason -- the arguments marshaled by those whose views he shares -- I have found no relief in such reading, which lately I have forgone.

In its stead, though, I have found a way not to be angry at all.

I have taken shelter in the ridiculous.

Imagine, for example, another warm morning in August 2005. The national atmosphere that summer was humid with talk of intelligent design, the evangelical putsch -- in Pennsylvania, in Kansas, in America -- to see pseudoscience imparted to our keen young scholars in place of the theory of evolution. My father, I knew, would be calling on such a day (and did) to rail thereupon. "Did you read Paul Krugman?" my father asked.

"Of course," I replied, "I did not read Paul Krugman."

What did I read? A newspaper I keep bookmarked on my computer browser and which, among many destinations, I visit every morning. Here, in part, is what it read:

Evangelical Scientists Refute Gravity With New "Intelligent Falling" Theory

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Kansas City, KS -- As the debate over the teaching of evolution in public schools continues, a new controversy over the science curriculum arose Monday in this embattled Midwestern state. Scientists from the Evangelical Center for Faith-Based Reasoning are now asserting that the long-held "theory of gravity" is flawed, and they have responded to it with a new theory of Intelligent Falling.

"Things fall not because they are acted upon by some gravitational force, but because a higher intelligence, 'God' if you will, is pushing them down," said Gabriel Burdett, who holds degrees in education, applied Scripture and physics from Oral Roberts University.

Should N.S.A. satellite footage surface of me reading the above report -- which appeared in The Onion: America's Finest News Source -- you would witness me nodding with pleasure, shaking with delight and laughing aloud (or, more accurately, snorting un-self-consciously). Why is this man snorting? I am doing so with relief, saved, as I was, from having to endure another reasonable argument in unreasonable times. This is, after all, a country where anyone is free to believe that the fingerprints of the Creator, however small, are discernible on even the tiniest microorganism (just as I am free to hold my sober conviction that chocolate rainbows pave the way to a heaven made of fudge). And yet, to my uncaffeinated morning self, intelligent design seemed as brusque a turn of the American evangelical screw as I had encountered -- a crude, anticonstitutional crack at marrying church to state. It was just too ridiculous! How ridiculous was it? Pretty perfectly on par, I'd have to say, with the refutation, along evangelical lines, of gravity.

That comedic turn, that comedic tone -- a smart blend of parody and hyperbole and mockery -- provided, that day, a remedy for my rage: it got channeled smoothly into ridicule. And that channel -- a broadband of joco-serious rebuke -- has been eating up the major part of my personal market share. As much as caffeine has become a matutinal necessity, a means of brokering, yet again, an uneasy truce with daylight, the kind of laughter -- a well-aimed dart -- induced by the larky bulletin above has become a no less necessary stimulant. How I hunger for that knowing tone! Like our little friend the lab rat at his lever -- all a-jitter from another marching-powder marathon -- I have acquired a taste for an addictive brand of fun.

Which means, of course, that I'm in luck: for that tone has been resonating through every echelon of American culture, a shift affecting and informing every storytelling medium, whether factual or fictional. The Onion, of course, is only where my day gets cooking. Other browser bookmarks send me to half a dozen sites where I hope to extract similarly intemperate snorts. The best of these, for sure, I forward along to friends -- fellow traffickers in yuks -- who, young and old, unfailingly send me links found during their own morning frolics. These I follow no less intrepidly than Theseus did Ariadne's thread, leading me, once again, out of my labyrinth of rage to that happier place: YouTube. There, with a dependability that would make a demographer pump his fist and an advertiser lose his shirt, I watch segments from "The Daily Show" and its spinoff, "The Colbert Report" (programs that, funnily enough, poached The Onion's top writers). In such shows, then, I find that tone -- so knowing, so over it, so smart, so asinine. And given the choice, these days, between a smartass and, well, a dumb ass, even the Academy Awards, that most treacle-toned of evenings, picked this year's host from that clever category.

And picking the smartass, it seems, is what we've been doing, across the televised board. We've been tuning in to "The Simpsons" (in its 18th season, the longest-running sitcom in television history), which pokes tirelessly away at the idea of the American family, not to say America. We've been turning on "South Park" (in its 10th season, the longest-running sitcom in cable-television history), with its

bile-tongued children probing every asininity (and which made a successful trip to the big screen in "South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut"). We've been ordering in "Chappelle's Show" (the top-selling DVD of a television series in, well. . .DVD history), with its now-embittered impresario, who, erewhile, was acid-tongued as he chewed up (and out) another cracker, whistling all the way. We've been showing up at "The Office," in branches on either side of the Atlantic, each of which, with regionally adjusted inflections, paws away at its constricting white collar (not to say its creator's later "Extras" -- another kind of office, a celebrity waiting room with sexier furniture). Like the soulless producer in the Coen brothers' "Barton Fink," our Hollywood executives have been courting the equivalent of That Barton Fink Feeling: that ubiquitous tone -- so "young," so "hip," so "edgy." Like the lava lamp of yore, it has been tucked into the hot corner of every room, whether "Da Ali G Show," "Curb Your Enthusiasm," "Boondocks," "American Dad!," "King of the Hill," "The Thick of It" or, on the big screen, the no less knowing "Dawns" -- and Shaun -- "of the Dead," "American Dreamz" and "Thank You for Smoking."

But if we were to think that that tone -- so sarcastic, so ironic, so sardonic -- were trapped within entertainments trundled onto screens, we would be wrong. It has pervaded literary fiction for decades, from Joseph Heller's "Catch-22" to Philip Roth's "Our Gang" to David Foster Wallace's "Infinite Jest." No surprise, then, that it should feature in the work of our most heralded young authors of the past year, whether Gary Shteyngart's unbridled "Absurdistan," Colson Whitehead's mocking "Apex Hides the Hurt," Marisha Pessl's madcap "Special Topics in Calamity Physics," not to mention books by our more seasoned storytellers -- "In Persuasion Nation," by George Saunders; "The Diviners," by Rick Moody; "Little Children," by Tom Perotta; and "A Changed Man," by Francine Prose.

All of these varied entertainments -- human emanations on the Web, on television, at the movies and between hardcovers (whatever their differences in ambition, conception and achievement) -- are attuned to the ridiculous in modern life. They are all, in other words, satirical: they revel in, and trade on, knowingness. And if we seem to be enjoying a sort of golden age of the satirical, that invites the question How successfully does satire serve our culture? That there is so much might seem proof of its expediency. After all, what could be wrong with a mode of expression that orients a critical, comical eye to flaws in the contemporary weave? And yet, you might wonder, as well, whether a culture can have too much of that knowing tone and, if so, just what that "too much" might mean.

The ancient Romans provide the beginnings of an answer, in large measure because that's where satire has its beginnings. Just as Americans like to claim jazz as "our art form," the Romans claimed satire as theirs. Gaius Lucilius (second century B.C.) was the first satirist, a writer vocal about the negative virtues of his fellow citizens -- mostly the tendency to imitate their Greek neighbors in everything. As boastful as a modern-day rapper, Lucilius pointed to himself as the original Roman -- not some Helleno-wannabe -- as much because of what he lampooned (things Greek) as the fact that he lampooned at all. I am Roman, his writings say, hear me mock. And indeed, it was how such criticism was delivered that made satire different -- and differently effective -- from, say, a sermon. "A cultivated wit," wrote Horace, a later Roman satirist, "one that badgers less, can persuade all the more. Artful ridicule can address contentious issues more competently and vigorously than can severity alone." Sounding like the always-fulminating Lewis Black of "The Daily Show," Rome's Juvenal tells us: "It is harder not to write satire. For who could endure this monstrous city, however callous at heart, and swallow his wrath?. . .Today, every vice has reached its ruinous zenith. So, satirist, hoist your sails." The idiot wind, blowing every time Rome's hypocrites moved their mouths, drove her satirists, in their artful way, to bluster back, setting a course pursued by writers living in turbulent eras ever since.

When, in 1729, the Tory politician Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) published his satirical "A Modest Proposal" -- which, in the straight-faced language of a sermon, advocated solving the problem of poverty

by selling Irish children as meat -- his mode was perfectly ironic. Swift did not wish to see his countrymen's children ground into shepherd's pies. Rather, he wanted to level an attack on political opponents who were devouring the Irish people. Swift, then, was approaching a troubling question upside down and intimating a sarcastic answer. (As such, Stephen Colbert, in parodying Bill O'Reilly's extreme rhetoric, is fully Swiftian: "The Colbert Report" works to convince us of the opposite of its host's every misguided opinion.) For Swift's part, he believed that satire was a way of "prompting men of genius and virtue to mend the world as far as they are able." His fellow Augustan Alexander Pope wrote, "When truth or virtue an affront endures, the affront is mine, my friend, and should be yours." And although satire could not be a remedy in and of itself, it was doing a good deal, Pope assured, when it could "deter, if not reform."

Indeed, this elegant, not to say defiant, means of addressing "affronts" to truth has proved a liberating mode of expression for authors across the ages, from Chaucer to Cervantes to Voltaire. Most comprehensible of all, perhaps, is the attraction that so insubordinate a brand of comedy, a very free kind of speech, held for writers in a country formed through insubordination -- our own. Prerevolutionary America was rife with satirical pamphleteers, and even Benjamin Franklin, in his "Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One," lampooned the misadministration of the colonies. And yet, when readers today experience the best satires of our past, editorial points that once took center stage now shuffle toward the wings. Whether in the rueful parody of Mark Twain's "War Prayer" ("It was a time of great and exalting excitement"), the wicked ironies of Ambrose Bierce's "Devil's Dictionary" ("Conversation, n. A fair for the display of the minor mental commodities, each exhibitor being too intent upon the arrangement of his own wares to observe those of his neighbor") or even the mordant sarcasm of Dorothy Parker's "Comment" --

Oh, life is a glorious cycle of song,

A medley of extemporanea;

And love is a thing that can never go wrong;

And I am Marie of Roumania.

-- we are responding, not so much to the underlying "point" each author makes as to the virtuosity of its execution, the satirist's fine ear for language, the pleasurable spectacle of seeing words used originally, used well. Yes, as it happens, Parker, Bierce and Twain are making timeless points: love, often unlovely; conversation, frequently dull; war, not exalting. No one, though, would needlepoint these revelations onto pillows -- they're old news. In the hands of an adept satirist, however, the old news satire brings becomes a special report. It reads, in part, that human civilization is not so wonderful: look, satire testifies, at the latest, artless shenanigans we've gotten ourselves into. But the report also shows that human civilization can be wonderful: look, satire says, at how artful we can be.

Satire, then, signals both the sickness and health of a society in equal measure: it showcases the vigor of the satirist and the debility of the satiree. As such, we might conclude, in America, that its abundance suggests a normal balance of destructive yin and creative yang, a human need to view the most vexing frailties of a culture through the liberating prism of lampoon.

An episode of "South Park" from last year, "Best Friends Forever," was shown on the eve of Terri Schiavo's final day, inspired by the grim battle among family members. Their private tragedy, we know well, became a series of loggerheaded squabbles in which efforts to reach consensus on what we mean by "human life" rapidly devolved. The creators of "South Park" addressed this rhetorical erosion with no

small insight and freakish speed. (Like all their episodes, this one was produced in less than a week.) Kenny, the accident-prone child, is killed by an ice cream truck while playing his Sony PSP -- the portable game console that, last year, was the grail of children everywhere. At the reading of Kenny's will, Cartman, the obese, morally repugnant child who, on another episode, ate the parents of a kid he disliked, is left the PSP. Alas for Cartman, Kenny, dead for almost 24 hours, is belatedly revived. Now on a feeding tube and, as his doctor explains, in "a persistive vegetative state. . .like a tomato," Kenny is, by law, alive. Kenny's possessions, therefore, revert to him. As Cartman goes to the Colorado Supreme Court to seek the removal of Kenny's feeding tube (so he can get the PSP), Kenny's more altruistic friends, Kyle and Stan, court the media: "We'll make everyone in the country know that they're killing Kenny."

The national uproar that ensued on this cartoon was, in temper, not a great deal more cartoonish than the one that was playing out that evening in Schiavo's real America. The episode, however distorted by crudity, mirrored the polarizing rage of our citizenry, recalling nothing so much as Ambrose Bierce's satirical definition of conversation. The genius of "South Park," scatologically over the top though it tends to be (Oprah, this season, was kidnapped at gunpoint by her vagina), is how it nonetheless manages, with glee, to go after everyone, artfully sketching our society's inability to make sense of itself, to itself.

Another target that our satirists have been skewering is our confusion about the responsibility that corporations, governments or, indeed, parents, have to tell the truth. Released in the spring of 2005, "Thank You for Smoking" (adapted from Christopher Buckley's very funny novel) featured the charismatic tobacco-industry lobbyist Nick Naylor, a villain with a hero's face and a salesman's mouth. As one senator puts it, "The man shills. . .for a living," a profession about which Nick's son is curious. Joey, 12, understands that his father makes arguments on behalf of corporations, but given that the corporation in question manufactures death, he wonders what happens when his father's arguments are wrong:

NICK: Joey, I'm never wrong.

JOEY: But you can't always be right.

NICK: Well, if it's your job to be right, then you're never wrong.

JOEY: But what if you are wrong?

NICK: O.K. Let's say that you're defending chocolate, and I'm defending vanilla. Now, if I were to say to you, "Vanilla is the best flavor ice cream," you'd say. . .

JOEY: No, chocolate is.

NICK: Exactly. But you can't win that argument. So, I'll ask you, "So you think chocolate is the end all and be all of ice cream, do you?"

JOEY: It's the best ice cream. I wouldn't order any other.

NICK: Oh, so it's all chocolate for you, is it?

JOEY: Yes, chocolate is all I need.

NICK: Well, I need more than chocolate. And for that matter, I need more than vanilla. I believe that we need freedom, and choice when it comes to our ice cream, and that, Joey Naylor, that is the definition of liberty.

JOEY: But that's not what we're talking about.

NICK: Ah. But that's what I'm talking about.

JOEY: But. . .you didn't prove that vanilla's the best.

NICK: I didn't have to. I proved that you're wrong, and if you're wrong, I'm right.

JOEY: But you still didn't convince me.

NICK: I'm not after you. I'm after them.

Nick's "them" are the people beyond the table where they sit, the wider world he would have believe that smoking is an expression of freedom. For Nick, "liberty" is merely rhetorical: it is, as he says, what he's "talking about." He doesn't mean a word of it: he only means to win. The truth is not his -- or, we are to understand, perhaps no longer our -- business.

The business of scoring this frustratingly debased game of contemporary conversation has been the main focus of "The Daily Show." Stewart et al. have built careers as liberal foils to conservative talk radio. Where the Limbaughosphere thrives on a muscular, hectoring rhetoric, the mode of "The Daily Show" has been a lampooning of such bullying. Although "The Daily Show" can revel in the same kind of posturing, even if the stance is far more liberal, the best of its work is restrained in the Horatian manner. The show's "artful ridicule" is at its most scrupulous when attentive to, critical of and vocal about abuses of language. When James Frey, author of the fraudulent memoir "A Million Little Pieces," was being torn apart by an array of talking heads indignant over his distortions, Stewart offered a deadpan summation that spoke to the perfervid journalistic outrage. Pundits were upset with Frey, Stewart explained, "because he misled us. . .into a book we had no business getting into." Armed with scrupulous syntax alone, Stewart ironically evoked two infamies that rhymed with Frey's: the claim that the Bush administration had misled us into war and the observation that the media, so severe in its judgments of Frey's lie-world, had remained less dogged before the administration's possible untruths.

This is artful indeed, but a high point both for "The Daily Show" and contemporary satire more generally came shortly after The New Yorker published Seymour Hersh's 2004 exposé, "Torture at Abu Ghraib." There was genuine shock, both here and abroad, that a prison taken from a dictator who had used it to torture Iraqi dissidents had in turn served as a forum for the torture of Iraqis by their American "liberators." Much of our high-flown rhetoric, billowing grandly over Operation Iraqi Freedom, collapsed on the mast. The irony -- uncomplicatedly galling -- seemed obvious enough, but its precise grade was measured nowhere more finely than in an exchange between Stewart and Rob Corddry, a player who has since departed. As Corddry explained to Stewart, his voice that of a schoolteacher instructing an uncommonly simple-minded child:

Jon, there's no question what took place in that prison was horrible, but the Arab world has to realize that the U.S. shouldn't be judged on the actions of a. . .well, that we shouldn't be judged on actions. It's our principles that matter; our inspiring, abstract notions. Remember, Jon, just because torturing prisoners is something we did doesn't mean it's something we would do.

This is not, as it is sometimes called, "fake news"; rather, blunt satire. Co-opting the patronizing, abstraction-rich rhetoric of the administration of which "The Daily Show" has often been critical, Corddry shined a bright light on an empty set of bromides. All too clearly, words can prove seductive -- but only to a point: the point where such seductions become fundamentally ridiculous.

Of recent examples of American satire, though, most remarkable may be Stephen Colbert's appearance this spring at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner. For anyone familiar with Colbert's lampoonery on "The Daily Show," not to say his rise to headlining "The Colbert Report," it was something to see him following in the footsteps of Cedric the Entertainer, Jay Leno and Drew Carey -- comedians who most recently tummled at the pleasure of the president. Whatever your tastes, we can agree that they are creatures of the mainstream. Whereas Colbert is nothing if not a critic of that mainstream, one traveling its trashy wake. Consider, then, his straight-faced, pseudoconservative patter, as he expressed, that night, his parodic support of a president sitting a few feet away:

I stand by this man. I stand by this man because he stands for things. Not only for things, he stands on things. Things like aircraft carriers and rubble and recently flooded city squares. And that sends a strong message: that no matter what happens to America, she will always rebound -- with the most powerfully staged photo ops in the world.

Or how he "defended" the administration's apparently chaotic profile:

Everybody asks for personnel changes. So, the White House has personnel changes. And then you write, "Oh, they're just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic." First of all, that is a terrible metaphor. This administration is not sinking. This administration is soaring. If anything, they are rearranging the deck chairs on the Hindenburg!

And how he reproached the "liberal press that's destroying America" for its lack of professionalism:

Let's review the rules. Here's how it works: the president makes decisions. He's the Decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type. Just put 'em through a spell-check and go home. Get to know your family again. Make love to your wife. Write that novel you got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration. You know -- fiction!

To go by the media swirl that followed, Colbert's speech that night represents in our culture a culmination of what satire does well or, rather, cannot but do: when it bends to kiss a hand, it bites. Such Lucilian ferocity drew the intended attention. By a great many journalists, Colbert's "antics" were deemed abusive, discourteous, tasteless. And yet, by a great many citizens, Colbert's appearance was a moment of hallelujah: he made many people -- most poignantly the press -- uncomfortable. Colbert stood in their midst, yes, but stood apart, just as the first Roman satirists stood apart, initially from things Greek and then from the corruption that flooded the mainstream. Whatever its latest stance, satire always finds its footing high above the polluted river of a culture, a vantage point from which it taunts. From Juvenal to Swift, from Franklin to Twain: each stood above his era's lies and, from such a lofty perspective, named the truths of his time.

The appeal of such a mode of discourse to any vice-blighted age is understandable: it provides another means to editorial ends. And yet, more than merely editorializing, it also demonstrates a capacity for better behavior in human beings -- our creativity, our subtlety, our panache. That so many people are responding to satire in the public square, and, indeed, that so much satire is thriving at a center usually held by more anodyne entertainments, suggests our hunger for the better -- the better articulated, the

better said, the better thought, the better done.

At the outset, I said I had taken shelter in the ridiculous. Upon reflection, the ridiculous may not be the most well shielded of retreats. Can you take shelter in the ridiculous if everywhere becomes ridiculous? For the tools of satire, the sharp knives of sarcasm and the pointy shivs of irony and the toy hammer of lampoon are being wielded with widespread enthusiasm, and not merely by cunning builders of satirical speeches and stories. Rather, they are being lent to us all, to enable every possible construction. Did you hear, for example, the news conference President Bush gave in Germany over the summer? "I'm looking forward to the feast you're going to have tonight," he said to the German chancellor in a moment of folksy charm, "and I understand that I may have the honor of slicing the pig." This drew laughs, and when his remarks wound down, the president repeated, "I'm looking forward to that pig tonight." This before fielding the following from a reporter:

"Does it concern you," the man asked, stuttering, "that the Beirut airport has been bombed, and do you see a risk of triggering a wider war? And on Iran, they've so far refused to respond. Is it now past the deadline, or do they still have more time to respond?"

"I thought," Bush replied, "you were going to ask about the pig."

Try to ignore, if you can, the image of the carcass of a pig, Bush poised, knife in hand, ready to carve. Consider instead that when asked on an international stage about real carnage -- about spreading violence in the Middle East, about a constellation of worries suggesting a world at the brink of war -- the president's reply did not take the questioner's inquiry seriously but, rather, sarcastically. His rhetoric sounded less like that of a steward of state -- one addressing serious matters with sobriety -- than that of a smartass. And this was not Juvenal's sarcasm, or Twain's, or even Colbert's: it was not elegantly tuned to a point nor artfully part of a formal design. It was, instead, almost perfectly inappropriate and, of course, not unindicative of the president's normal rhetorical mode. For it is not, I think, as is so often said, that the president is as much inarticulate as he is too clearly articulate, in a way: his tone, consistently condescending, betrays his sense of being, like a satirist, above those he calls down to. And that tone -- carelessly sarcastic, thoughtlessly ironic, indiscriminately sardonic -- that is the very one you now find everywhere. Bush is us; Bush is me: his is the same sarcasm I employ when I tell my father, once again, that of course I didn't read today's op-ed.

It makes me wonder what happens when the language of argument and the language of ridicule become the same, when the address of a potentate is voiced no more soberly than the goofings of some rube. Perhaps that leveling of language merely passes, the rhetorical registers recalibrated by nothing so much as an unfolding of the days. Or perhaps there's another way of putting it, one voiced by President Bush himself. After Colbert, after Germany, just before Labor Day, there was yet another news conference, one that found the president asking the press corps -- who so lately protested their mistreatment at satirical hands -- how long they were to be stationed in a temporary briefing room across from their typical quarters. "The decision will be made by commanders on the ground," cracked one. "There's no timetable," went another. "What do you think this is," quipped the president, "the correspondents' dinner or something?"

That, it seems to me, is an excellent question.

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