

Review article

The perplexities of satire

CONAL CONDREN

Juan Francisco Elices Agudo: *Historical and Theoretical Approaches to English Satire*. Munich: LINCOM, 2004. 200 pp.

Satire is a persistent irritant to all who wish to establish a unified theory, or to write a history over the long duration. The word itself is notoriously slippery, raising questions of whether it is definable in terms of a core feature, or a related syndrome of characteristics. Surveying the wealth of materials deemed satiric might even lead to the conclusion that the noun has come to refer to no more than a historically contingent family resemblance of discursive phenomena, corresponding to no coherent or singular creative activity. Yet most people, even without the dubious aid of definitions, appear to be able to recognize a piece of satire when they read or see it. With English satire, there is even fair measure of agreement as to who the major satirists have been.

Perhaps the problem, then, is less about arriving at a definition than of knowing how and where to apply one. Nevertheless, to conclude that the category is useful only in limited contexts of time, place and activity, and thus is amenable to no single history or theory, may indeed be conceptually rigorous, but does not easily explain the fact of recognition. So, the conceptual itch to find a theoretical solution to a troublesome identity remains. Such imponderables are important and may justify a rather lengthy assessment of a slim tome devoted to them.

Agudo's book is divided into three main chapters. The first surveys the history of satire from its putative beginnings as invective in ancient Arabic history, Esquimeaux culture and archaic Greece. From there it focuses on Rome before concentrating mainly on England, rather than the range of satire found in the English language as a whole. It ends with the twenty-first century. In the second chapter Agudo catalogues

a range of disparate theories purporting to define the nature and functions of satire and its principle subjects, which are taken to be religion, politics and social mores. The third chapter outlines what are described as satire's principal rhetorical strategies: irony, parody, wit, detachment and fantasy, embracing the use of animal imagery, the creation of Utopian and dystopian visions, and the reliance on scatological symbolism. These, it is claimed, render literary satire always indirect and so different from the invective in which it originated. There follows a short conclusion and a bibliography. There is no index and no information about the author. From the outset, it is stressed that satire, and even just English satire is complex, shifting and resistant to generalizations. But the determination both to survey its history (singular) and to provide an overarching theory of its nature requires trading in a disembodied abstraction. The result is highly problematic, but at one with much in the whole field of study.

The author is suitably modest about what he might achieve in the chapter devoted to history, based on subjective criteria that seem kept discreetly to himself (44). He has, however, read enough for a scissors and paste survey derived from the works of literary scholars. Perhaps this is why the category of literature is projected into distant times in which, strictly speaking, it was absent. There is, however, no mention of poetics, in terms of which so much of what we see as satirical was explicitly constructed. That satire is principally a literary phenomenon is supported by citing satirists since deemed to be of literary merit. Effectively, then, literature is reduced to established literature. Those "whose talent was practically non-existent" (17) are so erased that we are left to guess who they might have been. Such circularity and systemic anachronism may be an appropriate preliminary to the question of what, if anything, an array of largely canonic writers have in common, but it hardly amounts to an historical approach to anything.

Agudo's treatment of the indirections of satire in the face of censorship will help flesh out the point. He relies on what literary scholars, rather than historians, hold to be true about satire and censorship. But this distorts a complex and shifting relationship, as some literary scholars have recognized. Censorship in England, even when it was officially in force was erratic and not uniformly effective beyond the theatre; it might exclude imported books and English ones with a falsely foreign provenance that had little impact on manuscript production. That satirists in the seventeenth century purported to fear for the consequences of their out-

spokenness, may have been as much a way of proclaiming their moral integrity as of insinuating the corruption of authorities too cowardly to recognize corrective truths. The evocation of danger could be in order to don the mantle of the prophet alone in his own land. We don't have to believe them, but Agudo does: satirists should be, and the best apparently are, objective and without bias (65)—presumably like Swift, Dryden or Pope. So, if they *say* that they fear being silenced by censorious and oppressive authority, their writings are clearly good deeds in a naughty world. Nothing of the nuances of presentation and background circumstances so ingeniously exploited by satirists comes through in this study, and only a hint or two, (with respect to religion) of the changing patterns of satiric taboos and of what might be called self-censorship.

It is of course true that, for example, resorting to the indirection of allegory and beast fable could be a protective mechanism for those who feared retribution; Margaret Rose has argued that this was the case for writers and artists during the Third Reich.¹ Irrespective of any genuine expectation of persecution however, the encoding of satire through animal symbolism constituted a well-established habit going back to Aesop. So, when Orwell came to write *Animal Farm*, he was consciously working in such evocative narrative idioms. His use of animal imagery may have been a commentary on the self-censorship required among the orthodox left of British politics. Concomitantly, turning the form of a children's farm-yard story to didactic and ideological use may also have been found offensive by those to whom it was directed; but the assertion that he was obliged to hide his doctrines in allegory for fear of governmental persecution is altogether too simple (38–39, 66). The upshot here is that a mooted historical change, from satire thriving in an oppressive society, to being diminished in a free one, gains a spurious whiff of paradox by a series of oversimplifications.² Oppressive or persecuting versus free ignores social as opposed to state control, and also the fact that modern states are full of legal restrictions on freedom of expression and are far more efficient in controlling it through the law (there was no police force in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). And indeed what does thriving satire amount to? I think it means that we can count more writers that literary critics now take seriously. The whole issue, as presented, is historically incoherent and innocent.

The grasp on temporal sequence is also at times insecure. Writers living over a two hundred year period are treated as being contemporaries—a casual attitude occasionally made worse by poor syntax that inverts

chronological order (14, 69). Such slips are difficult to explain. But the lack of any ‘official document’ attesting to contact between Dryden and Johnson (18) is more easily understood. Johnson was born nine years after Dryden died; there is no official documentation of his attending séances.

The preparatory historical survey never considers whether historical and theoretical approaches can be married comfortably with each other. The clearest connection lies in the prefiguration of a certain conceptual indeterminacy. Although the work is on English satire, its origins are traced to the Arabs and Esquimeaux, for there is a haunting uncertainty as to whether satire began with, or is itself a literary form of invective. At the end of the work, I remained none the wiser.

It is, however, entirely fitting that Roman satire be included, because of the importance of Horace and Juvenal as models for English satirists; but we are given little more than the familiar contrast between Horatian subtlety and Juvenalian vitriol. Lucilius (c. 180–100), friend and satiric agent of Scipio Africanus, has his name dropped, as if in a vacuum, twice; but there is no mention of Lucian whose absence from a survey of English satire seems more than a little odd. The seminal importance of More’s *Utopia* is stressed, but there is not a word on its avowedly Lucianic character. From More onwards the trajectory is familiar: the heyday of English satire is the eighteenth century and it declines during the nineteenth century. I am uncertain whether this means that nineteenth century satire was not written, or, that little of it is now not read. The history peters out with a list of English names and the synoptic citation of texts. It would be carping to dwell on the obvious gaps and as the study is about literature, it is understandable that there is nothing on film. Yet quite a few “literary” satirists have been journalists, so their exclusion is less satisfactory. The vibrant English theatre is largely overlooked. The Americans are mainly off stage.

The problems of identifying satire, as opposed to listing those already accepted as effective satirists, are exacerbated by the author slipping between different designations of what he is actually writing a history of. Occasionally satire is a mood or a register and once by implication a genre (18), mostly it is a mode understood as a sub-genre; but under what category the sub-genre is subsumed, is unclear (unless, unhelpfully, literary satire is simply a sub-genre of literature). Satire itself is not, Agudo concludes, a genre, though in this context of argument, he also quotes with approval those who say it is. His points of contrast are pro-

vided by the genres of comedy, epic and tragedy, each having fixed “parameters that literary works always follow” (47). Really?

The one thing of which the author does seem confident is that satire is, or was, a moralistic correction to a corrupt reality. This relies upon a simplistic dichotomy between literature and the “reality” it putatively reflects. There is, in principle, an obvious artificiality in positing a reality separate from how people wrote about it and within the world they understood and then acted in the light of their understandings. In practice, the bifurcation can make nothing for example of Robert Harley, Queen Anne’s chief (or prime) minister, employing satirists and using satire to gain support for his policies. Harley was a member of the most remarkable satiric grouping of the age, the Scriblerus club and for him, satire was a way of political conduct. Margaret Thatcher incidentally exhibited something of Harley’s sensitivity to satire as propaganda, in associating herself so strongly with the *Yes Minister* television series which supplemented her drive to reform the public service. She even appeared briefly in a specially written stage sketch by its authors, Jonathan Lynn and Anthony Jay.

The difficulties in Agudo’s attempted historical survey are compounded by his acceptance of a dubious generalization from Leonard Feinberg, namely that modern satire has abandoned the high moral ground to concentrate more on technique (Feinberg 1967: 33). This does not sit well with Agudo’s cautious moves towards a definition. “Censoring evil or pettiness seems, therefore, satire’s primary objective” (58). There may be a confusion here between what literary scholars concentrate upon in the analysis of satire; what satirists, good, bad or indifferent, actually do in a much wider range of activity than was possible in the past; and how casually the word satire is used in the mass media.

But there are further problems with any thesis of a change so dramatic it must alter any definition of satire towards which Agudo is moving. That satirists in, say, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries used much the same general moral vocabulary to castigate vice and to applaud (usually absent) virtue, does not entitle us to infer that they appealed to the same moral standards, or that there was a universal deontology that has since broken down, certainly a common over-simplification of earlier patterns of moral discourse. What these satirists each might mean by the “public interest,” “justice,” “hypocrisy” and so forth could be very different. Again, it is less a matter of finding a definition than understanding the disparate processes of its application: compare for example Marvell

and Dryden. Both wrote in what they claimed was the public interest and to excoriate corruption, but had diametrically opposed views as to whom such critique applied. Marvell, perhaps the most controversial and emulated of seventeenth-century English satirists, is unmentioned throughout the book; but his views of the Earl of Shaftsbury and his allies are poles apart from the Satanic image of corruption and treachery crafted by Dryden (also, as it happens, during the seventeenth century). Dryden's is a diabolical image, hardly captured by referring to his "ironising about" Shaftsbury's "incompetence" (18). Yet the moralistic tone of his satire, no less impassioned than the satires of Marvell, should surely stand as a corrective against the sort of generalizations concerning satire, morality and reality so naively presented here. Similarly, modern satirists might not have abandoned moral standards, or any appeal to them, simply because nowadays we are attuned to a diversity of ethical norms, or even because in writing or performing for a given specific audience, the satirist's appeal to morality can be implicit. Indeed, considering how modern English satire has become a mainstream form of mass entertainment, there is a case for arguing that, although there has been a shift of emphasis from lecturing to generating amusement, it still reinforces the nostrums of everyday morality (whatever these might mean in practice).

Curiously, the very perplexities of defining and categorizing satire, so rightly emphasized by the author, offered him an opportunity to avoid serving up tendentious generalities (such as the one to which I have just succumbed). But plausible dishes are temptations not to be resisted in the study of satire, and the extensive reading incorporated into this work gives ample scope for them. Agudo does occasionally show a critical but always courteous independence, demurring, for example at Northrop Frye's argument that satire is no more than a mood or dimension that might be found in any writing. This is held to be too 'reductive', although no reasons are given (49). For the most part, however, Agudo is determined to agree with as many theorists as possible (58). For one who readily accepts that the domain of satire studies is full of confusion, a determination to blend as many perspectives as possible does not bode well (58).

I suspect such dogged ecumenism arises from a laudable desire to avoid any unseemly polemic, but the consequence is a disconcerting jangle of affirmations. We are told that all satire is conservative, and then that it thrives when attacked by the status quo. To reconcile these conflicting positions, the status quo has to be something other than conservative, and

conservatism is in fact mistaken for nostalgia (73). But to see all satire as nostalgic would demand that Agudo discount his own assessment of More's *Utopia* (100). Similarly, humor is said to be a defining feature of satire, but this is held to be true only sometimes—think of Juvenal, or Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (57), as well he might. We might also think of the seventeenth-century notion of comic satire, something which presupposed forms of satire to one side of any humor.

It is also confusing to be told first that religious and political satire are very different, and then that they can be the same (71). Satirists, Agudo asserts, never deal openly with political and economic realities (65). If all satire is indirect, this sweeping assessment might be rescued by its own triviality; but, as I have indicated, satire is treated throughout this book as a pretty transparent guide to reality and social decline. Indeed, Agudo is unequivocal, the satire of political systems and personalities is based “on measurable, tangible realities” (67), unlike the satire of religion involving faith. Almost immediately, however, we are told that the satire of religion is restricted to clerical abuse, something usually regarded by castigating satirists as pretty tangible, not to say political. The satire of religion was indeed largely an expression of pious and outraged anti-clericalism up to and including most of the eighteenth century; but this is probably less true of religious satire following the French Revolution. While some of these dissonances could no doubt be harmonized, it would be only a little unfair to say that, like the satiric invention Cornelius Scriblerus who achieved a satisfactory coherence in his beliefs by accepting the last ancient authority he had read on any subject, Agudo seems to side with each satiric theorist in turn. He is thus likely to be half right, for much of the literature, some of the time.

But not always: at one point he cites with approval a statement carrying the burden of self-contradiction in its own lumpen English prose (48). “Satire’s own frequent formlessness forces it to inhabit the forms of other genres and makes satire resistant to simplistic versions of a formalistic approach” (Coombe and Connery 1995: 5). First reify a coherent phenomenon, then attribute agency to its non-existence to explain its independent operation in the world as a usually formless genre. It *could* work, if you believe in genies as well as genres. And then end with a virtual tautology—of course what is simplistic is going to be inadequate, that is what simplistic means. With the guidance of such luminaries, we must necessarily approach the final chapter still in want of a candle.

Chapter Three argues that a certain range of rhetorical strategies creates literary satire, sustaining its “indispensable premise: indirection” (92). Might not this premise, if that is the right term, just be a function of the strategies chosen? Notwithstanding this possibility, an accepted asymmetry between the (defining?) strategies and satire itself muddies the waters. Some of satire’s strategies turn out to be acknowledged as “not even satiric at all” (79). Thus parody might only partly be satiric (92), or decidedly not satiric (88); I am unsure how this helps clarify anything.

Once again, uncritical reliance on a theoretical generalization proves unfortunate. Agudo follows Joseph Dane in seeing satire as about things, parody about words (Dane 1980: 88). How neat. Yet if true, it threatens to render irrelevant all previous talk of satirists following the textual models of writers like Juvenal and Horace. A more significant matter is, how it might apply to the satire of science and philosophy (pre-occupations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that pass all but unnoticed). Some of Swift’s more famous satire (or should that be parody?) gets its power precisely by pretending that words are things. Nor is it considered that much political satire (from e.g. Arbuthnot of the “so-called Scriblerus group” [*sic*] 20) to Orwell) focuses on words. The satire of politics has frequently been about alleged linguistic perversion and its power to distort perception.

The notion of a satiric strategy is moreover arbitrary and miscellaneous. Clearly, irony is not the same sort of thing as fantasy or a dystopian vision. Detachment is less a strategy than an end result, or an interpretative conclusion from the analysis of discursive strategies. But each of these is just listed and briefly discussed. At this point of the argument, satire is said to be a “rhetorical discipline” (79), if “discipline” is the right word; but if so, there is no treatment of rhetoric in any precise sense. Of the strategies discussed, irony is certainly an established trope. Yet, it needed distinguishing from *sarcasmus*, and supplementing with at least some discussion of conceptions such as *subdistinctio*, *aposiopesis*, *litotes*, and *tapinosis*. This last does get some oblique notice, though no real mention, in the comments on animal imagery; but all of them are surely vital to address if the desired association of satire with indirection is to be sustained. Again, there is a reasonable case to be made here, if there were any clear attempt to disentangle indirection from generality, or from ambiguity and equivocation, or to consider the distinction between locution and illocution. Setting all this aside, to see someone like the author of *The*

Julius Exklusus in the sixteenth century, or P. J. O'Rourke and Auberon Waugh in the twentieth as "indirect," is a little like calling a glancing blow from a tank a near miss.

Finally, throughout the book, the English proves inadequate to the tasks at hand. It could so easily have been brought up to an acceptable standard, for, despite the awkward syntax, grammatical error and misuse of vocabulary (all evident on most pages), the gist of the argument is pretty clear. A book this commendably short, however, has no business being seduced by verbosity and repetition (e.g. 14, 15, 36, 50, 73), most of which could also easily have been swept out of the way with a modicum of help. The publishers have done themselves and their author a grave disservice in not providing a copy editor and (presumably) by insisting on camera-ready copy. The Latin is almost always correct, but the Spanish invariably remains untranslated. *The Battle Between the Frogs and Mice* (1717), cited as anonymous (49), was by Thomas Parnell, another Scriblerian; the *Virgil Travestie* was possibly not by Paul Scarron (89), but by Charles Cotton, or even a Mr. Smith, depending on which text is actually being referred to (we are never told). For reasons that should now be evident enough, this is not a book to be recommended to students but one cannot anticipate just what might be of value to those engaged in research on satire; even error can prove a fruitful stimulus and the bibliography as a whole is of considerable value.

Where then, does this brave encapsulation of confusion leave us, or rather, how may this cautionary tale help to re-direct the study of satire? First, I think it would be helpful if there were to be some move away from seeing satire as a literary phenomenon. This view implicitly contextualizes all satire in terms of a quite modern, even a recent, institutionalized activity which then becomes historically distorting for vast tracts of relevant time. Agudo certainly recognizes the presence of satire beyond literature and although such a shift would not necessarily discount the insights and analyses of many literary theorists, it would rid the study of many encumbering presuppositions. It would make it easier to avoid conflating satire with good literature, which produces the consequent chaos of confounding critical with historical criteria of judgment. It should also increase sensitivity to the dangers of regarding the works of such paradigmatic names as Swift, Pope and Dryden as sound bases for generalization.

Secondly, it would be instructive to extend the range of what we think it is that satirists satirize in two ways. On the one hand, we should not

assume that to call something political satire is necessarily very informative. Like satire, the political is an unstable notion and it may not be uniformly helpful to rely upon it across time and cultures. On the other, the degree to which study of the satire of philosophy and science has been ignored is striking;³ yet satirizing metaphysics, logic, natural philosophy, could be an idiom of critical engagement in all those fields of enquiry, rather than mere literary descants or reflections upon them. The study of Thomas Hobbes (another satirist absent from this study), and the satiric treatment of his work, or the reception of Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*, provide ample evidence of the importance of widening our purview.

That satire *can* be an idiom, a way of doing something else, leads us in a more positive way back to Agudo's helpful proposition that understanding satire requires a rhetorical context. It is not that satire is anything as neat as the expression "rhetorical discipline" would imply, but insofar as humor is tied to satire—and it usually is—lines of enquiry are already established. The provocation of laughter may be crucial to the processes of persuasion, by isolating and ridiculing a victim, by protecting the victimizer, and in maintaining a sense of social solidarity and belonging. Rhetorical theorists have surely known this since antiquity and the early modern world, educated in rhetoric and poetics not literature, never lost sight of it. Perhaps in the end we don't need a theory or a definition, although these may be useful in the class-room; but to research the phenomenon, we need to look and see at least how, when, where and in what sort of immediate linguistic context the word satire and its cognates was used. If I may hazard a vulnerable generalization about the study of satire as a whole, it still remains uncomfortably poised between how satiric expression might cast light on other times and on other social and intellectual worlds, and how it might fit with modern institutionalized and disciplinary expectations. In a word, we need to rely less on an abstract noun, than on the wayward variety of the adjectival form. Such a shift back towards Northrop Frye's insights might not be reductive, as Agudo states, but liberating.

University of New South Wales

CONAL CONDREN

Notes

Correspondence address: conalcondren@optusnet.com.au

1. Margaret Rose, *Parody/Meta-Fiction*, (London: Croom Helm, 1979). This book is in the bibliography, but seems to have been unused, as is her later much expanded version of the work.
2. In this line of argument, Agudo largely follows Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Re-introduction*, (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1994).
3. For two noteworthy examples see Joseph M. Levine, *Dr Woodward's Shield: History, Science, and Satire in Augustan England*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977); and Christopher Fox, *Locke and the Scriblerians: Identity and Consciousness in Early Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

References

- Feinberg, Leonard. 1967. *Introduction to satire*. Iowa: Iowa State University Press.
- Coombe, Kirk & Brian Connery. 1995. Theorizing satire: A retrospective and introduction. In Kirk Coombe & Brian Connery (eds.), *Theorizing satire: Essays in literary criticism*, 1–15. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Dane, Joseph. 1980. Parody and satire: A theoretical model. *Genre* 13. 145–159.