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**Pissing in Political Cisterns, or Laughing Into the Pot of “The Flight 93 Election”**

Christopher J. Gilbert, PhD

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Abstract

Laughter has long been studied for its cultural catharsis and sociopolitical critique. However, in an era of Trumpism, laughter has become troubled by a powerful and vulgar rhetoric of shrugging off democratic politics even as the act of “laughing-at” has overtaken U.S. media culture. This essay argues that political laughter in the shadow of President Donald Trump is at risk of being enervated as a result of its displacement by an overwhelming sense of humorless ridicule. Nowhere is this more apparent than the infamous manifesto, “The Flight 93 Election,” which I read as a political laugh tract. Ultimately, I reconsider the comic possibilities of vulgarity in and through an exploration of Trumpism as a laughable outgrowth of the artfulness that drives so many comedies of public affairs.

Keywords

Vulgarity, Laughter, Populism, Comedy, Ridicule

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Expect the end of the world. Laugh.

—Wendell Berry, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front” (1973)

“Nobody does self-deprecating humor better than I do.”<sup>1</sup> So President Donald J. Trump told his staff before delivering a speech at the Gridiron Club Dinner in March 2018. The dinner venerates the oldest journalistic organization in the U.S. Not unlike The White House Correspondent’s Dinner, the Gridiron event is a showcase for good-natured humor. When President Barack Obama delivered his third Gridiron speech, he quipped about the “Birther Movement” (a reference to Trump’s own long-running “joke”) and thus his own presidential legitimacy vis-à-vis his Kenyan heritage.<sup>2</sup> President Trump took a different tack with jokes about liking chaos, getting rid of the First Lady in the same manner that he fired or pushed out members of his inner circle, detesting black congresswoman Maxine Waters, and doing diplomacy with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un by threatening nuclear holocaust—and, incidentally, by flailing around a jest in which he said “the risk of dealing with a madman” is the Supreme Leader’s problem, “not mine.”<sup>3</sup> The Gridiron dinner lets modern presidents step down as Chief Executive and stand up as Comedian-in-Chief. But President Trump is known neither for his sense of humor nor his predilection to even smile, despite the central argument for his presidential bid being that the U.S. is “the laughingstock of the world.”<sup>4</sup> This is probably why President Trump did not get roasted; rather, he took pot shots at the people, places, and things that most bother him, and promised that if he goes down the U.S. will go down with him.

Of central concern here is that the humor in Trump’s rhetoric is essentially anti-comic. So is the rhetoric of Trumpism. I say this because it pits folly against itself, using

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a comic framework to undermine the supposed good of comedy such that laughter is the thing that actually violates (and stands proudly in violation of) the comic effect. As George Meredith once wrote, humor of the comic spirit is manifest as laughter that is “of the order of the smile, finely tempered, showing sunlight of the mind, mental richness rather than noisy enormity.”<sup>5</sup> Such humor can resound like the laugh of a satyr, but its comicality does not abide pretention, self-deception, vanity, and bombast. The anti-comic humor in Trump’s rhetoric is both littered with pompous vulgarity and couched in a veiled appeal to furious—even outrageous—laughter. What is more, it reeks of authoritarianism. This modality is well documented in his storied history “of annoying and offending the sensibilities of others.”<sup>6</sup> Or, in daughter Ivanka Trump’s words, “every day is a Gridiron dinner” for Trump.<sup>7</sup> In his humor is an ethos to laugh in the face of any civic engagement that might nurture democratic, let alone humane, temperaments. Here is why: First, Trump’s jokes follow his braggadocio and bombast. Second, his self-deprecation is predicated upon the imagined failures of those around him. Third, and finally, the mirth underwriting Trump’s humor typifies what D. Diane Davis calls laughter “tied to the negative.”<sup>8</sup> Herein lies a core aspect of Trump’s cultural politics and the crux of this essay: Trumpism exposes a framework for vulgar humor that, while replete with jokes, wordplays, puns, and more, ultimately corrupts “the comic” by exposing a dark underbelly of rhetorical laughter.

Of course, just as it is hard to know the positive impacts of political humor, so is it difficult to grapple with the negative impacts of laughing matters. Laughter, says Hélène Cixous, is vulgar in the best sense when it “does not hold back, it makes possible.”<sup>9</sup> Even so, laughter is not just an eruption of the convulsed subject, à la Davis. It

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is not necessarily a sudden gasp of amusement, never mind a mirthful physical outburst, whatever its source. Laughter can be faked. It can be forced. It can derive from deeply derisive rhetorics “of flags, folly and presidential cynicism,” and so vulgarize instead of venerate “the people.”<sup>10</sup> Laughter itself can be rhetorical. Consider that President Trump’s press secretary regularly discounts his crudity with the cliché that he is just joking.<sup>11</sup> Consider, too, that many of Trump’s world-*un*making antics come from a laughingly (if not laughably) populist bent. More patently, they have a comic apologia in Michael Anton’s infamous tract, “The Flight 93 Election,” composed under the pseudonym of Publius Decius Mus.<sup>12</sup> The article unabashedly affirms Trumpism, and mimics the very Trumpian rhetorical strategies that constitute an affective investment in laughing at, laughing off, and laughing away an otherwise affirmative, democratic laughter.

Like Trump, “The Flight 93 Election” is cynical, thumbing a nose at conventions and so-called Establishment virtues with flagrant mockery, hyperbole, and name-calling. The article deigns to be an intellectual account of the push to Make America Great Again. Published online in September 2016 by the *Claremont Review of Books (CRB)*, the flagship journal of The Claremont Institute, the article has circulated widely. It has garnered everything from outright praise to sheer disgust for its impact (and pretense). It was “a sensation on the right,” with its author getting labeled “a thinking man’s Beau Brummell among the philistines of Trump world.”<sup>13</sup> Relatedly, “The Flight 93 Election” is the quasi-catchphrase for a Conservative comeuppance and the “Trump terrarium.”<sup>14</sup> This political zeitgeist is driven by justifications of chauvinism and xenophobia, extolments of a *herrenvolk* republicanism opposed to the cultural left, and generalized

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revilements of Conservatism, Inc.<sup>15</sup> My argument is that “The Flight 93 Election” is, at base, a Trumpian ukase for laughing in the darkness of contemporary U.S. American politics. Some might say it is a fool’s manifesto detailing a folly-to-be-wise log for the ship of state. More glaringly, “The Flight 93 Election” is a playbook for Trump’s Gridiron performativity.

To make my case, I begin by working through anti-comic vulgarity in corruptive laughter, specifically as it relates to the matter of populism and popular cynicism on one hand and humor on the other. Then I turn to the comic humorlessness of Publius Decius Mus, and with it some context for the key rhetorical devices that connect laughter in “The Flight 93 Election” to the comic degeneracy in Trumpian humor. This context entails the cultural setup for its apocalyptic articulation of American rebirth in the demise of conservatism. The rhetorical devices include *ethopoeia* (the reconstruction or representation of a character), *ecphonesis* (exclamation, usually to express vehemence or emphasis), and metaphor, as well as wordplay, double entendre, and pejorative. These devices accommodate a mixture of “rage and laughter” that is hard to distinguish.<sup>16</sup> This mixture is what demands less focus on “traditional” political humor in the time of Trumpism than on its vulgarian manifestations. It is also why I consciously invoke the sort of comic impulse that can counteract Trumpian vulgarity throughout my argument. Finally, I conclude with a meditation on democratic laughter, ultimately arguing that “The Flight 93 election” is vulgarity *en comicus vogue*.

### Anti-Comic Vulgarity

Vulgarity in U.S. American politics is not new. It is traceable at least from the election of 1800 (wherein Thomas Jefferson’s supporters labeled John Adams a hideous

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hermaphrodite) through presidential monikers like Martin Van *Ruin* and Abraham Africanus the First to contemporary iterations of “vulgar sensationalism and buffoonery.”<sup>17</sup> To be sure, Alexis de Tocqueville found coarseness in American assemblies and in civic habits. But “the vulgar” is not just about vulgarity.

Historically, the vulgar characterizes the masses. What Sigmund Freud might name the primal horde or Friedrich Nietzsche might dub simply the crowd, the masses constitute a mercurial assemblage of ordinary people.<sup>18</sup> By extension, populism is a mode of rhetorical identification, melding people, expressions of power (and powerlessness), and stories that encapsulate and captivate a polity.<sup>19</sup> Trumpism is a way of *doing* populism, much as his rhetoric is a way of *being* vulgar.<sup>20</sup> As Paulina Ochoa Espejo argues, President Trump typifies “how the bomb of populism explodes when you light the fuse of identity politics with an electoral match.”<sup>21</sup> This bomb is made of what some call a *Trumpenvolk*, which collapses coarseness into a newfangled vulgar realism. Trumpism is also aligned with a Hobbesian type of humor that emboldens a fit of “sudden glory” in laughter over inferiors.<sup>22</sup> Trumpism is disdainful, and its vulgarity emerges out of quasi-carnavalesque upendings and uncrownings. The vainglory of Trumpism amounts to a rhetorical laughter that disrupts the established order of things, and its grotesqueness is built on humor that clouds—or, better, *crowds*—the comic with crudity.

There is something unsettling here, specifically in overlaps between the anti-comic humor of Trump and what Philip Bosman calls the “comic performances” of ancient progenitor of Cynicism, Diogenes of Sinope.<sup>23</sup> Diogenes is best known for lampooning the prevailing Athenian virtues in the Fourth Century BCE. He had a

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doggish, insolent, and deliberate wit, which he parlayed into public antics that mocked the established order of things. Diogenes once pissed on passersby in the marketplace. He masturbated in the street. He lived in a tub (or, on some accounts, a wine barrel). Most importantly for this case, Diogenes did all of this with a laugh. His comicality pushed the limits of guilelessness and grotesquery—but in the name of pursuing virtue outside the material and metaphorical trappings of “the city,” and without the falsity of those blinded either by the untoward need for power or the spiritual drag of narcissism and self-interest.<sup>24</sup> Following Peter Sloterdijk, Diogenes cared for the body politic by converting his personal carriage into the comportment of a dog: he behaved naturally, and without shame, thereby drawing attention to fabrications in the human condition. Diogenes, says Sloterdijk, was dog-like (or *kynikos*), but his boorish, deviant, and anti-establishment behavior was ultimately self-effacing and selfless.<sup>25</sup>

There is a temptation to imagine a “diogenic attitude” in the Trumpian disposition.<sup>26</sup> Trump, after all, is a provocateur. He is obscene. He is barefaced and brazen in his political character. He is an outsider, at least with regard to official politics. Sinclair Lewis once described him, only it was in 1935 with his caricature of a “Professional Common Man,” Berzelius “Buzz” Windrip. Buzz is “vulgar, almost illiterate, a public liar easily detected, and his ‘ideas’ almost idiotic,” with the righteousness of a traveling salesman, the wit of a country store clerk, and the stagecraft of a conman.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, Aristotle described him, too, as “insolent and arrogant,” “ostentatious and vulgar,” “self-indulgent and adulterous,” and convinced that he is worthy to hold public office despite being a “prosperous fool.”<sup>28</sup> Trump is not a man of the people. He trumpets his own excesses (material and otherwise) as evidence of how



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one might embody the American Dream. All things considered, Trump is a churlish and lewd charlatan who won the presidency by coalescing a make-America-great-again campaign with a cynical view of what he characterized in his inauguration speech as “American carnage.”<sup>29</sup> The problem is that Trump also typifies the ruling culture, which—partly *because* of the position of political comedy as a cornerstone in contemporary discourse—approaches “cynical distance” and sardonic laughter as simply “part of the game.”<sup>30</sup> This is precisely why Trumpism represents the sort of cynicism that a *kynic* like Diogenes would have utterly abhorred. Diogenes embodied a rhetoric of flesh and blood, not pomp and circumstance.

Vulgar humor can be a public good when it disintegrates the boundaries between “us” and “them.” When couched in a comic frame, vulgarity often gets a pass because of its appeal to humanity. But vulgarity is dangerous, nay cynical, when it folds political differences into a politics of resentment. Kenneth Burke, who takes inspiration from Meredith, makes an instructive point about vulgarity when he locates it in the humorist ribbing about the fox who decided that the grapes he could not reach were, in fact, sour.<sup>31</sup> Vulgarity that *rejects* the comic is for those who appeal to sour grapes. Consider Burke again, and his view of humor that jokes downward as an anti-comic frame of rejection that is more aptly burlesque.<sup>32</sup> The comic should urge people “*to be observers of themselves, while acting.*”<sup>33</sup> In burlesque, all foibles are somebody else’s. Trumpism rejects other people by projecting faults onto his enemies, then laughing at them. Such self-aggrandizing cynicism is akin to the “Downward Way,” or the active negation of the comic as a means of propping up “the people.”<sup>34</sup> In Trump’s humor, the comic arises out of division.

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Laughter in the U.S. has long been associated not only with a democratic sense of humor but also an egalitarian sense of public selfhood.<sup>35</sup> The collective laughing pot plays into Pax Americana. What is more, “laughing matters” have become fodder for talking about how comic politics animate the important issues of the day. As such, laughter is not simply some physiological reaction to or effect of humor. Laughter, as Michael Billig suggests, “is rhetorical.”<sup>36</sup> This means that it can be affected and displayed. When caught up in a rhetoric of laughing-in-the-face, laughter blurs the lines between laughing at, laughing off, and laughing with. A prevailing notion is that Trump’s presidency is “not normal.” Trumpism laughs at/off/with this notion by making a laughingstock out of anyone seeking some return to normalcy. In Burkean terms, laughter should evince a frame of acceptance. And it *does* for Trump’s adherents. But, in terms of the comic, the rhetorical laughter of Trumpism reminds us that the shift from a frame of acceptance to a frame of rejection takes little more than “a *shift in the allegiance* to symbols of authority.”<sup>37</sup> To pledge allegiance to Trumpism is to abide the anti-comic.

Most outstanding in Trump’s vulgarity is the extent to which it corrupts the comicality of laughter. Trump’s persona is not unlike what Alex Inkeles has famously described as the “totalitarian mystique,” and this because Trumpism is fanatical to its core.<sup>38</sup> Trumpism is likewise fantastical insofar as it evokes the “Beautiful Dark Fascist Fantasy” of ruling a democracy by fiat.<sup>39</sup> How telling, then, that Trumpism’s comic festivity spills over into fascistic spectacles when “the subversive moment of the popular dimension” transmogrifies the rhetorical force of cynicism into a cathartic “project of synchronization and national renewal.”<sup>40</sup> Populism once referred to a People’s Party with an anti-capitalist bent a strong strain of civic nationalism and utter disgust for what

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infamous nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century populist Thomas E. Watson demeaned as money power.<sup>41</sup> Now, it bespeaks delusions of “real” or “true” Americanism, harkening to a tradition that showcases the inspirations for a great many to rage against anyone or anything that does not seem to put their view of America first. If Trump’s platform embodied a return of the ridiculous, his presidency has betrayed a “Return of Public Vulgarly.”<sup>42</sup> The folly of Trumpism amplifies the failures of contemporary kynicism.

President Trump is thus a caricature non grata. As Brian L. Ott argues, Trump peddles vulgarity by classifying everything he dislikes as a joke.<sup>43</sup> More broadly, Trump has leveraged cruelty as a rhetorical force for affective politics.<sup>44</sup> This cruel affect has led him to rise (and sink) to the level of a carpet-eating “Insult Comic in Chief.”<sup>45</sup> Trump is no Diogenes the Cynic. He is a modern day Pulcinella, breaking the comic frame not just by “pissing in public” but also by rhetorically pissing *on* the body politic.<sup>46</sup> He has been labeled a “twit” by radio host Eric Zane (“This Week in Trump,” or TWIT, is a prominent segment on his podcast).. He has been called an “ignoramus” by political commentators as divergent as Eugene Robinson of *The Washington Post* and ultraright firebrand Ann Coulter.<sup>47</sup> Impelled by apparent pettiness, egotism, ignorance, witlessness, and more, President Trump is known for barking out bêtises and bigotries while beckoning the “laughing barrel.”<sup>48</sup> In Kendall R. Phillips’ words, the “popular anger” of Trumpism bespeaks a sort of dark laughter that blends droll amusement with cultural alarmism in order to advance a vicious brand of politicking.<sup>49</sup> President Trump has used vulgarity to manufacture a “world of vanity, hate, arrogance, untruth, and recklessness.”<sup>50</sup> In tandem, he embodies the accumulation of white rage.<sup>51</sup> Tellingly, “The Flight 93

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Election” has been branded the “intellectual source code of Trumpism.”<sup>52</sup> It was even published by *The Unz Review* six months before its publication in the *CRB* under the title, “Toward a Sensible, Coherent Trumpism.”<sup>53</sup> Trumpism urges a cynical approach to public life as a dismal reality show, masquerading as a tragic end-of-days reckoning for democracy in America. “The Flight 93 Election” exists as its anti-comic relief.

### The Vulgarization of Democratic Laughter

Criticized as an irresponsible apology for Trumpism, “The Flight 93 Election” has also been revered as an accurate depiction of the Republican Party as it stands (or falls) against the machinations of the organized left.<sup>54</sup> However, less pronounced than the manifesto’s status as a polemic (or, a phantasmagoria) is its role as a joke on Conservatism. The article is a snide swan song for Conservatism, Inc., claiming that its money politics has sold out on things like civic virtue, religious faith and freedom, sexual morality, law, order, and small government. If, as Nietzsche suggests, jokes are epigrams on the death of a feeling, then “The Flight 93 Election” is a punchline-in-prose for experiencing twenty-first century Americanism as Decius does: like living through a political fate worse than death.<sup>55</sup> Some context is in order here.

Decius’s curt jeremiad emerged at a moment when nativism, xenophobia, and chauvinism found a home in Trumpism, when the Alt-Right and its white nationalist ideology came out of the shadows and into the mainstream, and when party conservatives began to openly toy with an authoritarian leadership style. Adherents to Conservatism, Inc. are the ne’er-do-wells in this emergence. They represent the preservation of ideas around personal liberty, American exceptionalism, and the like, but to the point of maintaining orthodoxies to win elections. Trumpism is an expression of enough is

enough. It combines the saber-rattling and America First ethos of neo-conservatism's world order with a politics of faith-like convictions analogous to the Christian Right. Trump himself typifies a somewhat incoherent conservatism with his populist rhetoric through his contradictory preference to rule by fiat and, as president, his will to run amuck in the corridors of political power. But, as American historian Rick Perlstein has demonstrated, the gall of a grifter is actually a ready aspect of conservative politics (and political show business) as usual.<sup>56</sup> Decius flips the script in "The Flight 93 Election" by serving as a nationalist scourge who makes a grifter into a good political shepherd.

"The Flight 93 Election" is a bookish commentary on how vulgarity can be justified as the ruse for riling up a public before it is recast as a Caesarian appeal to the ban of jokes against, in this case, a president looking to humor the people. Decius utilizes ploys like *ethopoeia*, *ecphonesis*, and metaphor to interpellate readers into a position wherein the laughter of ridicule, if misdirected, is the guttural speech of one who is doomed to die laughing. Decius also uses wordplay, pejorative, and double entendres to bolster what Greg Weiner dubs "The Flight of Fancy Election," which makes a show of replacing statesmanship with strongman-ism and so reads like a Sokal Affair for the 2016 presidential campaign season and beyond.<sup>57</sup> All of these ruses and rhetorical devices mirror, and at times even mimic, Trump's own political style. This does not mean that there is a one-to-one correlation. Rather, "The Flight 93 Election" performs the very anti-comic artistry of, in conservative political commentator Ben Shapiro's words, "a dog licking its own vomit."<sup>58</sup> Like Trump, Decius is outré. But his rhetorical laughter is ultimately revolting.

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The dark comedy of “The Flight 93 Election” begins with the titular metaphor of United Airlines Flight 93, which was hijacked by members of al Qaeda on September 11, 2001.<sup>59</sup> The plane ultimately crashed down in Pennsylvania, but only after its passengers wrestled control from the hijackers. The metaphor of a struggle over the yoke is rendered as a struggle over the question of whether or not the idea of a Trump presidency is a joke. Since Trump was elected, “The Flight 93 Election”—and the anonymous blog, the Journal of American Greatness, for which he became a chief contributor—has become something of “an inside joke” that eventually “ceased to be a joke.”<sup>60</sup> So, too, has Decius lived up to his alias, namely in taking a role as a White House aide after Trump won the election. Decius is the alias of conservative speechwriter Michael Anton, who has been called a dark essayist, a dystopian prophet, and even a West Wing Straussian.<sup>61</sup> He has been compared to Thomas Paine<sup>62</sup> and has also established himself as a veritable fabulist. Anton is an avowed white nationalist who pushed agendas in the National Security Council. More potently from a cultural standpoint, “The Flight 93 Election” is a catchphrase for enthusiasts and detractors alike, in part because the essay’s organizing principle animates Anton’s own laughter at anyone who might view Trump as anything but the most logical (even if ridiculous) choice of poison in an utterly polluted well.

That “The Flight 93 Election” was published in the *CRB* is significant. The *CRB* is the flagship quarterly journal of The Claremont Institute, an influential conservative think tank. The professed *raison d’être* for the *CRB* is to safeguard the founding principles of the American republic, and more specifically to “reawaken in American politics a statesmanship and citizenship worthy of our noblest political traditions.”<sup>63</sup> As such, many of its readers fondly embrace the Lewis Carroll-esque cognomen (which they advance as

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something of an agnomen), the “Claremonsters.” They are devoted to constitutionalism, and yet constitute the target audience of an essay that “doubles as a barely disguised rejection of conservatism itself, stoking panic in hopes that conservatives embrace what is essentially right-leaning authoritarianism.”<sup>64</sup> The solemnity of *CRB* is the cudgel for Decius’s sham comicality.

That “The Flight 93 Election” is so replete with Roman figures and culture is also significant. Publius Decius Mus was a Roman consul, renowned for charging his horse into the enemy lines of the Latins in 340 BCE in order to save his own side from defeat. His act of *devotio* to the Roman republic is considered an exemplar for sacrificing oneself so that one’s community can survive. Just a few centuries later, the republic had given way to an imperial order and Cynicism was reborn. Lucian became known as the leader of “the Army of the Dog” in the Roman Empire, thus summoning Diogenes. Demetrius became renowned for his lambasts of Caligula. Importantly, these two and others reappropriated the Ciceronian sense that humor is a powerful tool for asserting moral superiority over enemies and “others”—a sensibility held over from the late republic, which can be located in Plautus’s cynical depictions of trickster and political officials alike. Like Diogenes, they railed against a different type of cynicism, which contained power in the theater of politics and deigned to prop it up with the power of the people.<sup>65</sup> Tellingly, Anton has been referred to as a Machiavellian, if not Ciceronian, power-player, and a “profoundly dark cynic.”<sup>66</sup> Anton, in other words, is no Decius. He might say that he wants to save the republic, but he really plays politics to an American spirit of the time by mocking the wannabe kings of Conservatism, Inc., while working to crown a consul. Ancient Romans saw humor and the comic as reflections “of attitudes toward the

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practices of daily life.”<sup>67</sup> In addition, comicality was considered a mask for the everyman in society.<sup>68</sup> Anton qua Decius turns humor and the comic back on themselves when he reduces them to a rhetorical laughter that is belligerent and corruptive as opposed to democratic and corrective.

The opening gambit of “The Flight 93 Election” reads like a salvo to a joke, merging the sublime and the ridiculous. “2016 is the Flight 93 election,” Decius writes, “charge the cockpit or you die. You may die anyway. You—or the leader of your party—may make it into the cockpit and not know how to fly or land the plane. There are no guarantees” (para. 1).<sup>69</sup> This is a tongue-in-cheek setup since Decius *does* guarantee that “death is certain” (para. 2), lest Trump assume the presidency (an irony that is also identifiable in the relative weakness of the metaphor itself since the actual United flight crashed). This setup, too, grounds the metaphor that extends as wordplay throughout the entire piece. Many were quick to point out the folly in equating United Flight 93 with the 2016 presidential election. Robert Tracinski of *The Federalist* went so far as to reduce the metaphor to the gravely absurd in comparing the election to the ill-fated Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, which disappeared in March of 2014 while traveling from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. The election is “like MH370,” Tracinski asserted, “a mystery flight veering off course into the unknown.”<sup>70</sup> Silly as they seem, both metaphors make fun of the pilotage.

This apocalyptic scenario, therefore, rationalizes the author’s choice of Decius as the most apt pseudonym, and with it the primary *ethopoeic* appeal. *Ethopoeia*, after all, is a vivid representation of some character, from moods and manners to voice and gesture.<sup>71</sup> *Ethopoeia* enables an author to covet a sense of identity and connote some principled



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nature to an ethical appeal as such—and, more, to fold personal authorship (or a noble deed) into the public weal. On top of this, such a rhetorical impersonation allows for reconfigurations of common sense, particularly when *ethopoeia* is used to turn an audience against itself. This is no doubt why the rhetorical device has a “tendency to humour,” or why it can be seen for its turn from a comical comment on manners to a *comedy* of manners unto itself.<sup>72</sup> In one reading, Anton as Decius is the martyr of democracy in the United States, never mind American conservatism.<sup>73</sup> Alternatively, though, Decius portrays Trump as the savior. This confusion is manifest when Decius’ rather rash dilation of his extended metaphor becomes a mixed metaphor.

The 2016 presidential election is first compared to a plane hijacking. Soon after, the party politicking that will or will not determine its outcome (and fallout) is used to prove that Conservatism, Inc. is actually a car “*headed off a cliff*” (para. 7), with the implication that falling back on principles in the face of certain demise is like continuing to drive toward the ledge knowing full well that a fall awaits. In one instance, passengers need to seize the controls. In another, they are the unwitting drivers of a bloated corporate caravan set on cruise control. Furthermore, the entire essay is premised on the analogical setup of a Hillary Clinton presidency and a game of “Russian Roulette with a semi-auto” (para. 2). Commandeered planes, suicide guns, and idiot drivers make up one side of Decius’ equation. On the other side are sacrificial lambs, a firing squad made of an upright citizens brigade, and passengers willing to take the wheel of a runaway transport. Not to leave out the ancient Roman well from where all of this accumulation springs, Decius codifies these comparisons as a pick between Caesarism and Constitutionalism. Plainly, Decius’ flailing rhetoric lays the groundwork for allusions to Trump’s own

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speechifying, which—from the campaign trail to the seat of executive power—is rooted in bizarre, nonsensical, incoherent, rambling, jumbled, counterfactual, paroxysmal, and palimpsest-like argumentation.<sup>74</sup>

Decius' roving dilation continues when he turns to Edward Gibbon. History, Gibbon once wrote is “the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind.”<sup>75</sup> Decius does not quote these lines, but he implies them when he highlights the high stakes of the 2016 election. There are at least two meanings in Decius' implication. One has to do with a push for Conservatives to act “Right” in the face of flawed institutions. Another bespeaks the irony in imagining that the American republic is slated to follow the path of imperial (to say nothing of republican) Rome, falling under the weight of its own enlargement, decadence, and corruption. But Decius promotes an evangelical crusade for Christian evangelism in American politics to fend off faux Republicans. Ironically, Gibbon long expressed a biting disdain for Christianity and church doctrine, even as he proclaimed to conceive of his story about the ancient flop of republican government while sitting in the ruins of the Roman capitol listening to friars sing Vespers in the temple of Jupiter. He also feared the sort of civil strife that led people to look for solace in something like skyjacking as a mechanism for civic renewal. Nonetheless, civil strife affords the opportunity to take concerted—or, better, radically *conservative*—action. Here is the accusation that Decius levies on so-called Conservatives, as it is reiterated in his “Restatement on Flight 93”: Trump is the best bet, even if he is a buffoon, because Trumpism stands for “the interests of lower, working, and middle class Americans,” the promotion of “unity across all swaths and sectors of society,” and “the people's rightful, Constitutional control of their government.”<sup>76</sup> Here, too, is the comic relief, which

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doubles as a jab at his detractors that, in Decius' words, dubbed him "Dangerous," "Authoritarian," "Poisonous," and more. Those who are conservative in principle but not in practice, Decius proclaims in "The Flight 93 Election," have done little more than accumulate the characteristics of "a party, a society, a country, a people, a civilization that wants to die" (para. 31). Trump, alternatively, is pegged as the presidential equivalent of life support. He alone—but, really, *the people*—can save America. These are the proselytizations of a man who thinks that conservatives preaching about the troubles that permeate the American body politic (from crime through big government to political correctness) do not actually take them seriously. Instead, they treat them as rhetorical platitudes. Trump, says Decius, typifies the drastic measures needed in desperate times.

This is where *ethopoeia* merges with *ecphonesis* in the pseudo-religiosity and unapologetic grandeur of Decius' rhetoric. *Ecphonesis* is common in religious writings, not to mention the cantillation of a church service. It is prevalent in the exclamatory, aphoristic wit of Friedrich Nietzsche. It is made of the sort of exclamatory pathos that captures the passions of a speaker or writer and, in turn, coerces the affections of an audience. To borrow from a Jazz Age novelist, it also indicates laughter at one's own joke.<sup>77</sup> *Ecphonesis* is replete in "The Flight 93 Election." For instance, Decius follows his references to Gibbons and his dirges of constitutionalism with the intonation: "Cruz in 2024!" (para. 3) Texas Senator Ted Cruz is a punch line here, not only because he is broadly hated for his limpid ideology and his willingness to be a party lackey for Tea Partiers and Talk Radio enthusiasts, but also because he appears to be the sort of principled conservative (or conservative *nisi in suis principiis*, in principle only) that

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Decius so despises. Later, Decius derides their fruitless yields from Edmund Burke, Father of Conservatism, “of course!” (para. 8) To reject Trump, the logic continues, is to revert to “the stance that Things-Are-Really-Bad—But-Not-So-Bad-that-We-Have-to-Consider-Anything-Really-Different!” (para. 10) Times *are* different, Decius exclaims. “Here our ideas sit,” he cries, “waiting to be implemented!” (para. 14) They are as limp as the empty promises of the senator that candidate Trump was so fond of calling “Lyin’ Ted.” Republicans might be on the right, but they are repeatedly wrong. Decius could have summed up this sentiment with a catchphrase Trump himself used throughout his campaign: “We don’t win anymore!”<sup>78</sup> Or maybe Decius should have parroted Erasmus in his praise of folly: “Prodigious fops,” these faux Conservatives are, “which can’t agree / To be call’d what ’tis their happiness to be: Blest *Idiots!*”<sup>79</sup> Decius, like Trump, mocks the very people he proclaims to save.

The sniping mockery does not stop here, though. Once again, in making his case, Decius almost apes the very man that he apotheosizes just as he makes fun of the Conservatism he apostatizes. Trump’s campaign began in 2015 with slogans like “build the wall” (regarding the southern border of the U.S.), “fake news” (regarding mainstream media), “drain the swamp” (regarding corrupt politicians), and, perhaps most prominently, “lock her up” (regarding so-called “Crooked Hillary” Clinton). As one observer noted in December 2015, Trump “leaps from subject to subject. Fear, danger, stupidity. *Stupidity! Weakness!*”<sup>80</sup> These leaps propelled his campaign rallies. They also exemplified Trump’s drifts into the ridiculous, including his regular encouragement of chants that folded into guffaws (i.e., “CNN sucks!”), use of insults (i.e., the claim that Hillary got “schlonged” by Obama in 2008), construction of nicknames (i.e., Lyin’ Ted

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and Crooked Hillary as well as Little Marco, Pocahontas, and Crazy Bernie), and support for audience aggression—even violence—against protestors in the ranks. All of this and more amounts to what has been widely regarded as Trump’s elemental vulgarity.

Most pronounced in this brief overview of Trump’s rhetoric is the pretense of humor. At the same time observers were criticizing Trump for his politics of offense, supporters were praising his frank comicality. For instance, Ann Coulter early on labeled Trump “extremely funny.”<sup>81</sup> Other backers reveled in the notion that his whole candidacy was a comic routine, with his rise to the presidency something of a political encore.<sup>82</sup> As such, Decius’ rhetoric is of a Trumpian kind. Metaphors of hijacked planes and brinksmanship bespeak thinly veiled, hyperbolic threats of the “what the hell do you have to lose?” variety.<sup>83</sup> The mocking exclamation “Cruz in 2024!” is a quip on the notion that a cookie-cutter conservative might restore “cherished ideals.” Name-calling of institutions (i.e., “The Megaphone”) and political groupings (i.e., the “bipartisan junta”), which I get to below, mirrors Trump’s invective. The flagrant riffs on historical touchstones are akin to the rant-and-rave bombast of a Trump rally. More consequentially, just as Decius entreats “the people,” Trump eggs on his “Trumpsters” with mockeries and wisecracks and jests that regularly inspire laughter.<sup>84</sup> To be sure, the familiar “Lock Her Up!” chant is the crowd-pleasing punchline to a joke that needs little more than reference to the political establishment as a setup. Still, Trump threatens retribution against humorists and popular comedy shows when they make fun of him, thereby announcing the imperiousness of his anti-comicality.

For Decius, Trump is not a comic villain; more accurately, he is the real thing insofar as he tells it like it is. Anti-Trump conservatives are merely poseurs who find in

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their own, self-made American horror only the happiest of consequences. Conservative media outlets only add to the cacophony of The Megaphone, Decius' term for mainstream (liberal) intelligentsia and every other partisan propaganda machine that makes "conservative" media what Decius calls "barely a whisper" amidst "the blaring" of the Liberal Establishment. In yet another mixed metaphor, Decius laments that all of this laissez-faire politicking has done nothing to stave off the "tsunami of leftism," awash with the usual suspects of corrupt universities, gutless Washington Generals who refuse to play politics to their own partisan advantage, and immigrants from the Third World. Decius wants a mutinous win at the polls over and above a wimpy recourse to wish fulfillment, and this for the sake of "Conservative solutions" to existential problems facing the American republic.

Decius' entire line of reasoning is contradictory given that his manipulations of metaphors are underwritten by a pejorative figure of speech for characterizing bipartisanship as antithetical to the type of civic union that he claims to seek. Over and again, Decius refers to "the bipartisan junta," a cabal of Leftists, Democrats, and craven Conservatives who are united in their stubborn stickiness to principals and their distaste for Trump. According to Decius, this junta is comprised of all those who pay lip service to constitutional democracy while pushing for ever more "ringers" to shore up "a permanent electoral majority," preserve The Establishment, and ensure that Washington elites continue to lord over the people (para. 30). Herein lies the core of Decius' populism. With diversity comes disunion. Tolerance begets weakness. The U.S. has been overrun by Washington powerbrokers that have assumed power over the country by force rather than by free elections. Allusions to grand councils and military dictatorships in

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Francoist Spain are resonant in Decius' rhetoric, but so are reverberations of Trump's own apparent disdain for democracy. This is one of the problems with populist frameworks: their rhetorical overtures often betray the extent to which every political contest is a competition between Our Principles and Theirs, and thus every appeal to the people is run through with contradictions that cannot be simply voted away. There is a thin line between democratic government by fiat and republicanism by folly.

Consequently, "The Flight 93 Election" prefigures an almost-satirical view of Trump's presidency, mired as it is in scandal, alternative facts, questions about collusion with the Russian government, firings and resignations of top officials, allegations of past misconduct and other misdeeds amongst high ranking aides as well as the president himself, and controversial activity on Twitter. Funnily enough, Decius wrote despairingly of "ills plaguing the body politic," of racism dancing over the heads of Republicans "like some Satanic Spirit," and of leftist "inaneities like 32 'genders,' elective bathrooms, single-payer, Iran sycophancy, 'Islamophobia,' and Black Lives Matter" (para. 21). What is more, he wrote in a paroxysmal tone of his fellow Republicans gazing skyward like nervous Chicken Littles when they should be hitting the political ground. "Trump is worse than imperfect," says Decius. "So what?" (para. 32) Even if he is a buffoon, Trump is a welcome "political" brain on matters of trade, war, economic nationalism, and immigration. Those who think otherwise, Decius proclaims, are the actual buffoons. They miss the fact that Trump is bold, brazen, and perhaps even crazy enough "to rise above the din of The Megaphone." This is what makes "Trump's vulgarity...a godsend to the conservatives" (para. 34). Why? Because vulgarity is an honorific in a house of cards. As Decius wrote in his own defense, capriciousness, repugnance, and indecency do the good

public work of shattering the fragile glass of the Overton window (that is, the range of what is tolerable in public discourse), thus splintering the distinctions between acceptable comportment and revolting or even ridiculous modes of conduct.<sup>85</sup> Here, Decius satirizes the very notion that there is such a thing as a “good” politician. Sure, he reckons, in another world one might imagine a “dignified, articulate, experienced, knowledgeable” statesman “of high character” who could woo the electorate in accordance with some common weal. “Back on planet earth,” however, political goodness is as fantastical as the “foolishness and hubris” of statesmanship (para. 35–36).

How resonant are these sentiments with President Trump’s repeated mockeries of what it means to be “presidential.” Trump is at once a bane and a boon for whatever *virtù* is “left in what used to be the core of the American nation” (para. 42). Just before he was inaugurated in January 2017, Trump was dubbed a “comic hero.”<sup>86</sup> This is why he has been such a conundrum for all those attempting to subject him to political comedy.<sup>87</sup> Decius, too, wrote of heroes when he doubled down on Trumpism. “For all of recorded history,” says Decius, “men have drawn inspiration from, and made analogies to, their heroes.”<sup>88</sup> Comic heroism, for Decius, lives in Trump’s knavery, excesses, and foolish imposture. “The Flight 93 Election” is full of legitimate concerns. Following Decius, the only way to give weight to these concerns is to suffer a Fool for president.

Ultimately, “The Flight 93 Election” provoked the sort of discomfort that comes from reconciling “the problem of warrantable outrage” with a comic *ambivalence* that emerges when political melodrama trumps the pursuit of meaningful change.<sup>89</sup> Some readers disliked Anton’s invocation of Decius. Others reviled his appeals to 9/11. Finally, many more readers reminded Anton-as-Decius that Trump is little more than a snake oil



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salesman. In something of a comic retort, Anton backed away a bit from his ludic take on national politics in order to move toward a sensational lamentation. A la Gibbon, he portrays himself as a witness to the history of the decline and fall of the American republic. He originally praised Trumpist folly, rooting its vulgarity in “the right of sovereign people to make their government do what they want it to do.”<sup>90</sup> His delusions of *devotio*, though, make “The Flight 93 Election” laughable. Well before Decius, ancient Greek philosopher Democritus celebrated (and was celebrated *for*) devotion to necessity and duty. Notably, when he appeared in public, he was almost always laughing. This earned him the moniker of the happy “mockers.”<sup>91</sup> As Seneca recounts in *De Tranquillitate Animi*, the revered pre-Socratic philosopher of politics and ethics was a lover of democracy as much as he was a despiser of the wicked. Following ancient wisdom, a democratic adherent par excellence is one who realizes the difference between wit that laughs and wisdom that cries—or, in a more comic argot, wit without tears and wisdom without laughter.

So, while vulgarity can draw attention to morals and manners, its unsmiling ridicule can diminish the corrective, curative power of laughter. Trump combines “the clown and the buffoon” with “the more destructive and venal type characters—the liar, cheat, vulgarian, and crook.”<sup>92</sup> He is Punchinello turned despot. Some have gone so far as to liken Trump to a junkyard dog. I am therefore reminded of Caligula and his “tyrannical manipulation of laughter” during the demise of the ancient Roman republic, and that “edgy intersection between the human and the animal” represented in an age-old wonderment about whether or not dogs can laugh.<sup>93</sup> Trumpism reminds us that laughter cannot always be the measure of all things. Many have conceived of laughter as an

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ultimate overlap with the Other, and a route to other worlds. I count myself among those who see laughter as a mode of resistance and change. My concern here is with a vulgar form of laughter that corrupts comic possibilities. When caught up in the mix of horror and humor, laughter can contain dimensions that end up qualifying or trivializing political animus. Before he was elected, many Chicagoans had signed up to participate in an event, “Point and Laugh at Trump Tower” (it was canceled after Trump won).<sup>94</sup> Editorial board writer for *The New York Times*, Anna North, concluded in September 2016 that the only appropriate response to be directed at the bigoted and buffoonish billionaire was laughter.<sup>95</sup> Trump has persistently “laughed” back. Even more, Decius appears to have gotten the last laugh.

### Conclusion: Measuring Comic Laughter

In 1973, writer and environmentalist Wendell Berry wrote a mock elegy. In it, he ruminated on “how people might become more free—free from patriarchy, racism, and so on—without becoming deracinated.”<sup>96</sup> As in all of his work, Berry’s farming principles seep into his political principles. We reap what we sow. We cultivate our world in accordance with how we tend to its goods, how we take care of them, and how we nurture one another. Furthermore, how we consume politics has everything to do with how we imagine our liberties. This is a democratic condition, and it is imbricated with ethics, aesthetics, and subsistence.

If Berry’s ethos is that of a Mad Farmer, it can be extended into that of a Mad Citizen. It is fitting, then, that in his lament he seeks to recover laughter. “Laughter,” Berry pronounced, “is immeasurable.”<sup>97</sup> Rhetorically, laughter is too vast to be contained. We find ourselves now facing off with a new world order comprised of old animosities.

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In the shadow of political darkness, one might look for the light of immeasurable laughter. But if laughter is vast, it is also—at times—incommensurable. And so I arrive at my title about pissing in political cisterns, or laughing into the pot. “We are destroying our country,” Berry wrote in 2004.<sup>98</sup> While originally written as a speech for an Earth Day celebration, the essay in which this line appears is about limits. The limits of laughter, perhaps. Or the limits of democracy. Indeed, the limits of the comic. “Most of us are still too sane to piss in our own cistern,” says Berry, “but we allow others to do so and we reward them for it.”<sup>99</sup> Berry was talking about farming principles. But insofar as he was implicating government officials, corporate industries, and compromising citizens, we can say that our contemporary political climate is not so different from our natural environment. Comic politics are no laughing matter. They cut far deeper than clever lambasts of Trumpism or marches of idiocracy. This is not to suggest that we are witnessing an end to laughter akin to the ostensive “death of irony” that followed 9/11.<sup>100</sup> Laughter thrives. So does irony. Laughter, though, is acutely limited when it is no match for an official politics of malediction, especially when it is reduced to a retributive form of grotesquery rather than elevated as a restorative comic gesture to civic wellbeing.

Throughout this essay is the specter of Bakhtin—a writer who celebrated the liberating power of the belly, the genitals, piss, and shit. Bakhtin was also a writer who advocated a form of vulgarity that recovered a lost cause of comedy, which is the elevation of high hopes in healthy dissension over the type of “hot-piss” that someone like Pantagruel might spew from this throat.<sup>101</sup> Vulgarity, in other words, can foster a mature self-awareness and thus help us undo the damage we do to ourselves. It can be a source of madness that is more festive than fatalistic. It can spawn Mad Comics. Or, with

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all of its Aristotelian undertones, vulgarity can be the tip of an iceberg that typifies a want of refinement. That Trumpism succeeded despite long being considered a joke at best and the catalyst for a political pissing contest at worst should give us pause if we take seriously the notion that it emerged as much out of laughter as it did out of rage. That Trumpism also got one of its strongest apologies from an anti-comic source should also give us good reason to reconsider the historical potential for humor as a rhetorical agent of change.

What remains to be seen is whether or not Trumpism will swell as a dire laughingstock and how much democratic laughter will suffer. It might just be that political humor has facilitated an utter imbalance of sufferance and happiness, with the fall of democratic laughter in the U.S. following from the rise of a Trump Tower of Babel. Political hell awaits a democracy without useful disagreement, without a real pursuit of shared happiness, and without a sense of humor about the joys available in not being possessed. Democratic laughter helps us deal with those dark realities that empower totalitarian fantasies. Those invested in comic politics should be most concerned not by some elision of laughter but rather its enervation, displacement, or dissolution. Slavoj Žižek argues that “the source of totalitarianism is ... the lack of laughter.”<sup>102</sup> Scholar of aesthetics and critical pedagogy, Tyson E. Lewis, revises this reasoning. The source of “totalitarianism today is not the lack of laughter but rather the *persistence* of laughter,” or the fact that “it is now fully integrated and anticipated ahead of time.”<sup>103</sup> I would go a step further to say that there is a travesty of laughter when ridicule loses its rhetorical force for comic possibility and radical imagination. Laughter is not just endangered but also dangerous when it becomes a vehicle of disregard, of

detachment that is not ironic, of hauteur that is deemed bona fide. Comic politics that laugh off troubling realities, even when expressed as civic melancholy, do little more than reify a festivity that culminates in democratic failure, taking the liberatory potential of ridicule and remaking it into a grim-faced iteration of what Hannah Arendt saw as the “combination of horror and laughter.”<sup>104</sup> Decius did as much in “The Flight 93 Election” when he imagined the plane coming down—and maybe the sky along with it.

Notes

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3. Manchester, “Trump’s remarks.”

4. Michael Finnegan, “Trump’s Closing Argument: The U.S. is ‘the laughingstock of the world,’” *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/politics/trailguide/la-na-trailguide-updates-trump-s-closing-argument-the-u-s-is-1478540304-htmlstory.html> (accessed August 8, 2019).

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*Publications: A Critical Edition*, ed. Maura C. Ives (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1998), 140. To expand on the notion of anti-comicality just a bit more, it is worth noting that it is not a harbinger for the sort of anti-humor found in the avant-garde. On the contrary, it is utterly self-righteous (even more so than it is superior) in its orientation, making its outcomes not necessarily tragic but certainly fatalistic and bleak—particularly given that the humor of anti-comicality magnifies the plaint as a comedic ploy. Comedy, in the comic spirit, can be (and often is) self-conscious, but it abhors egotism and conceit. Following Meredith, the comic spirit—to be comic—must be driven by a curiosity that enlarges the human imagination, even if it makes fun of it.

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8. D. Diane Davis, *Breaking Up [at] Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 60.

9. Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 889.

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25. Sloterdijk, *Cynical Reason*, 104.
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