

The Satirist, The Law, And Society

by *Robert C. Elliott* for *Britannica.com*

Indeed, the relations of satirists to the law have always been delicate and complex. Both Horace and Juvenal took extraordinary pains to avoid entanglements with authority— Juvenal ends his first satire with the self-protective announcement that he will write only of the dead. In England in 1599 the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London issued an order prohibiting the printing of any satires whatever and requiring that the published satires of Hall, John Marston, Thomas Nashe, and others be burned.

Today the satirist attacks individuals only at the risk of severe financial loss to himself and his publisher. In totalitarian countries he even risks imprisonment or death. Under extreme conditions satire against the reigning order is out of the question. Such was the case in the Soviet Union and most other communist countries. For example, the poet Osip Mandelstam was sent to a concentration camp and his death for composing a satirical poem on Stalin.

One creative response the satirist makes to social and legal pressures is to try by rhetorical means to approach his target indirectly; that is, a prohibition of direct attack fosters the manoeuvres of indirection that will make the attack palatable: e.g., irony, burlesque, and parody. It is a nice complication that the devices that render satire acceptable to society at the same time sharpen its point. “Abuse is not so dangerous,” said Dr. Johnson, “when there is no vehicle of wit or delicacy, no subtle conveyance.” The conveyances are born out of prohibition.

Anthony Cooper, 3rd earl of Shaftesbury, writing in the 18th century, recognized the “creative” significance of legal and other repressions on the writing of satire. “The greater the weight [of constraint] is, the bitterer will be the satire. The higher the slavery, the more exquisite the buffoonery.” Shaftesbury’s insight requires the qualification made above. Under a massively efficient tyranny, satire of the forms, institutions, or personalities of that tyranny is impossible. But, under the more relaxed authoritarianism of an easier going day, remarkable things could be done. Max Radin, a Polish-born American author, noted how satirical journals in Germany before World War I, even in the face of a severe law, vied with each other to see how close they could come to caricatures of the Kaiser without actually producing them. “Satire which the censor understands,” said the Austrian satirist Karl Kraus, “deserves to be banned.”

The 20th-century American critic Kenneth Burke summed up this paradoxical aspect of satire’s relation with the law by suggesting that the most inventive satire is produced when the satirist knowingly takes serious risks and is not sure whether he will be acclaimed or punished. The whole career of Voltaire is an excellent case in point. Bigots and tyrants may have turned pale at his name, as a famous hyperbole has it; however, Voltaire’s satire was sharpened and his life rendered painfully complicated as he sought to avoid the penalties of the law and the wrath of those he had angered. Men such as Voltaire and Kraus and the Russian Ye.I. Zamyatin attack evil in high places, pitting their wit and moral authority against cruder forms of power. In this engagement there is frequently something of the heroic.

Readers have an excellent opportunity to examine the satirist’s claim to social approval by reason of the literary convention that decrees that he must justify his problematic art. Nearly all satirists write apologies, and nearly all the apologies project an image of the satirist as a plain, honest man, wishing harm to no worthy person but appalled at the evil he sees around him and forced by his conscience to write satire. Pope’s claim is the most extravagant:

Yes, I am proud; I must be proud to see
Men not afraid of God, afraid of me:
Safe from the Bar, the Pulpit, and the Throne,
Yet touch’d and sham’d by Ridicule alone.
O sacred Weapon! left for Truth’s defence, Sole
Dread of Folly, Vice, and Insolence!

—(*Epilogue to the Satires, II, 208–13.*)

After the great age of satire, which Pope brought to a close, such pretensions would have been wholly anachronistic. Ridicule depends on shared assumptions against which the deviant stands in naked relief. The satirist must have an audience that shares with him commitment to certain intellectual and moral standards that validate his attacks on aberration. The greatest satire has been written in periods when ethical and rational norms were sufficiently powerful to attract widespread assent yet not so powerful as to compel absolute conformity—those periods when the satirist could be of his society and yet apart, could exercise a double vision. Neoclassic writers had available to them as an implicit metaphor the

towering standard of the classical past; for the 19th and 20th centuries no such metaphors have been available. It is odd, however, that, whereas the 19th century in general disliked and distrusted satire (there are of course obvious exceptions), our own age, bereft of unifying symbols, scorning traditional rituals, searching for beliefs, still finds satire a congenial mode in almost any medium. Although much 20th-century satire was dismissed as self-serving and trivial, there were notable achievements.

Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22* (1961) once again made use of farce as the agent of the most probing criticism: Who is sane, the book asks, in a world

whose major energies are devoted to blowing itself up? Beneath a surface of hilariously grotesque fantasy, in which characters from Marx Brothers' comedy carry out lethal assignments, there is exposed a dehumanized world of hypocrisy, greed, and cant. Heller was a satirist in the great tradition. If he could no longer, like Pope, tell men with confidence what they should be for, he was splendid at showing them what they must be against. The reader laughs at the mad logic of *Catch-22*, and, as he laughs, he learns. This is precisely the way satire has worked from the beginning.