

# Take This Seriously

*An Editor's Note*

*Dante, who knew the world about suffering,  
had a place in hell for people who were grave  
when they might have rejoiced.*

—Marilynne Robinson

You want satire? We've got your satire right here. Irony, sarcasm. Wit. *New Letters* has been stocking up on all varieties since the price went so low in July 2008, when *The New Yorker* ladled up irony on its cover. Remember: a drawing of Michelle and Barack Obama in Islamic and military dress, fist-bumping in the oval office, with an American flag burning in what I still think of as the Nixon fireplace (he reportedly cranked the air-conditioning way down so he could cozy-up to the fire). In any case, *The New Yorker's* ironic commentary went over as well as a subprime mortgage.

More on *The New Yorker* in a moment. First, a disclaimer. This magazine uses no artificial ingredients. The satire in the new translation of Dante's *The Inferno*, published here, might seem light, delectable, but don't stuff yourself. It's real butter. It will come up on you later. The first circle of hell, my friends, looks a lot like paradise, "a meadow of new green grass," where languish the greatest minds of antiquity—Aristotle, Plato, Democritus, "who says the world is no more / Than happenstance and chance." Could he be wrong? Democritus' lack of faith amounted to a lack of baptism, alone. Blessed be the rational mind, for it shall have paradise in hell.

The thing about irony is this: Once the artist explains it—I did the explaining above, not the poet—irony disappears. Poof. It stops being funny. People walk out on you. If you want to understand, read Mark Twain’s “How to Tell a Story.” Don’t tell us that you’re telling us a joke. Barry Blitt’s *New Yorker* cover, called “The Politics of Fear,” might have hit its unstated target, but not many people cared. Too unstated. The target: demagogues who depict the Obamas as secretly unAmerican, patriotically suspect.

“A joke’s a very serious thing,” wrote 18th-century British poet Charles Churchill. Most serious of all, however, were left-leaning, Obama supporters, some intellectuals and artists, who said the cover cartoon failed precisely because it did not explain itself. It risked being misunderstood and thereby offensive to someone. As jokes go, some of us can tell them and some can’t; and one award-winning graphic designer, Paula Scher, says the Blitt cartoon simply is not outrageous enough. Another political cartoonist once said in a lecture I attended that if his audience doesn’t get the joke in three seconds, he has failed. Several artists and at least one African-American comic said they wished the cartoon had a chubby little Karl Rove resting on the couch, a giant thought balloon growing from his head, in which the cartoon of the Obamas would reside. Then the meaning would be clear, entirely serious in media terms.

I heard that “explanation” repeatedly, as to why so many people thought the cartoon tasteless—to which I answer, Hell is tasteless. Dante nevertheless wrote it up, using some bit of irony. We have to work out our own salvation, it says somewhere, with fear and trembling. This small essay cares to defend simply this: our ability to say one thing and mean another. The presidential election matters greatly, but we must first of all demand of ourselves that we face our frailties, our failures, and make of them a bit of fun.

“*The New Yorker* may think,” said Bill Burton, press secretary for Obama’s campaign “. . . that their [sic] cover is a satirical lampoon of the caricature Senator Obama’s right-wing critics

have tried to create, but most readers will see it as tasteless and offensive. And we agree." Actually, only most Democrats found it offensive—70 percent, according to a Pew Research Center poll of July 24, 2008. So it goes in post-modern life that only 48-percent of Republicans, the intended targets of the satire, took it badly. The joke backfired. At the core of all this is the reason Kim Addonizio's essay and Albert Goldbarth's poetry take on the dangers of wit and implication. We do weird things, artists and writers, willing to *embrace the stink of barnacles*, as Goldbarth suggests, and *the royal jelly of delight*. What we have here in our culture, in our popular media—to risk sounding elitist—is fear of communicating on different kinds of levels. What Mr. Burton finds offensive is the irony, not the message. He loves the message, but he is afraid to say in public that he loves the irony. Therefore, he must publicly hate the message. Ironic, hu?

—Robert Stewart