

Satire's Changing Target

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CONSIDERED FROM A SUFFICIENT REMOVE, the target of satire really never changes, for the satirist always attacks pretense and stupidity, no matter what their source, no matter what their disguise. However, since the nineteenth century, American and, to a lesser degree, European satire has regarded the classic vices with a tolerance, if not sympathy, that has debilitated the satiric energies. The results of this have been most immediately observable in the audience itself.

It has been my experience in the classroom that American students are led to comprehend the feline treacheries of the satirist only with difficulty, and that when they do at last follow the curving flight of the arrow to the target, they are liable to reject the legitimacy of the hit. They resent the satirist's viciousness as much as they resent his oblique and backhanded methods of expressing it. A display of spleen is altogether disagreeable to them, and for compelling cultural reasons, the contemporary impulse is to hospitalize everyone. The wounds the satirist has inflicted upon his victims are soothed by the salve of excuse—"After all, what could you expect him to do? He's only trying to survive." The French film version of *Volpone* is instructive in this light, responsive as it is to the modern temperament. At the conclusion you will recall, Mosca prospers. In a world of scoundrels and fools, he alone had the intelligence, the wiliness and the self-control to succeed. Mosca is no longer measured against an ideal moral world, but only relative to his environment. To a contemporary audience, the punishment Jonson metes out to Mosca—whipping, followed by perpetual imprisonment in

the Venetian galleys—is depressingly barren. Our sympathies flow readily to the picaro, the bright rogue. As to the satirist, students immediately put him in therapy, until the psychological maladjustments that made him aggressively anti-social are eliminated. Americans find it very hard, for example, to accept Mark Twain's latterday virulence. On the whole such pieces as "The War Prayer," "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" and "The United States of Lynch-erdom" are ignored, and when they do reach the public, they are frantically explained away as not being genuine Mark Twain, but only the products of a childish and broken spirit.

This phenomenon of an uncomprehending and resistant audience for satire is reenforced by evidence drawn from a variety of sources. For example, some forty years ago, the English essayist Ronald Knox expressed the belief that satire was virtually non-existent in the United States. What Americans did have, he thought, was an abundance of *humor*, by which he meant "satire run to seed," toothless, its aggressive virility gone. This humor he argued had no point, no message, and consisted of mere fooling with amiable incongruities. More recently, after compiling a collection of American satire, Henry Carlisle mused over the puzzling conformations of what he had harvested. In brief, he found that satire "typically humorous, disarming, friendly, familiar, perhaps a trifle ingratiating." The typical American satirist, he thought, was "wholly indifferent to the object of his attack, if not actually fond of it." The result was a "satire that doesn't satirize." Then, in the past few weeks, I have noted two

reviewers making comments that bear upon this situation. One called his satirist's pose "decadent acquiescence," saying "The most he promises is to show us some amusing types—people who parody us but in such contrived ways that we needn't take offense." The other asked of *his* satirist, "How can [he] exercise such sharp satiric wit without damaging a single one of the clichés and received ideas that imprison the average American mind?" This reviewer's conclusion was that the writer was perpetrating a fraud, for, while he pretended a serious satiric intention, he canceled it totally in the execution.

Non-existent, ingratiating, acquiescent, fraudulent. These several thumb-nail assessments of American satire share the assumption that it deviates from normal expectations, principally because its bite is at most the playful one of a friendly dog, its acid is boric, suitable primarily as eyewash. Is this true, and if so, why? Well, Constance Rourke's basic study, *American Humor* does not even index the word *satire*. American satire has never been seriously studied as such, and no one can be satisfied by generalizations on such a large subject; still I should like to try out some explanations for its peculiar identity. Among the possibilities I can discern are the lack of censorship in the United States; the unpredictable mobility of society; the lapse and evaporation of moral standards; the frequent absence of identifiable targets; and the unavoidable sympathy extended to such targets as can be found.

Censorship, like manure, is malodorous, but it encourages growth. Nothing rouses the satiric temper faster than repression. When power seeks to smother expression of opinion, it produces a hatred which in turn produces that murder by indirection we identify as satire. The censored critic must resort to the oblique attacks of insinuation and

irony, or of burlesque and parody, to make his point within legal boundaries. The third Earl of Shaftesbury thought that the greater the weight of constraint the more bitter the satire, and while the relationship is not so mechanically proportioned—I know of no satire out of Buchenwald or Dachau—still it undoubtedly exists and may partially explain the blandness of the American product. The protection the United States Constitution affords freedom of speech has promoted direct criticism of irritants. Even when, as often happens, the tyranny of majority opinion effectively stifles criticism, Americans continue to *believe* themselves free to speak. Therefore, candor has achieved an exaggerated importance in American life. The vernacular is filled with idioms that extoll forthrightness in speech, notably "straightness." "Let me have it straight from the shoulder," "He's a straight-shooter," "He meets problems head-on," "He goes straight to the point." At least until recently, Americans have regarded the virtues, not to say the necessities, of assays of bias as foreign to their way of life. So one of satire's principal causes—censorship—and one of its principal approaches—indirection—have been conspicuously absent from the national consciousness.

A second problem for the American satirist is that if he is one who ridicules violations of accepted norms of behavior, he has been seriously handicapped in the New World, for it has overwhelmed him with subject matter. Ever since its discovery the American continent has been a veritable showcase of the abnormal, the exaggerated, the unconventional. For three hundred years, agents and symbols of European civilization have been discovered inadvertently creating the most incongruous alliances with the products of an untutored American wilderness. The French trader Jean Nicollet marches out to parley with an

unknown people newly arrived in the region of Lake Nipissing, and he wears a robe of Chinese damask embroidered with birds and flowers and he carries a pistol in each hand, for he literally does not know whether these men will be Orientals from Cathay, or devils from hell. As it turned out they were Winnebagoes. John Winthrop, losing his way home, barricades himself in the hut of Sagamore John and sings psalms through the night while an inquisitive Indian squaw rattles his door. Indians sign treaties in Philadelphia, pianos are jettisoned in the alkali dust of the Oregon trail, Oscar Wilde takes his velvet breeches and lily to the Western mining camps. Such violent and preposterous contrasts have inevitably affected the nature of the national humor. The bold expansiveness of tall tales, the explosive, slapstick changes in fortunes as boats overturn and bears sweep into garden patches and children tumble down wells, the crude clashes between genteel idioms and vulgar dialects—all of these have been staples of American humor. Abnormality has been expected. Rather than being regarded as socially dangerous, such violations of propriety have in themselves been regarded as natural, and have been tolerated if not actually encouraged. The perpetual American ambivalence towards the poles of native shrewdness and imported learning made an absolute choice between them less attractive than the profitable exploitation of these incongruities that their juxtaposition caused.

The nineteenth-century American satirist's tolerance was also developed, I think, because he did not feel genuinely threatened nor revolted by what he made fun of. In *The Cankered Muse*, a study of English Renaissance satire, Alvin Kernan points out that the satirist conventionally offers himself as a plain-speaker, frequently one who emerges from a rural environment that has taught

him directness. The plowman, the shepherd, the farmboy then are all familiar roles for the satirist, and they are all figures that America has readily furnished. Rustics from Enoch Timbertoes and Hosea Biglow down to Will Rogers and Herb Shriner have exposed society's foibles with sly geniality. They come to town with the weight of American respect for the farmer-yeoman behind them and therefore need not apologize for their country ways. Not being on the defensive, they observe and are bemused by what they see, but not infuriated. They are not menaced, yet, by this urban world whose faults they so easily ridicule. They can, when they wish, withdraw into the protective independence of the backwoods, the prairies, and the mountains. These figures and their retreats are now almost extinct—their contemporary avatar, the New York-born Harry Golden dispensing satiric wit from North Carolina symbolizes the weird inter-penetration of city and country that has grown more familiar in the past decade. But in the heyday of the folk humorist, he possessed a freedom simply not available either socially or geographically to the European satirist. One result, it seems to me, was his unusual temperamental equanimity. Intolerable irritation did not induce his laughter, merely an awareness of urban artificiality. The rustic observer saw a facade of convention whose very flimsiness amused him, but which, since it did not encroach upon him, he had no need to destroy. Only when the population flooded into the city and the city accordingly expanded into the country did satire begin to sharpen, for then detachment, that rare luxury, was no longer possible.

In the twentieth century, the mobility of the free American society has expressed itself less in actual physical movement, more in subtle movements up and down the ladders of power. This

has created inducements to pretense, one of the classical objects of satiric attack. Since the citizen is not fixed in his place in society in the United States, he is tempted and in fact enjoined to thrust ever higher. If he does not continue to "grow," he marks himself as either lazy or on the decline. It is an axiom of American life that no man can know his limits unless he has actually tried to reach them. But even as he aspires, how is he to recognize that he has actually reached his proper limits? If the quester loses heart, he is in danger of being proved a coward, or of being morally lax. Since he is ostensibly free to choose his course in life, whatever course he does choose is the one by which he is identified and judged. So if he perseveres a little longer, the myth says, success will reward him. All the while the little Faust is overreaching, he is painfully vulnerable to the satirist's merciless needle. But with the exception of H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis, few major writers have taken serious advantage of him. More often a tolerant sympathy was extended to this new fool of a new god. Writers have either excused the victim or attacked the system.

Because the citizen's identity is established in large measure by his possessions, this pretense extends to the heart of middleclass security. It is significant that when American satire does purport to satirize, it frequently pours its wrath upon things. Things are popular targets for they stand for human foolishness without really endangering or hurting those devoted to them. So stoves, automobiles, can openers, vegetable peelers, computers—all the innumerable gadgets of American life—are frequent objects of satirical attack. Yet they, and especially the status symbols that have been so thoroughly mocked in the past few years, are of the utmost importance to the man on the rise, and all of the car-

toons and jokes joshing the foibles of suburbia finally impress one as being kindly meant. Material possessions are the fragments the non-poet shores against his ruin. They give him contour, they define him by surrounding him, for democratic man is the void inside a circle of things.

It has become, moreover, increasingly difficult for the satirist to locate a human target whom he can identify as being genuinely responsible for social abuses. It is almost impossible to launch a coherent attack against those vast governmental and corporate bureaucracies that impersonally manipulate and harass our lives. And when the corporate identity finally shoves forth a scapegoat, the thoroughness of journalistic scrutiny immediately destroys its ritualistic usefulness. For satire functions best when it refuses to entertain anything that will induce sympathy. But as the newspapers close in upon the scapegoat, they reveal him as no Machiavellian monster, but only as another wretch like ourselves. It is not immorality that has been brought to light, only the lubrication of the modern political and economic machine, and who can sustain serious indignation against a drop of oil?

This raises the familiar question asked of tragedy in the modern world: can satire exist in a world without heroes? As with tragedy, for satire to function, the reality of stature must be accepted. When each man knows and believes in his role, the ridicule or destruction of the transgressor is welcome, for it signals a return to order. But in a time of mobility, when any position is provisional and the sham of identity reaches to the center of existence, then the satiric destruction loses its therapeutic justification. Satire requires a strong and even arrogant sense of what is normal and right, but the many surface certainties by which the modern social world oper-

ates yield swiftly to profound and crippling doubts. With illness regarded as the normal condition in a post-Freudian world, the satirist is faced with the prospect of commanding a person suffering from an incurable disease to cure himself.

As a consequence, we still do not have in modern American satire either the icy, detached observer scornfully raking the idiocies of fools, or the enraged moralist launching headlong attacks against scoundrels. Rather, as observers have repeatedly noted, the American satirist tends to be tolerant, bemused, indulgent about what he exposes. His tone is affectionate, he wants to tease people into sense, although he is prepared to admit that his version of sense may ultimately be as foolish as yours. Is this Horatian? Yes, if one is forced to pick between Horace and Juvenal, but the label is a queer one to pin on Mr. Dooley, say, or Mr. Benchley. The difference is that Horace speaks from a position of certainty, balance and warmth that emanates from his knowledge of the vicissitudes of the world coupled with his present comfort and security. In contrast, the American lacks the equilibrium necessary for security. If he is tolerant, it is not because he can afford to be, but because he has no other choice. When he begins to saw his neighbor's branch off, the abyss opens beneath him.

So the American satirist has come to turn his weapons upon himself, to produce the self-inflicted wound. He readily associates himself with his victims in a democracy of rogues and gulls. *We*, says

the satirist, are the scoundrels and the clowns, not he or you alone. The satirist performs in his own circus, gaining laughter by making himself the representative fool. Sometimes he operates as the rascal, sometimes as the dunce, but in both instances, despite the plentiful ridicule of his defects, he remains fundamentally loveable. Exposure of the inadequacies, deceptions, and petty hypocrisies of self has been the stock-in-trade of *New Yorker* humorists for the past generation. But it must be said that the sting has gone from the satiric lash, for this activity has been carried on with a remarkable moral complacency and self-indulgence.

Recently, it is true, signs of a satiric renaissance have sprung up everywhere in the United States. One can detect a new hardness in the humor, which is not really surprising. As under the pressure of numbers the United States society stratifies more and more, as the urban concentration of an expanding population locks more men in place and demands of them obedience to rules if they are to make even minimal changes in their status, then satire should increase in response to the increased restrictions. In more fluid, free, permissive times, a benign mockery satisfied the national temper, but now the pressures and abrasions of society seem to be growing intolerable. And one result of this may be that, after years of eating honey, Americans are suddenly finding the taste of vinegar is sweet.

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Composition is for the most part, an effort of slow diligence and steady perseverance, to which the mind is dragged by necessity or resolution, and from which the attention is every moment starting to more delightful amusements.

Samuel Johnson