"Damn, Brother! I Don't Believe I'd a Told That!"
Humor and the Cultural Identity of the American South

by

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I first set foot in this hallowed structure in September 1965 to attend a freshman orientation session presided over by none other than the University of Georgia's legendary dean of men, William Tate, who was both a great wit and an old-school practitioner of what is now known as "tough love." As Dean Tate set me and several hundred of my classmates straight on the great many things that might incur his wrath, he softened his stern admonitions with a number of interspersed and disarming one-liners. The one I recall most vividly after all these years is his observation that the baby boomer-induced, on-campus housing crunch would be mitigated at least a bit that year by the admission of a particularly large contingent of southern Baptists, who were typically so narrow that three of them could share a single bed. The ensuing sprinkle of no more than polite laughter suggested that his quip had gone right over most of the student heads in the Chapel that day. Still, as I look back on it now, I am struck by the quintessential "southernness" of Dean Tate's use of what he honestly believed was "insider" humor to signal to an auditorium filled with anxious eighteen-year-old boys that while he expected to be seen as an authority figure, he hoped at least to be understood as an empathetic one.

A year before my first visit to the Chapel, a fellow named Lewis Grizzard doubtless sat here listening to a similar and perhaps identical Dean Tate monologue. On his way to fame as a southern humorist, Grizzard popularized a story that actually inspired this little talk. Distressed by a steady shrinkage in both attendance and the contents of the offering plate, the minister vowed to light a fire under his complacent congregation by calling on them to make public confessions of their most egregious sins, "Come on now," he demanded, "I want each and every one of you to tell it all," and when the first congregant rose to confess to gambling away his paycheck, the preacher's response was "That's it! Tell it all, Brother! Tell it all!" And so it went, as one after another member of his distressingly wayward flock offered a steady stream of shocking revelations about their drinking ("Tell it all, Brother! Tell it all!"), fighting ("Tell it all, Brother! Tell it all!"), and adultery ("Tell it all, Brother! Tell it All!") until finally there remained but one unburdened sinner, who, under a steady barrage from the pulpit of "Tell it all, Brother! Tell it all!" rose hesitantly from the back pew to admit, "Well, preacher, I had sex with a goat last week," only to hear the preacher immediately exclaim, "Damn, Brother! I don't believe I'd a told that!"

I think the odds are pretty good that French philosopher and Nobel Laureate Henri Bergson never heard this joke, but he did insist that "to understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one . . . Laughter must have a social significance." Apropos of Bergson's remarks, the foregoing story seems to suggest that while many residents of the Bible Belt South may have indeed believed that God's forgiving grace was boundless, their own definitely had its limits.

It may seem incongruous that, in a region where Bibles are sold in tire stores and everyone is presumed either to have or be searching for "a church home," so many jokes showed so little reverence for institutionalized religion, the clergy, or even the admonitions of the Holy Scriptures. Although Dean Tate was a Methodist, he delivered his little dig at the Baptists knowing full well that their perceived dogmatism had long invited far sharper ridicule. His fellow Methodist Lewis Grizzard even observed that things must really be changing in the South because the Baptists were finally starting to make eye contact with each other in the liquor store. In reality, the profusion of such jokes in the Bible-bound South simply illustrates the socially interpretive potential of humor, which, by its inherently subversive nature, is typically directed at absolute taboos or iconic figures and precepts. Thus it provides invaluable clues about a society's social and cultural sore spots, the places where its norms and constraints bind a little too tightly or the rough edges of its history have left a wound that resolutely refuses to be healed.

Just such a wound plagued General Robert Toombs. Although his youthful proclivity for mayhem led to his untimely dismissal from this institution, the flamboyant Toombs's exploits and legend are chronicled on a marker a few feet from this building. Toombs became an influential and thoroughly committed secessionist, and as the war clouds gathered in 1861, he supposedly encountered a coquettish southern belle who twirled her parasol, blinked her eyes, and demanded to know, "General Toombs, do you really think we can whip them Yankees?" The supremely confident Toombs reassured her immediately; "Why, my dear, don't you worry yo' pretty little head. We can whup them Yankees with cornstalks."

Four years later, Toombs, looking considerably less confident, had the misfortune to encounter the same female, who, looking not so young and feeling not so coquettish herself, accosted him straightway. "General Toombs, you said we could whip them Yankees with cornstalks!" "Yes, my dear, I did," the quickwitteddowncast Toombs readily conceded, "but the sons-a-bitches wouldn't fight with cornstalks!" I wish that I could report that the resolutely unreconstructed Toombs was eventually able to put his resentment of the Yankees behind him, but when queried about efforts to extinguish the Great Chicago fire in 1871, he reported that, even though all possible resources had been marshaled against the flames, "The wind is still in our favor."

Although such stories have much to tell us about the inner workings of the South's complex and constantly evolving society and culture, historians have devoted most of their attention to the tragic side of its story, as have most of the South's major writers. The region's two most significant popular musical forms are the blues, whose name pretty much says it all, and country music, which, with its emphasis on lying, crying, and dying, has been described in several quarters as simply white man's blues.

Yet country music's sometimes wryly humorous treatment of human misfortune, as in "Alimony, Alimony—ordered steak and got baloney," does suggest that those who seek a fresh perspective from which to examine the cultural identity of the American South might well ponder William Faulkner's observation that "even tragedy is in a way walking a tightrope between the ridiculous. . . . the bizarre and the terrible." Bergson agreed, insisting that when one becomes "a disinterested spectator . . . many a drama will turn into a comedy." Surely, to define the South solely in terms of its darker side is to oversimplify considerably a regional persona where the tragic and the terrible were often not just related to but actually inseparable from the hilarious and the bizarre.

No southerners were more intimately acquainted with tragedy and suffering than the region's black residents. Yet, no segment of the population was more readily associated with humor and laughter. By laughing at the cruel and degraded state in which they found themselves, southern blacks, as Bill Maxwell observed, somehow found "the power to destabilize the enemy's control." Thus, as the noose tightened around his neck, the condemned black man took pains to assure onlookers that "whut's gwine happen hyeah to-day, suttenly is gwine to be a good lesson to me!" The situation for blacks in the South often seemed so impossible that even Jehovah himself could not always be counted on for support. When a black civil rights leader from Mississippi showed up unexpectedly at the Pearly Gates, an agitated St. Peter informed him that there had been a terrible

mistake, and he needed to return to Mississippi and continue his good work. Mindful of the many perils that awaited him there, the man asked whether God would go with him if he went back to Mississippi and heard his Heavenly Father respond, “I’ll go as far as Memphis.” Such humor is notable in the diaries of prisoners of war or Holocaust survivors, one of whom wrote that “we never lost our ability to laugh at ourselves and our miserable situation. We had to make jokes to survive and save ourselves from deep depression.”

There was considerably more to black humor than met the eye, of course, and even when they heard a joke or supposedly funny saying offered by blacks, whites often failed to see its meaning and, therefore, its humor. A case in point is Mississippi planter Will Percy’s account of an incident in which one of his black tenants referred to Percy’s car as “us car.” When Percy allowed the remark to be “funny” [meaning strange], his black driver, Ford, responded “funnier” [meaning funnier] than you think.” Pressed to explain, Ford said patiently, “He meant that’s the car you has bought with us money. They all knew what he meant, but you didn’t, and they knew you didn’t. They wuz laughing to theyselves.” When Percy’s plantation manager later concurred with Ford’s explanation, they also laughed. “I laughed, too,” wrote Percy, “but not inside.” Percy’s discomfiture in this case calls to mind a joke popular among southern blacks about towns where whites were so intent on stifling black self-expression of any sort that they set out “laughing barrels” into which blacks were to duck their heads whenever they felt the urge to laugh in public.

Not surprisingly, black humor relied heavily on the technique of “inversion,” whereby weaker, ostensibly powerless characters managed to triumph over stronger, more dominant ones. The appeal of the so-called “trickster” tales among enslaved blacks is obvious enough. In addition to the well-known symbolic stories of Brer Rabbit’s victories over Brer Fox, there were the exploits of the comic/heroic slave, Old John. Old John’s triumphs over his master were sometimes direct and definitive, but at other times, the message was more subtle and complex, as when he is awarded his freedom for saving the master’s children from drowning. At John’s departure, the children and Old Missy commence to crying, but clad, stereotypically enough, in one of his former owner’s castoff suits, John never looks back as he starts down the road while his Massa calls out, repeatedly reminding John that he and the children love him and Old Missy likes him. The “inside “ joke in this tale comes at the expense of white men whose fears of their own sexual inadequacies fueled an obsession with keeping black men as distant from white women as possible.

The inversion technique was also apparent in black humor throughout the post-bellum Jim Crow era. A black man who went into a white diner succeeded in placing an order for a whole baked chicken but was quickly surrounded by a menacing group of white patrons who vowed to punish his racial transgression by doing to him whatever he did to the chicken. When his order arrived, after pondering the situation for a minute or two, the black man simply picked up the chicken and ceremoniously planted a big kiss on its rear end before walking out of the restaurant.

With emancipation, however, the trickster who lived by his wits gradually gave way to the badman—angry, fearless, defiant of authority, and utterly compassionless toward black and white alike. Although the badman was ostensibly fearsome, he often became a caricature, so mean and vile that he was more comical than frightening. Hence the antihero Stagolee murders in cold blood; intimidates judge, jury, and executioner; and winds up terrorizing Hell itself. In a variation of this story, a lustful black stud arrives in Hell and proceeds in short order to ruin the devil’s daughter, wife, and mother and drive a trembling Satan himself to his knees, begging God to “Please take this Negro out of here before he ruins me.”

Many learned observers have found it puzzling that so much of black humor appeared to reinforce or embrace demeaning white stereotypes of blacks. As Lawrence Levine has pointed out, however, this phenomenon resulted from black perceptions of the “ambivalences contained in those stereotypes.” Hence, like the blues, “black humor reflected an awareness that the pervasive white stereotype of Negroes as oversexed, hyper-virile, and uninhibitedly promiscuous” actually suggested envy as well as disdain; that it was “a projection of desire as well as fear.” John Dollard found jealousy of the alleged sexual freedom enjoyed by

African American women in the jokes about their promiscuity that circulated among white women in Indianola, Mississippi. Had he investigated further, Dollard would have realized that similar jokes were common among black women as well. For example, although Moms Mabley was no spring chicken herself, she complained that her even-more-ancient husband was so totally lacking in masculine ardor that when he finally died, she decided to cremate him so that "I'd know that that old man got hot at least one time."

Many middle- and upper-class blacks saw jokes about black illiteracy or ignorance as aimed at lower-class "country" blacks and told them with apparent relish, while their country counterparts seized on stories ridiculing the manners and pretensions of middle-class "strivers," who seemed intent on social climbing. Because lighter-skinned blacks enjoyed the presumption of higher social status, some were given to ridiculing their "dark-as-midnight" inferiors. When one spurned suitor learned that a young woman had not only rejected him because of his "coal-black" skin but nicknamed him "Captain Midnight" as well, he snorted, "She got no business callin' me Midnight. That gal is pretty close to 11:30 herself."

Although irreverence toward men of the cloth was hardly out of the ordinary among jokesters of either race, as the blues would also suggest, it was definitely pronounced among southern black men who suspected that ministers pursued their calling primarily to avoid hard manual labor while enjoying easy access to the good food and sexual favors provided by the female faithful. Sure enough, seeking likely candidates for the ministry, a pastor asked all the men who loved fried chicken more than anything to move to one side of the church and those who loved women more than anything to move to the other. When the young man left standing in the middle explained that he loved both equally well, the minister broke into a huge smile and shouted, "Come forward, Brother. You've been called to preach."

If humor provides an underutilized window into the lives of southern blacks, it offers the same opportunity to understand better the southern women of both races. In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, an elderly black woman tells her young granddaughter, Janie, that "de white man is de ruler of everything" and "when [the] white man throw down de load and tell de black man tuh pick it up. . . . He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De black woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can se." Granny's perspective did not instill abject servility in Janie, however. After the middle-aged Janie Crawford endures all she can stand of her husband Joe's ridicule of her age and appearance in front of his friends, she strikes back with "When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life." Though he assaults her with brutal physical force, Joe and his friends know immediately that her verbal blow was infinitely more damaging because it "had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men treasure."

On the other side of the color line, the white southern belle was often stereotyped either as a rigid, humorless ice maiden or a frivolous, superficial bimbo who spurns group sex simply because she hates writing all the thank you notes. Even in the antebellum era, however, some white women managed to see humor in the South's rigid sexual and racial double standard. "Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household but her own. Those, she seems to think, drop from the clouds," diarist Mary Chestnutt observed wryly. In Atlantan Frances Newman's 1926 novel, *The Hardboiled Virgin*, aspiring writer Katherine Faraday realizes that southern men are charmed by women who embrace traditional gender roles but intrigued by those who do not, and she is therefore given to such ambivalent observations as "there was a great deal to be said for the Old South, but not nearly so much as people had already said." Like many others, Florence King made the link between white men's dalliances with black women and their florid celebrations of the virtue and chastity of white women. Moreover, in response to these "fulsome testimonials to their purity," King observed, many a southern white woman simply decided to "recycle her pearl beyond price" and become a perpetually "self-rejuvenating virgin." As to her own departures from the bonafide southern bell's strict behavioral code, King allowed that, at least, "no matter which sex I went to bed with, I never smoked on the street."

Despite its long-standing association with the darker aspects of the human condition, the South's literary tradition owes much to the raucously self-deprecatory depictions of the nineteenth-century southwestern humorists, such as Georgia's Augustus Baldwin Longstreet. Although the writers themselves often presented the antics of their rustic protagonists from what was supposed to be a shocked and thoroughly disapproving patrician perspective, even as they caricatured the ignorance and crudity of the frontier hooligans, the southwestern writers often conveyed a certain admiration of those who had cast off any pretense of adhering to community standards of decency and morality. In his story, "The Fight," Longstreet described a violent encounter between Billy Stallings and Bob Durham, whose mastery of the fine art of fisticuffs made them the very best men in the country," according to their Georgia peers. At the end of a marathon of reciprocal head-butting, eye-gouging, ear-tearing, and indiscriminate anatomy-wide biting that the locals simply knew as a "a fair fight," the vanquished Billy "presented a hideous spectacle. About a third of his nose at the lower extremity was bitten off, and his face was so swelled and bruised that it was difficult to discover in it anything of the human visage." Meanwhile, the "victor," Bob, was missing his entire left ear as well as a large chunk of cheek and the middle finger of his left hand, which he had opted to abandon between the clenched teeth of the determined Billy.

Among twentieth-century southern writers, Erskine Caldwell was particularly indebted to the southwestern humorists. In Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, while Jeeter Lester's hare-lipped daughter, Ellie May, copulates with her brother-in-law in full view of the entire family, an unfazed Jeeter merely uses the distraction to steal his son-in-law's sack of turnips. Later, Jeeter's moronic son Dude backs his new car over his grandmother, whose death causes the family no apparent grief and barely even captures their attention.

Elsewhere, even *Sanctuary*, one of Faulkner's grimmest works, presents more than a few humorous moments. Ole Miss coed Temple Drake, the daughter of a Mississippi judge, scandalizes even Memphis madam Miss Reba with her sexual depravity, while country bumpkins Virgil Snopes and Fonzo Winbush arrive in town to attend barber college and, thinking it a boarding house, take up residence at Miss Reba's, searching all the while for a brothel without ever realizing that they are already living in one.

Though she specialized in the Gothic and grotesque, Flannery O'Connor also allowed readers to see the comical side of her characters, including in "Good Country People," Hulga, the know-it-all nihilist philosopher who loses her artificial leg to a not-so-good—or simple—country person, a lecherous Bible salesman, named aptly enough, Manly Pointer. In O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," like the black badman, Stagolee, a brutal criminal known as "the Misfit" is so evil as to be comical when he defines enjoyment solely in terms of "killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him," but after slaughtering an entire family still complains, "It's no real pleasure in life."

Literary scholar Richard Weaver once likened "being a southerner" to "being a Catholic or a Jew" because "members of the group can recognize one another by signs which are eloquent to them, though too small to be noticed by an outsider." Weaver's observation squares nicely with Bergson's contention that "laughter is always the laughter of a group," implying "a kind of secret freemasonry with other laughers," and thus explaining why "many comic effects are incapable of translation from one language to another because they refer to the customs and ideas of a particular social group."

Georgia writer Mary Hood echoes both Weaver and Bergson as she illustrates distinctive southern verbal tradition:

> Suppose a man is walking across a field. To the question "Who is that?" a Southerner would reply by saying something like "Wasn't his granddaddy the one whose dog and him got struck by lightning on the steel bridge? Mama's third cousin—dead before my time—found his railroad watch in that eight-pound catfish's stomach the next summer just above the dam. I think it was eight pounds. Big as Eunice's arm. The way he married for that new blue Cadillac automobile, reckon how come he's walking like he has on

Sunday shoes, if that's who it is, and for sure it is." A Northerner would reply to the same question (only if directly asked, though, never volunteering), "That's Joe Smith." To which the southerner might think (but be much too polite to say aloud), "They didn't ask his name, they asked who he is!"

This presumption among southerners that, as my father used to say, "there ain't nobody here but us," can lend a comic tint to even the most somber circumstances as it did in an obituary that appeared a few years back in the *Guntersville (Ala.) Advertiser-Gleam*:

> A car hauler and drag strip racer, Travis Clemon Vaughn of Alder Springs, had an aneurysm on his brain Monday and died in Carraway Methodist Hospital in Birmingham early Tuesday morning. Mr. Vaughn, who was 47, had seemed to be in real good health.
>
> He hauled cars most of his adult life, bringing them to dealers in those big trucks you can put 9 cars on. The last 2 years, he hauled cars for Junior Compton Motors of Albertville.
>
> He loved drag racing. He went to the races at Baileyton just about every weekend and raced in them a big part of the time.
>
> He grew up at Alder Springs, lived at Hustleville a while, then moved back to Alder Springs 21 years ago. He and Carolyn Riddle have been married 30 years. His parents were Clyde and Elza Helton Vaughn.
>
> He was a former member of the Guntersville Rescue Squad.
>
> Rev. Robert Bright and Rev. Shannon Burnett conducted the funeral at the Alder Springs Presbyterian Church Thursday. The Pope family sang. Burial was in the adjoining cemetery.
>
> Pallbearers included Whiskers Beard, Smut Smith, Snoopy Vaught, and Scarecrow Burbanks.

If obituaries can sometimes be good for a chuckle, the same is true of some of the rituals surrounding southern funerals as well. Explaining that "food" is "grief therapy," in the witty little book they call *The Official Southern Lady's Guide to Hosting the Perfect Funeral*, Gayden Metcalf and Charlotte Hays contemplate the "Southern Way of Death" as it is observed in the Mississippi Delta, where stuffed eggs are such a mainstay of the funeral menu that when a husband sees his wife getting down her egg plate, his first question is always "Who died?" The grand doyennes of Delta funeral cuisine, it seems, are the Methodist ladies, who simply "do great things with the contents of cans and boxes." Unfortunately, their heavy reliance on canned goods means the sodium content of their dishes is substantial, and if, heaven forbid, several Methodists happen to check out within a short span, the ladies of the church are certain to be heard complaining that their fingers are so swollen they can't get their wedding rings on. Still, even the snootiest of Delta Episcopalians privately admit that "nothing whispers sympathy quite like a good old Methodist frozen pea casserole with canned bean sprouts and mushroom soup."

Such "insider" humor may affirm group solidarity by focusing either on common understandings within the group or perceived differences that set it apart from other groups. A Yankee tourist who saw a man holding a small hog up so that it could eat apples directly from the tree felt compelled to stop and inquire, "Excuse me, buddy, but may I ask what you're doing?" Studying the stranger up and down, the old boy replied, "Why, I'm trying to fatten up this here runt hog." "Well," said the amused Yankee, "don't you think if you just picked a bunch of apples and put them in with the hog's food, it would save a lot of time?" "Maybe so," the farmer replied, "but what's time to a hog?" From the perspective of the Yankee visitor, in this case, time is a finite commodity which should always be consumed efficiently with an eye toward maximum production or

accomplishment. For the southerner, time is more an element of natural existence to be experienced as it comes rather than managed or maximized for material benefit.

If regional and racial group demarcations seemed reasonably straightforward for most southerners, things were a little more complicated for Jewish southerners facing the challenge of being a part of southern life while always remaining a bit apart from it as well. The complexities of this challenge are manifested in the wry, ironic humor of southern Jews, such as the Friedman brothers who claimed that they met at their department store in a tiny South Georgia town store every Christmas morning to tally the seasonal sales figures, crack a bottle of good bourbon, and offer up a heartfelt rendition of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

Although humorist Roy Blount, Jr., has a point when he observed that nothing could be less "southern" than trying to explain the meaning of southern humor, it behooves me at this point to at least try to restore some sense of dignity to these proceedings by assigning a loftier purpose to what may well have struck you as nothing more than a shameless bombardment of a captive audience with some of my very favorite stories. When I arrived here as a student in 1965, the University of Georgia was just awakening to its true potential and possibilities. By the time I returned as a faculty member in 1997, Georgia had entered the top ranks of America's best public institutions, this despite warnings from some quarters that it would never achieve true national standing without distancing itself from its regional roots and identification by, among other things, shunning any discernible research or curricular emphasis on the South. Needless to say, I am pleased that this nonsensical notion appears to have finally gone South, so to speak. In fact, in addition to my soaring pride, as both a faculty member and an alumnus, in the University of Georgia's rise to national and international prominence, I could hardly be more pleased by recent faculty appointments and generous endowments, not to mention the opening of an unrivalled on-campus archival facility that could and should help to make this place a mecca for studying the South from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. I also see the Wilson Humanities Center's new Global Georgia Initiative as an important step toward moving this University to the forefront of efforts to transcend the traditional focus on the region's "otherness" within the United States and expand southern studies into a global economic, social, and cultural context where many of the South's perceived differences with the rest of the nation suddenly become similarities with the rest of the world.

All of this is to say that we here at Georgia are now perfectly poised to place a coordinated, campus-wide, Ag Hill-to-the-Arches, instructional and research emphasis on exploring the richness of this institution's regional birthright in every aspect. If I have managed here today to encourage such an initiative even slightly by suggesting what may be gained from examining a single, often-overlooked aspect of that richness, then I am doubly grateful for the both the honor and the opportunity that have been accorded someone who is, after all, nothing more or less than what Dean Tate was famously fond of calling "a Georgia boy with a Georgia education."