

## Political satire in contemporary British fiction: The state of the art<sup>1</sup>

LUIS ALBERTO LÁZARO  
*Universidad de Alcalá*

Politics has always captivated writers as documented throughout the history of the written word. Sometimes they would write in fulsome praise of a king, a courtier, or a political party; and sometimes they would fearlessly denounce flaws and excesses of governments, political systems, or their leaders. Not surprisingly, political satires have often attained a prominent status in the history of English literature. They have appeared in various literary forms and dwelt upon a great variety of subjects. From the earliest complete political song to survive in English, 'A Song of Lewes'<sup>2</sup> (c. 1264), many other satirical poems of this type have followed suit: Laurence Minot's *The Battle of Neville's Cross* (c. 1346), John Skelton's *The Bowge of Courte?* (c. 1498), David Lyndsay's *The Dreme* (c. 1528), Edmund Spenser's *Mother Hubbard's Tale* (1591), Andrew Marvell's *Last Instructions to a Painter* (1667), John Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), John Wilmot's 'History of Insipids' (1676), Daniel Defoe's *The True-Born Englishman* (1701), Alexander Pope's *The Moral Essays* (1731-35), Samuel Johnson's *London: A Poem* (1738), Charles Churchill's *The Prophecy of the Famine* (1763), Lord Byron's *The Vision of Judgement* (1822), or Siegfried Sassoon's *The Old Huntsman* (1919), to mention just a few.

Although poetry has been the predominant form of critical expression, political satires in prose have also played an important role, especially since the eighteenth century: Delarivier Manley's *The New Atlantis* (1709), John Arbuthnot's *History of John Bull* (1712), Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* (1729), John Wilke's *The North Briton* (1762-63), William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), G. K. Chesterton's *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904), Wyndham Lewis's *The Revenge for Love* (1937), and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) could be a few representative works.<sup>3</sup> Some of them have deserved serious critical analysis, and there are several prestigious publications begotten to examine their satirical targets as well as their methods. Nonetheless, little is said about the importance of this literary tradition in the second half of the twentieth century. Consequently, the present paper aims to offer a view of the state of political satire in contemporary British fiction. Far from being a comprehensive study, it is nevertheless an introduction to the main topics and rhetorical strategies used by the satirists of the last decades.

Even though it might sound too simplistic, we could arrange the contemporary political novelistic satire into four categories, according to the particular target they seem to aim at: the fatal connection between excessive violence and suppression of liberty, the evils of colonialism, women's predicaments in society, and the decline and fall of Eastern European regimes. Although several other novels could be included in the featured discussion, each faction of political satire will be illustrated with only a few references to the works of two or three distinguished novelists.

The relationships between violence and liberty are particularly dramatised in Angus Wilson's *The Old Men at the Zoo* (1961). It is a nightmarish satirical fable set in the future, about the administration of a London Zoo which is eventually taken over by a cruel alliance of European powers. Wilson metaphorically links here the primordial human trait of thirst for power and authority with the unnatural cruelty to animals, outlining simultaneously the thin line that separates freedom from anarchy. Similarly, though with different implications, Anthony Burgess deals with violent behaviour and freedom of choice in *A Clockwork Orange* (1962); it offers yet another futuristic

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<sup>2</sup> It is an anonymous contemptuous piece directed against Henry III's brother, Richard, Earl of Cornwall; see Carleton Brown's *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century* (1932: 131-32).

<sup>3</sup> Though it is outside the scope of this paper, political satire has also appeared in several theatrical plays and operas, such as John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), Henry Fielding's *Pasquin* (1736), P. B. Shelley's *Oedipus Tyrannus, or Swellfoot the Tyrant* (1820), and Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* (1894).

dystopian vision of England in which a violent teenager is 'rehabilitated' with totalitarian conditioning methods. More recently Louis de Bernières charges against power and war in his *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (1994), where beneath the surface of a seemingly engaging romantic novel about an Italian soldier and a Greek girl, lurks a blistering criticism of the butchery, absurdity, and senseless affinity of armed conflicts compounded by lack of scruples on the part of dictatorial attitudes.<sup>4</sup>

The second group of political satires includes those which disclose the machinations and abuses of colonialism in a post-imperial age. Tom Sharpe, for instance, in his first two novels, *Riotous Assembly* (1971) and *Indecent Exposure* (1973), unravels some of the negative aspects concerning a colonial heritage left behind by European masters: the apartheid in South Africa; here nobody is spared from the author's humorous criticism: police officers, judges, lawyers, prison governors, old British colonialists, and all those who helped to build a decadent society based on white dominance with their repression of the nonwhite majority.<sup>5</sup> William Boyd, a British writer born in Ghana, also decodes the historical and contemporary myths of colonialism in *A Good Man in Africa* (1981), introducing Morgan Leafy, a minor British diplomat marooned in an imaginary African nation who tries to survive in a world abounding in prejudice, stupidity, and corruption.

Notwithstanding, there are also several novelistic satires dwelling on the topic of sexual 'imperialism' professed by men and written by remarkable women novelists. We should consider, for example, novels such as Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), *Heroes and Villains* (1969), *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972), and *The Passions of New Eve* (1977); texts which mix fantasy, horror, and comedy to satirise the reductive political implications of western patriarchy.<sup>6</sup> Emma Tennant also leans on science-fiction conventions in *The Time of the Crack* (1973) in order to present a group of women who take advantage of an apocalyptic period of time to abandon their sexual roles. In the same manner, Zoe Fairbairns's *Benefits* (1979) is another feminist dystopia in which women are subjugated by a state that reduces their lives to reproductive and domestic duties.<sup>7</sup> One more example of this type of biting satire directed against the patriarchal desire to control female sexuality could be Fay Weldon's novel *The Life and Love of a She-Devil* (1983), a story of female revenge on a society dominated by unfaithful and vicious husbands.

Finally, we could mention those novels that analyse the nature of totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe. One of the most interesting examples can be found in Malcolm Bradbury's *Rates of Exchange* (1983), which uses the contemporary satirical convention of the so-called 'campus novel' to draw a portrait of a lecturer in linguistics who visits the communist state of Slaka; it is an imaginary Eastern European country where, as the author informs, the rigid ideology is 'being increasingly undermined by the playfulness of language and the enduring power of the human imagination' (qtd. by Gindin, 1991: 129). Another political satire on the current downfall of Eastern European regimes is Julian Barnes's *The Porcupine* (1992); in the book, readers participate in the public hearing of the deposed communist president from a Soviet satellite state submerged in a profoundly enduring political and economic crisis.<sup>8</sup> Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs* (1992) is likewise a disturbing fable that depicts the decline of Eastern Europe; the narrator's memoirs comprise certain incidents in Berlin during the fall of the wall and in Poland some weeks before General Jaruzelski's coup in 1981.

All this goes to show that the frequency with which the political note is sounded in contemporary novelistic satire is extremely significant. Although some critics had repeatedly trumpeted the death of English satire in the first three quarters of the twentieth century,<sup>9</sup> it seems that it has been revived and it enjoys good health. In fact, there are as many political satirists as there were in eighteenth-century

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the grotesque portrait of The Duce in the second chapter of the novel.

<sup>5</sup> J. M. Coetzee is a South African novelist who also satirises this type of racial segregation sanctioned by law in novels such as *Dusklands* (1974), *The Heart of the Country* (1977), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1982), *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), and *Age of Iron* (1990).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Clark's article 'Angela Carter's Desire Machine' illustrates this idea very well.

<sup>7</sup> The Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood has written a similar dystopia on the exploitation of women entitled *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).

<sup>8</sup> Although the name of the country is never mentioned, Julian Barnes refers to recent political developments in Bulgaria (see his own article 'How Much is That in Porcupines').

<sup>9</sup> Evelyn Waugh stated that our century is not an appropriate period for satire because it only 'flourishes in a stable society and presupposes homogeneous moral standards' (1946: 56); and P. K. Elkin's explanation for this decline of English satire is that 'The twentieth-century satirist sees himself as completely alienated from society and for this and other reasons, he is fundamentally unsure of himself and his standards' (1973: 198).

England, known as the golden age of English satire. In a period marked by the decline of the British Empire, a greater public awareness about civil rights, the strengthening of the feminist movement, and the fall of the Berlin wall, politics still draws the attention of contemporary British satirists. Even more so, since nowadays in Britain it is easier and safer to publish 'seditious' books against political doctrines without fear of ending up on the gallows.<sup>10</sup>

One of the differences between past political satire and that of our times is the literary form in which it appears. The canonical heroic couplet used by Dryden, Pope, and Johnson, or the ottava rima enacted by Byron has given way to the novel. Although prose fiction begun to have an impact on the eighteenth-century English satire, it is only in recent decades that this mode has made real inroads. Since the main objective of the satirist consists of winning over the greatest possible audience to his point of view or to enforce an opinion which many readers already share, it is understandable that the novel, which seems to find greater acceptance than poetry, is now the favoured literary genre.

On the other hand, the satire of the past tended to be more personal and was very often used as a scourge to one's enemies: Skelton satirised Cardinal Wolsey; Dryden attacked the Earl of Shaftesbury; Delarivier Manley took as her target the Duchess of Marlborough; Arbuthnot, Pope, Swift and Johnson wrote as anti-Walpolean Tories; Charles Churchill criticised the Earl of Bute; and Lord Byron parodied Southey's vision of George III. However, contemporary political satire has lost this personal character; instead, it is more inclined to address the whole reading public in order to give a general warning about our political ills.

This warning usually focuses today on the question of power. Whilst previous satires covered many different issues (such as corruption, inefficiency, negligence, stupidity, ambition, treachery, intolerance, avarice, and hypocrisy), current political novels seem to lack that variety of targets. Following in Orwell's footsteps, they often paint a dystopian picture of the world in which the negative consequences of excessive power are clearly seen. The four types of novels discussed above may suggest various satirical subjects, but in fact they all deal with the same principle of absolute power, analysing it from different perspectives: the control of a totalitarian state over its citizens, the colonial domination over subdued countries, or the hegemony of men over women.

One of the most interesting developments in the political satire of the second half of the twentieth century is the greater number of women writers. Occasionally, their criticism is directed against the same vices and defects as those addressed by men, but most of them seem to be particularly interested in sexual politics and issues concerning gender. Of course, this growing presence of women satirists in recent decades coincides with an extraordinary expansion of the feminist movement, more active participation of women in politics, and an increasing interest in books written by and about women.

What has not changed much though, are the rhetorical strategies employed in these contemporary political satires. If satire has traditionally been characterised by an impression of economy, a token of fantasy, indirect criticism, and the satirist's detachment,<sup>11</sup> most recent satires also make extensive use of the great masters' powers of persuasion. Contemporary authors put their cases clearly and simply by creating straightforward stories full of striking caricatures living in a fantastic or distorted world, which is usually presented as an instance of deformity, of the absurd, and the grotesque. Moreover, contemporary political satirists also set a high value on parody and irony, while shunting away from both argument and characters.

The skilful combination of all these techniques might just as well account for the success this type of literature has lately achieved. Whilst prose satire was often considered a minor genre by many literary critics and historians, all the contemporary novelists mentioned in this paper not only have attained popular success, but they have also enjoyed critical acclaim. Of course, it is hard to predict how many titles will survive the passage of time. After all, the satirical works of John Arbuthnot, Delarivier Manley, and John Wilkes were tremendously popular in their own times, but now they seem to have fallen into virtual and undeserved oblivion. Perhaps, when apartheid, communism, colonialism, patriarchy, or other political references in these contemporary satires fade away, their authors will not be able to avoid the fate that has already befallen some of their ancestors, and their names will be overshadowed by other more canonical ones. But, who knows? Only time will tell.

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix I on censorship and the law of the press in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Harvey, 1967: 911-920).

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed description of these strategies, see the traditional studies of the nature of satire by Gilbert Highet, Matthew Hodgart, Alvin B. Kernan, Ronald Paulson, Arthur Pollard, James Sutherland, and David Worcester.

Meanwhile, let us all enjoy the large quantity and excellent quality of political satire in contemporary British fiction.

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