

Abstract

This chapter considers the reception of eighteenth-century verse satire in transatlantic criticism of the first half of the twentieth century. Beginning with the revival of interest in Georgian writing and art in literary circles between the wars, it surveys the gradual rehabilitation of eighteenth-century satire from its low Victorian reputation to its major treatment by mid-century New Critics, scholars of rhetoric, and textual editors. In particular, it traces patterns of oscillation in satire's reception history between moral and formal approaches, suggesting that treatments of satire as a moral art flourished under the special conditions of wartime, but were replaced in subsequent years by less politically charged rhetorical analyses of texts' internal logic. It concludes by focusing on the sceptical return to moral questions in satire criticism of the 1960s and indicates some problems with reading satire from modern positions of moral relativism.

Keywords

satire, reception, literary criticism, morality, biography, rhetoric

Chapter 41

Satire, Morality, and Criticism, 1930–1965

Clare Bucknell

The eighteenth century was a great age of writing about satire. As a literary art undergoing an extraordinary period of practical development, it was discussed energetically and combatively. The morality of the satiric attack, the differences between wit, ridicule, and raillery, and the relative merits of the ancient Roman satirists were debated at length in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*.¹ A number of poets, well known and less well known, produced heroic couplet essays on the nature and uses of satire.² Some satirists thought of themselves as theorists and historians of the genre as well as practitioners: John Dryden, for instance, prefaced his 1693 translation of the satires of Juvenal and Persius with a critical *Discourse on the Original and Progress of Satire*. In the first half of the century especially, verse satire was considered to be such a public mode of social or political commentary, and its uses so controversial, that to write satire also meant defending one's reasons for doing so, or at the very least considering the possible consequences. Published satires typically had critical prefaces setting out the intellectual basis for the poet's engagement with

¹ See *Tatler*, ii. 73–8 (no. 92, 10 November 1709); *Spectator*, i. 97–100 (no. 23, 27 March 1711); *The Adventurer*, no. 133 (12 February 1754), 1–6.

² Contemporary didactic poems on satire include Harte's *An Essay on Satire* (1730), Whitehead's *An Essay on Ridicule* (1743), and Boscawen's *The Progress of Satire* (1798).

the genre, and the poems themselves often contained self-reflexive lines about the moral or technical features of the task in hand.

Satire and Biographical Criticism

Given this flourishing line in criticism during the neoclassical revival, it might seem odd that the history of satire reception over the next hundred and fifty years should have taken the course it did. Serious modern critical work on eighteenth-century satire took a remarkably long time to get off the ground. During the Victorian period, Dryden, Pope, Swift, and others tended to be passed over or dismissed outright by critics, who felt that their verse did not fit the narrow post-Romantic definition of poetry that had prevailed since the beginning of the century. Virginia Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, for instance, insisted that 'lofty poetry' could 'only spring from some inner positive enthusiasm', which satire—'by its nature negative'—could not share; and, likewise, Matthew Arnold claimed that Dryden and Pope's verse belonged to 'an age of prose and reason', and could not touch the 'imaginative life of the soul' in the way that true poetry should.³ 'Though they may write in verse, though they may in a certain sense be masters of the art of versification', Arnold argued in 'The Study of Poetry' (1880), 'Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of

³ <<<REF:BK>>> Leslie Stephen, *English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1904), 120 <<<REFC>>>.

our prose’.⁴ As Stefan Collini has shown in the context of John Morley’s ‘English Men of Letters’ series (launched 1877), this judgement about the prosiness of the eighteenth-century satirists was partly a nationalist one: it was a recapitulation of the old prejudice that any verse displaying qualities associated with ‘French’ rationalism—argumentation, systematic thought, polished versification—must be inherently un-English and unpoetic. ‘It was always easier’, Collini writes, ‘to find the approved qualities in, say, Johnson or Wordsworth than in Dryden or Pope’.⁵ Stephen, who provided the volume on Pope (1880) for ‘English Men of Letters’, was unwilling to grant even that Pope had managed satisfactorily to imitate the French way of doing things. ‘Boileau would have been revolted by the brutal images which Pope does not hesitate to introduce’, he declared. ‘It is a curious phenomenon that the poet who is pre-eminently the representative of a polished society should openly taken pleasure in unmixed filth.’⁶

The comment about ‘unmixed filth’ touches on the other reason why Victorian critics were unwilling to devote sustained attention to eighteenth-century satire. Their approach to the reading of poetry was strongly biographical, founded on a conviction that poets, like other figures from history, were worth writing about to the extent that

⁴ <<<REF:BKCH>>> Matthew Arnold, ‘The Study of Poetry’, in *Selected Prose*, ed. P. J.

Keating (London: Penguin Books, 1970; repr. 1987), 358–9 <<<REFC>>>. See also

Stephen, *English Literature and Society*, 115–16.

⁵ <<<REF:BK>>> Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in*

Britain, 1850–1930 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 357 <<<REFC>>>.

⁶ <<<REF:BK>>> Leslie Stephen, *Alexander Pope* (1880; repr. London: Macmillan, 1902),

118–19 <<<REFC>>>.

a knowledge of their lives and works would be likely to have a ‘morally elevating effect’ on readers.⁷ This, it was felt, could never be the case with men like Swift and Pope. Their poems—read with the historical literalism that Victorian critics tended to espouse—seemed full of rank hatred for the world and its people, and their victimization of powerless opponents looked ungenerous and malevolent. For Stephen, a reading of *An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* (1735) or *The Dunciad* (1743) showed Pope to be a ‘cruel little persecutor’, a man of ‘abnormal character’ who took delight in ‘coarse abuse’, ‘concentrated malice’, and ‘personal venom’, and attacked his dunces for complex vengeful motives of his own.⁸ ‘There is something cruel in Pope’s laughter, as in Swift’s’, Stephen wrote. ‘The missiles are not mere filth but are weighted with hard materials that bruise and mangle.’ He admitted to feeling ‘half ashamed of confessing to reading *The Dunciad* with pleasure’.⁹ Later, when he came to write his more substantial work on the period, *English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century* (1904), he claimed more robustly that it was not possible to read *The Dunciad* ‘without spasms both of disgust and moral disapproval’.¹⁰ Even George Saintsbury, whose 1916 book *The Peace of the Augustans* aimed to show against the critical tide that Pope, Swift, Gifford, and others were actually poets, could not help

⁷ See Collini, *Public Moralists*, 356.

⁸ Stephen, *Alexander Pope*, 120, 130, 118, 119.

⁹ Stephen, *Alexander Pope*, 120.

¹⁰ Stephen, *English Literature and Society*, 133–4.

attributing the denigration of Grub Street to ‘Pope’s poisonous and self-torturing spite’.¹¹

The pull of biographical criticism continued to be felt strongly during the first decades of the twentieth century, though in a new direction. In a wave of what Terry Castle has dubbed ‘Rococophilia’—the revival of eighteenth-century styles and attitudes by British Modernists after the First World War—writers engaged in passionate defences of the eighteenth-century satirists.¹² In his lecture *Pope* (1925),¹³ Lytton Strachey asserted that it was ‘time to consider the master of the eighteenth century with a more impartial eye’ than the Victorians had managed, and recognize that real poetry might just as well be found ‘in a game of cards, or a gentleman sneezing at Hampton Court’ as in the sorts of lofty scenes that Arnold adumbrated.¹³ Strachey’s ‘impartial eye’, though, turned out to be less analytical than it might have been, and his study of Pope’s heroic couplet technique returns repeatedly to the personal grudges, ‘malignant fury’, and ‘murderous insolence’ that are assumed to stand behind the satire. Pope was ‘naturally drawn to the contemplation of human beings’, Strachey concludes, ‘and the feelings which these contemplations habitually

¹¹ <<<REF:BK>>> George Saintsbury, *The Peace of the Augustans: A Survey of Eighteenth Century Literature as a Place of Rest and Refreshment* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1916), 92–3 <<<REFC>>>.

¹² Terry Castle delivered the 2011 Clarendon Lectures at Oxford University on ‘Rococophilia: The Eighteenth Century and British Modernism’.

¹³ <<<REF:BK>>> Lytton Strachey, *Pope: The Leslie Stephen Lecture for 1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925), 10–13 <<<REFC>>>.

aroused in him were those of scorn and hatred'.¹⁴ Edith Sitwell, meanwhile, met the Victorians head-on with a new biography of Pope (1930), designed explicitly to present the poet 'in his true light as a good and exceedingly loveable man'.¹⁵ Sitwell's account, like Strachey's, avoids directly treating satire as a genre, commenting only on local qualities of the verse and, rather bizarrely, the perceived suitability of the heroic couplet measure, 'with its sustaining rhymes, its outward cage', to 'a poet of Pope's tiny and weak body'. ('It is nearly always possible to judge of the poet's physique from his technique', she writes.) Her biography opens by claiming that it will save the reputation of Pope's satires from the 'general blighting and withering of poetic taste' presided over by Arnold, but proceeds to make only passing reference to *The Dunciad*, the *Imitations of Horace* and their political and social valences.¹⁶ It seems to have been easier to defend Pope's personal character than engage with the qualities of the satires.

The Satire as a Moral Art

The earliest recognitions that something might be changing in the way critics thought about satire came in the pages of *Scrutiny* in the early 1930s. Sherard Vines's survey of a reissued edition of Dryden's poetry (1932) notes with pleasure that critical interest in Dryden seems to have taken an upturn in recent years. 'Through our poets,

¹⁴ Strachey, *Pope*, 29–30, 24–5.

¹⁵ <<<REF:BK>>>Edith Sitwell, *Alexander Pope* (London: Faber & Faber, 1930),

1 <<<REFC>>>.

¹⁶ Sitwell, *Alexander Pope*, 266, 2.

and our more professionally academic critics', Vines writes, 'his credit is slowly rising'. Extracts from Dryden's verse appear in I. A. Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924); inspired by Dryden and Pope, contemporary poets such as Edgell Rickword are coming back to the heroic couplet; and, most importantly, Dryden's satires no longer have to be carefully packaged to appeal to what Vines calls 'the pseudo-Wordsworthianism of the early twentieth century'.¹⁷ Led by the growing body of professional critics who produced scholarly editions and commentaries, attitudes to satire seemed gradually to be changing. F. R. Leavis, who devoted the second of his *Scrutiny* 'Revaluations' essays to Pope (1933), was likewise willing to admit that progress had been made on the Dryden front, and indeed with satire in general. 'It may be', he suggested, 'no longer necessary to discuss whether satire can be poetry, and we may have entirely disposed of Matthew Arnold'. Nonetheless, there was some way to go yet in the battle to discredit biographical criticism. 'Elementary things still need saying', Leavis reminded his readers. 'Such terms as "venom", "envy", "malice" and "spite" are, among modern connoisseurs, the staple of appreciation.'¹⁸

What seemed to be required was a new critical language in which the art of satire, rather than the feelings that might have inspired it, sat at the centre of debate. In his 'Revaluation' Leavis gestures towards this language, noting that *The Dunciad* is 'certainly poetic creation, even by Romantic standards', and that its verse, by virtue of imagery, tone, and mood, 'demonstrates [. . .] irresistibly that satire can be great

¹⁷ <<<REF:JART>>> Sherard Vines, 'Dryden Redivivus', *Scrutiny* 1 (December 1932), 283–
5 <<<REFC>>>.

¹⁸ <<<REF:JART>>> F. R. Leavis, 'Revaluations (II): The Poetry of Pope', *Scrutiny* 2
(December 1933), 268–84 (268–9, 277) <<<REFC>>>.

poetry'.¹⁹ Geoffrey Walton, reviewing Geoffrey Tillotson's *On the Poetry of Pope* (1938) in *Scrutiny* a few years later, made the same point in relation to Pope's *Moral Essays* (1731–5). 'It seems to me', he suggests, 'that a more disinterested reading of his poetry and a closer study of his use of words and verse rhythms would have enabled Mr. Tillotson to see more clearly the reasons why Pope's satires are great poetry'.²⁰ This is true, but the problem with it and with Leavis's comment is that neither has anything to say about satire *qua* satire, only about the degree to which lines of verse that happen to be in a satire are good poetry. Elsewhere in his essay, Leavis resituates Pope's poetry in a tradition with which he—under the influence of T. S. Eliot—is more comfortable. 'Pope is as much the last poet of the Seventeenth Century as the first of the Eighteenth', he argues. 'His Wit is Metaphysical as well as Augustan.'²¹ It is easier, Leavis seems to be saying, to compare local effects in Pope's poetry to the wit of Donne or Cowley than to make any claims for what eighteenth-century satire might do differently, or especially.

In 1940, the Dryden scholar Louis Bredvold wrote an article that set about programmatically to 'reopen the question of the nature of satire'.²² 'A Note in Defence of Satire' starts by admitting that its task is an uphill struggle. 'In the current standard treatises', Bredvold writes, 'satire appears as the least attractive and the least

¹⁹ Leavis, 'Revaluations (II)', 282, 284.

²⁰ <<<REF:JART>>> Geoffrey Walton, 'The End and the Means', *Scrutiny* 6 (March 1938), 433–4 (434) <<<REFC>>>.

²¹ Leavis, 'Revaluations (II)', 270.

²² <<<REF:JART>>> Louis I. Bredvold, 'A Note in Defence of Satire', *ELH* 7 (1940), 253–64 (253) <<<REFC>>>.

defensible of the many manifestations of the comic spirit'. Accordingly, 'the lover of good satire is now put to it to defend his taste'. Bredvold's case for the defence is not concerned with satire's 'publicist function', the political or social uses it may have in the life of a community; these are 'accidental effects' of the genre and have little to say about 'the essential nature of satire'.²³ Instead, what interests him is the moral quality of 'indignation' (Juvenal's *indignatio*) that he perceives at the heart of the satiric attack. For Bredvold, what makes satire defensible is that its indignation at a social or political ill is no mere 'personal feeling of resentment or desire for retaliation', but the expression of a broader public morality, 'an affirmation of some standard which we as good men cannot refuse to sustain'. Satire, he writes, 'is an indictment, and as such appeals to some sort of categorical imperative, to what is right and just'. The judgement it makes 'springs from some over-individual principle within us, not merely from our ego'. Indeed, the 'whole art of satire', Bredvold suggests, 'rests on the assumption of the moral sympathy and agreement of the reader with the writer'.²⁴

This is designed explicitly to reject any lingering Victorian arguments about the unpleasantness and unjustifiability of satire, and correct those who still think that satirists write out of private spite. But it also has larger cultural resonances. For Bredvold, writing in 1940, satiric indignation is urgently needed, more so now than ever, because it confirms the existence of the strong moral positives ('valid universal principles') upon which decent civilizations are founded. 'It is a popular *non sequitur* in our era', he observes, 'to berate the wickedness of the world and then add in

²³ Bredvold, 'A Note in Defence of Satire', 253, 255, 257.

²⁴ Bredvold, 'A Note in Defence of Satire', 259–60, 262.

bitterness of spirit that there is no good'. The continuing legibility of satire proves positively that in the darkest of times there is still a 'communion of men—few though they may be—for whom things matter', enough good citizens whose moral idealism is 'activated through [their] sympathetic response' to the satirist's anger.²⁵ In 1943, reviewing James Sutherland's new Twickenham edition of *The Dunciad* for *Scrutiny*, Leavis had similar things to say about the moral certainties and civilized ideals standing behind Pope's satire. *The Dunciad* is not, he argues, like some of Swift's satires an exhibition of 'contempt, disgust, hatred, and the will to spoil and destroy'.²⁶ Rather, the 'satiric antipathy' it dramatizes is a celebration of positive Augustan values. "'Order" for Pope is no mere word', Leavis writes, 'but a rich concept imaginatively realised: ideal Augustan civilisation. [. . .] It is the comprehensive positive from which the satire works.'²⁷ Elsewhere, he notes that Pope and his contemporaries were 'in complete accord about fundamentals', about what mattered to their society and what the substance of its moral identity was. 'How firmly he [Pope] realised the substance, and how habitually present to him were the positive bases, one is apt to find most strikingly evidenced in the neighbourhood of his most spirited satiric passages', he wrote of the 'Timon's Villa' episode in the *Epistle to Burlington* (1731).²⁸ Neither he nor Bredvold were in any doubt that Pope and his fellow satirists really felt the indignation, outrage, or disbelief they described; as

²⁵ Bredvold, 'A Note in Defence of Satire', 262–4.

²⁶ <<<REF:JART>>> F. R. Leavis, 'The Dunciad', *Scrutiny* 12 (Winter 1943), 74–80 (75) <<<REFC>>>.

²⁷ Leavis, 'The Dunciad', 77.

²⁸ Leavis, 'Revaluations (II)', 274.

Stephen and Strachey had done before them, they held satire to be the expression of personally held convictions, albeit ones that were social and sympathetic enough for all right-thinking readers to share.²⁹

In 1940, a Harvard scholar named David Worcester took the critical defence of eighteenth-century satire in a new direction. In his book *The Art of Satire*, Worcester argued that satire was an indirect mode, not a direct one. He agreed with Bredvold, Leavis, and the rest that satires were motivated by powerful personal feelings, but insisted that in persuasive and successful pieces these angry sentiments would have been disguised or framed by a set of rhetorical conventions by the time they reached the reader. Satire, Worcester wrote, was ‘the engine of anger, rather than the direct expression of anger’: the satirist must ‘simulate coolness and detachment’, however strong his initial feelings, interposing a ‘rhetorical pattern of astonishing complexity’ in between ‘his naked sentiment and the reader’.³⁰ Worcester’s approach to satire required, as Bredvold’s had done, a recapitulation of the reasons why satire merited literary study; but it also needed some sort of historical discussion of rhetoric, in order to drag rhetorical work out of the scholarly disfavour in which it had been languishing. Worcester approached this difficulty head-on. ‘Rhetoric is in disgrace’, he argued in his opening chapter. ‘Nowadays when we say that a piece of writing is “rhetorical”, we usually mean to call attention to its tumid style and trumpery of ornamentation—its false rhetoric, in other words.’³¹ The challenge for the modern

²⁹ See, e.g., Leavis, ‘*The Dunciad*’, 75.

³⁰ <<<REF:BK>>> David Worcester, *The Art of Satire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940), 18, 22 <<<REFC>>>.

³¹ Worcester, *Art of Satire*, 8–9.

scholar of rhetoric was, therefore, to distinguish false rhetoric from the art of persuasion more broadly, and to show that rather than making a piece of writing decorative and over-complicated, rhetorical forms aimed at comprehensibility and universality.

Like Bredvold and Leavis, Worcester was interested in satire as a moral art, and his discussion focuses as theirs does on the reciprocity between satire's moral function and the shared 'fundamental' codes of right and wrong that underpin decent political societies. Where he departs intellectually, however, is in the importance he accords to rhetoric in this narrative. Rhetorical conventions, for Worcester, act as intermediaries between the convictions of the satirist and the shared moral imperatives of the society he belongs to: they transform personal feelings of anger or resentment into social indignation, and make something public and high-minded of a private sentiment. 'The true function of rhetoric', he argues, 'is to teach the writer how to translate the undefined stirring in his breast into an objective form that speaks to all men'.³² As an instance of this translation process, Worcester looks at eighteenth-century burlesque and mock-heroic. In his analysis, mock-heroic is a distorted vision of society that neglects to supply the conventional or normative framework from which it departs (it is a kind of 'extended simile' that lacks one of its terms). As such, it relies on the reader to be an active participant in the creation of meaning, supplying the moral ideal that is imaged in negative by the text's rhetorical transformations (Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe* (1682), for instance, is funny and pointed because we can see Aeneas and Ascanius behind Flecknoe and Shadwell). 'It is the reader's part to supply knowledge of the model', Worcester writes. 'So long as the author can depend

³² Worcester, *Art of Satire*, 9.

on his audience for the necessary information, he need not utter a word of reproach or obloquy; his audience will provide the curses.’³³

This conclusion had historical and political implications. Worcester argued that satire’s indirectness, its reliance on a readership capable of ‘providing the curses’, meant that it flourished in ages (such as the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries) when a broad understanding of the categories of rhetorical speech flourished alongside a stable notion of the organization and ideals of political society. There was a clear contemporary warning to take from this. In 1940, Worcester felt that satire was suffering from the general fashion for ‘everything [. . .] ironical’ that had swept through the public sphere. What satirists needed, he thought, was to achieve a ‘purposeful, intellectual communion with the reader’, and reclaim some of the ‘moral responsibility’ they seemed to be shrinking from. There was much at stake: in the decline of the old reciprocal relationship between the satirist and his audience he foresaw the sort of political ‘sterility’ that could ‘give encouragement to the absolute authority of Nazism, Fascism, and Communism’.³⁴

The Rhetoric of Satire

Whether this was an exaggeration or fair warning, the view from after the war looked rather different, and in the following decade large-scale moral and political conclusions were sidelined as the least important part of Worcester’s work. Instead, the hint that subsequent scholars took from him concerned rhetoric. During the 1950s,

³³ Worcester, *Art of Satire*, 41–2.

³⁴ Worcester, *Art of Satire*, 166–8.

Pope, Swift, and others became ‘occasional beneficiaries of New Criticism and its close explorations into ambiguity, irony, and innuendo’, scrutinized by careful formal analysis that deliberately downplayed the sorts of historical and contextual inquiries that had previously dominated the study of satire.³⁵ Ian Jack’s *Augustan Satire: Intention and Idiom in English Poetry* (1952) and Martin Price’s *Swift’s Rhetorical Art: A Study in Structure and Meaning* (1953), for instance, both concentrate on the patterns of rhetorical design at work in individual satires and the broader generic categories to which these patterns belong.³⁶ Jack’s study focuses on neoclassical doctrines of literary decorum and the ‘levels of idiom’ suited to particular rhetorical occasions, drawing examples from Dryden’s *Mac Flecknoe* and Pope’s Horatian imitations; Price takes Swift as his subject and considers the rhetorical building blocks—structures of analogy, opposition, and argumentation—that make up the

³⁵ <<<REF:BKCH>>> W. B. Carnochan, ‘Swift: the Canon, the Curriculum, and the Marketplace of Scholarship’, in *Reading Swift: Papers from the Fourth Münster Symposium on Jonathan Swift*, ed. Hermann J. Real and Helgard Stöver-Leidig (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2003), 13–21 (17) <<<REFC>>>; see also <<<REF:BK>>> Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 28–9 <<<REFC>>>.

³⁶ Other notable rhetorical studies of satire produced during this period include <<<REF:BK>>> Rebecca Parkin, *The Poetic Workmanship of Alexander Pope* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955) <<<REFC>>>; <<<REF:BK>>> Ellen Douglass Leyburn, *Satiric Allegory: Mirror of Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956) <<<REFC>>>.

‘internal necessity’ of each ‘single work’.³⁷ The most influential treatment of the rhetoric of satire in the early 1950s, however, came from Price’s doctoral supervisor at Yale, Maynard Mack. Mack’s article ‘The Muse of Satire’ (1951) begins, as Worcester’s book had done a decade earlier, with a discussion of the particular applications of rhetorical analysis in the context of satire scholarship. ‘In the case of satire’, Mack writes, ‘what is desperately needed today is inquiry that deals neither with origins nor effects, but with artifice’.³⁸ The biographical and historical approaches favoured by old-fashioned scholars, he argues, ‘can and should be supplemented [. . .] by a third kind of inquiry treating the work with some strictness as a rhetorical construction: as a “thing made”’. This sort of treatment has been made possible by New Critical scholars, who as part of a more ‘general revival of rhetorical interests and disciplines’ have endeavoured to ‘recapture some of the older exegetical skills’ in textual scholarship.³⁹

Mack’s article applies this new rhetorical work to Pope’s Horatian satires. ‘Even in these apparently very personal poems’, he argues, ‘we overlook what is most essential if we overlook the distinction between the historical Alexander Pope and the

³⁷ <<<REF:BK>>> Ian Jack, *Augustan Satire: Intention and Idiom in English Poetry, 1660–1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952) <<<REFC>>>; <<<REF:BK>>> Martin Price, *Swift’s Rhetorical Art: A Study in Structure and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), vii <<<REFC>>>.

³⁸ <<<REF:JART>>> Maynard Mack, ‘The Muse of Satire’, *Yale Review* 41 (1951), 80–92 (82) <<<REFC>>>.

³⁹ Mack, ‘The Muse of Satire’, 81–2.

dramatic Alexander Pope who speaks them'.⁴⁰ Under the influence of 'romantic theories of poetry as the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions', nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers have grown unaccustomed to thinking about poems as dramatic fictions, and treating poetic speakers as characters in a rhetorical situation rather than direct mouthpieces for the poet. Tricked by the obliquity of the relationship between the historical Alexander Pope and the speaker of the *Imitations of Horace* or *The Dunciad*, they fail to see that Pope himself is as unhelpful a guide to the character of his dramatic *personae* as the historical Jonathan Swift is to the more obviously fictive Modest Proposer.⁴¹ For Mack, the conclusion to be drawn from reading passages of lofty self-aggrandizement in the later Horatian satires is not that Pope himself must have been a vain man, but that given the nature of the rhetorical enterprise he was engaged in, high-flung modes of presentation were suitable ways of 'supporting the *ethos* a satirical poet must have'. He shows that what Pope's satiric speakers say and how they select and characterize their antagonists are functions of the internal logic of the satiric fiction, rather than responses to external realities. The bitter 'Sporus' portrait in the *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*, for instance, is 'called for, at just this point, not by the poet's actual feelings about a contemporary, but by the drama of feelings that has been building inside the poem'.⁴²

Mack trained and taught at Yale, and was part of a larger group of scholars there during the 1950s and early 1960s who studied satire from a New Critical perspective. Collectively, these scholars—Mack, Price, Alvin Kernan, Robert C. Elliott, Ellen

⁴⁰ Mack, 'The Muse of Satire', 83.

⁴¹ Mack, 'The Muse of Satire', 84.

⁴² Mack, 'The Muse of Satire', 87–8, 92.

Douglass Leyburn, and others—produced, as Dustin Griffin has suggested, ‘a rhetorical theory of satire’. Their scholarship, Griffin writes, tended ‘to separate the work from the author who produced it, the world out of which it grew, and the audience towards which it was directed’.⁴³ It was resolutely anti-biographical. Elliott’s *The Power of Satire* (1960), for instance, argued that the trajectory of satire’s development from a primitive curse ritual to a literary art had been one of increasing impersonality and indirectness: what interested him was the distance satire posited between the real-life satirist and his dramatic speaker, and the kinds of social mores or legislative constraints that had interposed to encourage this distancing process over time.⁴⁴

Kernan’s two major books on satire, *The Cankered Muse* (1959) and *The Plot of Satire* (1965), both began by sketching out the reasons why the old biographical methods had no place in contemporary critical inquiry. Historical literalism, Kernan argued, ‘makes of satire a type of propaganda originating in the author’s prejudices’; it denied individual texts ‘the independence of artistic status’, and instead directed the reader’s attention ‘towards some second object, the personality of the author or the contemporary social scene’.⁴⁵ His approach, like Mack’s, involved a ‘more sympathetic understanding of rhetoric’ than was traditionally offered by post-

⁴³ Griffin, *Satire*, 29.

⁴⁴ <<<REF:BK>>>Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960)<<<REFC>>>.

⁴⁵ <<<REF:BK>>>Alvin Kernan, *The Plot of Satire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 4–5<<<REFC>>>; <<<REF:BK>>>Alvin Kernan, *The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 2<<<REFC>>>.

Romantic studies of poetry, and focused on the internal logic of satiric texts and the nature of the fictions or ‘master tropes’ they constructed.⁴⁶ In *The Plot of Satire*, for instance, he reads the catalogue of stylistic faults listed in Pope’s *Peri Bathous* (1727) as an index to the major rhetorical figures used by eighteenth-century satirists in their depictions of ‘dullness’: this allows him to deal with texts as different as John Gay’s mock-heroic poem *Trivia* (1716) and Ben Jonson’s comedy *Volpone* (1606) in the same argument, on the basis that they delight in opposite and complementary patterns of rhetorical trope.

This is a typically ahistorical way of proceeding. For Kernan, interested in the internal structures of texts rather than the circumstances in which they were produced, satire may be thought about generically as a collection of rhetorical characteristics (certain kinds of image, figure, or dramatic plot) that crop up in texts from all sorts of times and places. ‘The specific forms of dullness change from age to age and satirist to satirist’, he writes, ‘but the action of dullness and the plots which imitate it remain the same’.⁴⁷ Since the applications of satire as a rhetorical occasion are unchanging, there must be commonalties to be traced through its dramatic figures and master images across time. ‘It should be possible’, Kernan writes, ‘to define in very general terms the essential satirist, those traits, attitudes, passions, which every author of satire brings together’.⁴⁸ In this he shares some ideas with the Canadian scholar

⁴⁶ Kernan, *The Plot of Satire*, 26.

⁴⁷ Kernan, *The Plot of Satire*, 103.

⁴⁸ Kernan, *The Cankered Muse*, 16. On the possibility of schematizing satire’s rhetorical

patterns, see also <<<REF:PER>>> John M. Aden, ‘Towards a Uniform Satiric

Terminology’, *Satire Newsletter* 2 (1964), 30–2 <<<REFC>>>.

Northrop Frye, whose book *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) sets out to think about genres atemporally as myths or ‘structural principles’, enduring intellectual patterns that lend form and meaning to human experience. Satire, as one such structuring myth, is made up in Frye’s schema of a set of tropes and images that recur in texts separated by hundreds of years: the theme of anti-intellectual mockery, for instance (‘setting ideas and generalisations and theories and dogmas over against the life they are supposed to explain’), is alive in various forms in satires by Erasmus and Rabelais, but also finds its place in Swift, Sterne, and Peacock.⁴⁹

Though the critical focus was now firmly on rhetoric and form, the question of satire’s morality did not entirely vanish from the debate. One of the more challenging suggestions raised by rhetorical analysis was that the moral positions a satire held (or that its dramatic speakers were represented as holding) might be dependent on the formal or technical requirements of the genre rather than on any extra-textual moral commitments of the satirist’s. The implications of this suggestion for the early moralist defences of eighteenth-century satire were far-reaching: could it be the case that moral feelings were incidental to satire rather than the formative inspiration behind it? Mack’s essay of 1951 on Pope made some early hints in this direction, arguing that Pope’s self-presentation in the *Imitations of Horace* as a ‘fundamentally virtuous and tolerant man’ was an element of the satire’s persuasive strategy, rather than (necessarily) a reflection of the poet’s historical character. It was ‘imperative’, Mack argued, for a satire to establish an ‘authoritative ethos’ if it was to get its moral and political teaching across; and to project this ‘ethos’ successfully the satirist

⁴⁹ <<<REF:BK>>>Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 310, 230<<<REFC>>>.

needed a dramatic mouthpiece—in Pope’s case, the figure of the *vir bonus*, or ‘plain good private citizen’—who would be calculated to appear ‘stable, independent, urbane, wise’, and win the reader’s confidence in his ‘moral insight’.⁵⁰ More radically, Mack suggested that there was no reason to think of this ‘ethos’ itself as grounded in any existing moral standard or political position. Instead, the various ethical and political conflicts dramatized in the Horatian satires (everything, he argued, that could be gathered under Pope’s line ‘the strong Antipathy of Good to Bad’) might be nothing more than a ‘fictive war’ between good and evil: a climactic ‘drama of feelings’ whose clashes and contrasts were designed to satisfy the formal requirements of a bipartite satiric structure.⁵¹ Satire was a dramatic mode, and it needed a good plotline.

In *The Satirist* (1963), the American scholar Leonard Feinberg developed some of Mack’s suggestions. The satirist’s adoption of a moral position, Feinberg argued, was an essentially pragmatic choice. The reason why early modern satire tended to take a moral view on the world was not because (or primarily because) the satirist was interested in moral reform. Instead, a writer who wanted his work to be read would need to ‘choose material with which his audience [was] familiar, and an attitude with which it [was] sympathetic’, and material that ‘involved ethics and morality’ would be familiar and attractive in just this way. Because the satirist chose this ‘socially acceptable kind of criticism’, his satire would be ‘likely to appear “moral”’—but, Feinberg emphasized, morality was ‘usually incidental to his aesthetic intention,

⁵⁰ Mack, ‘The Muse of Satire’, 86, 89, 91.

⁵¹ Mack, ‘The Muse of Satire’, 85, 92.

peripheral to it, and motivated to a large extent by purely technical requirements'.⁵² What Feinberg had in mind by 'technical requirements' were the particular themes, images, and actions that served satire's essential dynamics of irony and comic incongruity. Chief amongst these was hypocrisy, 'the single greatest source of satiric material'. Hypocrisy (or vanity, or duplicity, or anything that involved a mismatch between representation and reality) provided 'precisely the kind of incongruity' that was most 'suitable for the satiric method', Feinberg said.⁵³ So, whilst writing about hypocrisy might be likely to bring moral concerns and moral feelings into the scope of the argument, these were in themselves incidental and only circumstantially interesting: it was the rhetorical shapes and forms that incongruity could take in satire (bathos, irony, travesty, mock-heroic, and the rest) that mattered.

In an article of 1964, Kernan wrote about what he thought of as a major technical difficulty that New Critical scholarship on satire had thrown up. Rhetorical analysis had shown that eighteenth-century satires, like lyric poems, could be read as closed systems, internally consistent networks of intricate formal connections. According to this kind of reading, the logic of satire was purely textual: its functions made sense relative to one another, but their meaning collapsed outside the framework of the individual poem or prose passage. In his article, Kernan argued that the principal rhetorical figures in eighteenth-century satire ('the major actions of dullness—degrading, magnifying, and jumbling') were all 'relative movements': that is, they needed to be 'plotted' against 'certain fixed points' outside the boundaries of the

⁵² <<<REF:BK>>> Leonard Feinberg, *The Satirist: His Temperament, Motivation, and Influence*, 2nd edn. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 40 <<<REFC>>>.

⁵³ Feinberg, *The Satirist*, 38–9.

individual work if they were to have any meaning in themselves.⁵⁴ If the satirist could not point to some authoritative and commonly held measure of value external to the text, it would be very difficult for him to show *why*, for instance, the presentation of a louse as Ulysses in Peter Pindar's *The Lousiad* (1785–95) was absurd and comic. For his satire to succeed, he must 'contrive in some manner to demonstrate that the mad world he constructs is truly mad, that it is the breech which is up, not the head'—that something must be up if, in the case of *The Lousiad*, a little insect was at the centre of an epic narrative. There were ways, Kernan showed, to demonstrate this plainly, and to establish a set of 'cardinal points on the satiric compass' against which the text's rhetorical transformations could be seen clearly for what they were; but they all relied on professions of lofty moral certainty from the satirist of just the sort that New Critical scholarship had revealed to be generic and dramatic rather than sincere. 'The most direct way of establishing the necessary reference points', Kernan wrote, 'is to provide a spokesman for the truth [. . .] who breaks into the narrative and tells us what is wrong with the world'. But how was the reader to know that the particular version of the 'truth' issued by the satirist's spokesman was the right one? Why should the satirist be believed if there was only 'his word for it'?⁵⁵

'Truth' might seem an oddly old-fashioned thing to find mentioned in scholarship of this nature, but the kinds of moral or political standards ('cardinal points') that Kernan is talking about here are a long way away from the confident 'categorical imperatives' that critics such as Bredvold and Worcester had in mind in 1940. New

⁵⁴ <<<REF:PER>>> Alvin Kernan, contribution to 'Norms, Moral or Other, in Satire: A Symposium', *Satire Newsletter* 3 (1964), 2–25 (12) <<<REFC>>>.

⁵⁵ Kernan, contribution to 'Norms, Moral or Other', 12–13.

Critical analysis of satire had shown that there were still interesting things to say about the moral content of satiric texts as well as their form, and it had demonstrated that knowing more about the rhetorical techniques with which satires were made allowed for more subtle conclusions to be reached about the nature of satiric morality. But the sceptical framework within which critics of the late 1950s and early 1960s approached the question of moral norms had little in common with the positivism of earlier accounts. Frye's *Anatomy of Satire*, for instance, suggested that the moral universe the genre traditionally inhabited was a distinctly unsatisfactory one, 'full of anomalies, injustices, follies, and crimes'. Any norms of behaviour it encoded were 'low' and pragmatic, expressions of 'tried and tested' common-sense wisdom or 'church porch virtue'.⁵⁶ In *The Satirist*, Feinberg also dealt with moral norms, but took the argument a step further and argued flatly for the impossibility of a broad consensus over what might count as 'good' and 'evil' in human behaviour. 'Sceptical intellectuals', he wrote, must 'consider the possibility that good and evil are complementary and indispensable components, incapable of absolute identification'.⁵⁷ One thing that the study of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century satire had shown, he argued, was that when satiric speakers claimed to be moralists or offered up moral wisdom, it was very often not the sort of morality that twentieth-century audiences could respond to or recognize. The rakish behaviour presented on the Restoration stage, for instance, might look immoral now, but had it been then? If Wycherley and Congreve were simply 'expressing the morality of the dominant group at King Charles' court', should the social mores they dramatized be measured by

⁵⁶ Frye, *Anatomy of Satire*, 226–7.

⁵⁷ Feinberg, *The Satirist*, 28.

contemporary polite standards?⁵⁸ Historical as well as rhetorical sensitivity, Feinberg suggested, was required for a sophisticated grasp of the relationship between moral norms and satiric representation.

Satire, Historicism, and Morality

The return to historical thinking in Feinberg's discussion was more than just an academic move: it was also the expression of a wider political consciousness, a way of looking at the world that had its roots in the recent experience of wartime.⁵⁹ One of the prompts for thinking about morality—and the morality of satire—somewhat differently in the 1950s and early 1960s was the extraordinary nature of the evils committed under wartime administrations (for transatlantic scholars, the German and Soviet administrations), and the proselytizing justifications composed in their defence by writers and publicists. 'Is the Marxist, or Stalinist, or post-Stalinist reformer, who believes that the end justifies the means, a moralist?' Feinberg asks. 'Was the anti-Christian Nazi who devoutly practiced Hitler's pagan morality, a moralist? Satire has been written in defence of all these positions.'⁶⁰ For Bredvold in 1940, it was still possible to assert with confidence that all 'true satirists' were motivated by moral idealism, working together as a kind of 'invisible church [. . .] of good men' to

⁵⁸ Feinberg, *The Satirist*, 28.

⁵⁹ It has been argued more generally that the experience of war might have been a factor in the sudden upsurge of interest in satire amongst scholars of the 1950s and 1960s: see, e.g., Brian Connery, introduction to Feinberg, *The Satirist*, x.

⁶⁰ Feinberg, *The Satirist*, 34.

articulate the ‘eternal verities’ of decency and righteous indignation.⁶¹ From the post-war vantage point, by contrast, the landscape of moral politics looked very different, and the scope of satire’s moral work seemed to shrink in size accordingly. Some scholars remarked that the existence of Hitler created problems for satire, as the evil he embodied was beyond its capacities to take on. ‘Some villainies are too awful for us to despise’, the American critic Gilbert Highet wrote.⁶² The lines that had previously marked the limits of what was conceivable in human action and thought had been crossed. It was clearer than ever before that there was no such thing—in life or in art—as a supra-human moral consensus, whose values and codes could transcend national and social barriers. The war had made all positivist statements and confident diagnoses look naïve; the only thing to be said with some certainty was that other people held wildly divergent views of what was right, and with sufficient conviction to make them the foundations of institutions and policy.

In late 1964, an academic journal called the *Satire Newsletter* devoted most of its third number to a ‘symposium’ on moral norms in satire. The *Newsletter* was a relatively new operation: its first issue had appeared a year previously, edited by a board of eminent specialists including Kernan, Frye, Elliott, Mack, and others. It published original short satiric poems and stories, reviews of academic monographs on satire and stand-alone critical readings, and aimed to elevate the genre of satire from its current status as ‘the leper of literature’ to a legitimate object of scholarly

⁶¹ Bredvold, ‘A Note in Defence of Satire’, 263–4.

⁶² <<<REF:BK>>> Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 22–3 <<<REFC>>>; see also <<<REF:BK>>> Leonard Feinberg, *Introduction to Satire* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1967), 30 <<<REFC>>>.

study.⁶³ Its symposium on satiric morality collected responses to the question of how explicit satiric works of various historical periods tended to be about the moral standards they held—or, indeed, whether they were founded on moral standards at all.⁶⁴ A small number of contributors contended that successful satires were characterized by their ability to communicate, even if implicitly, a set of fixed norms by which the human conduct they dramatized was being judged; but the vast majority of scholars took a more circumspect approach to the problem, adopting the same relativist line as Feinberg on the question of satire's moral life.⁶⁵

‘Few if any values are universally held, and many more are not very widely shared’, wrote the Swift scholar Edward Rosenheim, arguing that the closest thing contemporary society had to a public morality was a thin ‘substratum of common belief’, a set of ‘tacit, common assumptions about what is right or wrong’ whose foundations lay in custom rather than normative principles.⁶⁶ Norman Knox, the author of a 1961 book on Renaissance and eighteenth-century understandings of irony, acknowledged likewise that the truth-claims historically thought to be the province of satire were contingent rather than universal. ‘Our heads are full of truths’, he argued, ‘not all moral, not all of great significance, not all logically consistent with each other, and not all unrelated to time, place, context, and so forth’. For Knox, satire could only be sure of winning a broadly sympathetic readership when the ‘truths’ or

⁶³ ‘Higet’s *Anatomy* and Some Critics’, *Satire Newsletter* 2 (1964), 70.

⁶⁴ See ‘Moral Norms and Satire: A Forthcoming Symposium’, *Satire Newsletter* 2 (1964), 71.

⁶⁵ For an example of the positivist approach, see Various, ‘Norms, Moral or Other, in Satire’, *Satire Newsletter* 2 (1964), 25.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 22–3.

normative standards it embodied were so uncontroversial as to be a kind of moral lowest common denominator. The example he gave was Swift's *Modest Proposal* (1729), where, even if the more complex ironies were missed, the point about cannibalism being a poor solution to social ills was unlikely to be disputed.⁶⁷

Maurice Johnson, another Swift scholar, used the symposium to interrogate some of the confident conclusions previous readers had reached about the values of eighteenth-century satires. 'Respected scholars and critics have announced that in terms of Augustan ecclesiastical thought and historical particulars, Swift framed the Houyhnhnms as unequivocal models for imitation', he wrote. 'These scholars and critics seem very sure of themselves.' Properly understood, Johnson argued, there was nothing 'unequivocal' about eighteenth-century satire, or about satire in general; more often than not, a satiric text was liable to leave its reader in a state of moral uncertainty ('unsure of himself, uneasy, suspicious of his accustomed conclusions'), rather than reassured as to the orthodoxy of his beliefs.⁶⁸ Feinberg's contribution to the discussion, meanwhile, reiterated some of the arguments made a year previously in his book about moral relativism. 'Whose moral norm is satire based on?' he asks. 'A universal norm? It is hard to prove that one exists. [. . .] A democratic norm? But there has been satire on behalf of communism, fascism, and aristocracy.'⁶⁹ If a communist writer of satire thought of himself as a moralist, could it really be the duty of an American critic to tell him that he had got hold of the wrong moral norms? As Rosenheim pointed out, there were—again in the light of the last twenty years of

⁶⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 10–11.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 8.

global history—unpleasant political implications to being ‘prescriptive’ about the sorts of things satire ought to be saying and doing. ‘If we feel free to prescribe the satirist’s social or moral purpose’, he warned, ‘there is no reason why we should not similarly define his *province*—the kind of issues or victims which are properly the object of his attention’.⁷⁰

There was not much of a consensus among contributors as to the nature of satiric morality, but one thing a number of them did agree on was that were limits to the intellectual work literary critics were equipped to perform. Scholars could still interest themselves in moral and political questions as they cropped up in an incidental fashion in the course of rhetorical investigation, but the anxieties raised over the subjectivity of moral norms produced a widely held feeling that it was not the province of any cultural commentator—least of all the literary scholar—to try to police the things that other people should value or deplore. Rosenheim, as we have seen, argued that critics had no business prescribing the satirist’s ‘social or moral purpose’ or delineating the political space of the satiric attack. And Feinberg, similarly, insisted that critics had overstepped the mark in thinking of themselves as moralists, claiming the cultural authority to evaluate the moral backbone of satiric texts when the war had shown that there could not possibly be any universal consensus over values. ‘In the middle of the twentieth century’, he wrote in the *Satire Newsletter*, ‘who has the right to set up his own preferences as moral norms?’ If ‘thousands of intelligent and sophisticated readers’ enjoyed ambiguous and inconclusive satires such as Fielding’s *Jonathan Wild* (1743) or Book IV of Swift’s

⁷⁰ Ibid., 21.

Gulliver's Travels (1726), what critic could possibly be 'eminent enough' to inform them that they were 'all, regrettably, mistaken?'⁷¹

It seems unlikely to have been a coincidence that the rise of close formal analysis in satire criticism during the 1950s and 1960s took place concurrently with the move away from large-scale moral claims. As Collini has shown in the context of British intellectual history, the post-war years were a period of increasing specialization in literary study. Critics became 'professional explicators of increasingly opaque texts', textual scholars who dedicated themselves to the elucidation of meaning using complex practical tools and techniques. Where the language of literary criticism had—particularly in the interwar years—been expansive and flexible enough to serve as the 'chief idiom for cultural criticism' in the widest sense, now it was a specialized academic mode that flourished in universities rather than in newspapers or on the radio.⁷² Literature was experiencing a kind of disciplinary retrenchment: scholars who found themselves unwilling to encroach on what had become specialist philosophical or historical debates worked all the more industriously to fence off the practices and arguments that would make their subject unique. Academics working on eighteenth-century satire (particularly those employed in American universities where New Criticism had taken off) cultivated techniques of rhetorical exegesis and practical criticism because they sought to develop a purely formal language in which they could talk about satiric texts—something that was not also steeped to some degree in moral philosophy, history, or biography. For these scholars, taking a closer look at the works of Dryden, Pope, or Swift was an opportunity to develop specialist rhetorical

⁷¹ Ibid., 8.

⁷² Collini, *Public Moralists*, 348, 370.

terms and a specialist technical framework—and, beyond these, a textual basis for the evolution of ‘English Literature’ as a set of replicable academic practices and concepts.⁷³

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⁷³ Dustin Griffin and Ashley Marshall both note how influential the results of this critical moment continue to be in satire scholarship. See Griffin, *Satire*, 1–2;

<<<REF:BK>>> Ashley Marshall, *The Practice of Satire in England, 1658–1770*

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