### Satire: Some Basic Techniques

How does a satirist set about ridiculing the vice and folly she wants the audience to recognize as unacceptable? Remember that the challenge to the satirist is to get the moral point across with humour, so that the audience or the reader laughs in the appropriate manner. Put another way, the challenge is to put across serious matters in humorous ways.

Let me restate this point because it is crucial. The central message of satire is often very simple and can be stated quickly. Satire is, for reasons we shall consider in a moment, not a genre which encourages complex explorations of deep psychological issues in the characters. It's much more like a repetitive insistence on the foolishness of certain kinds of behaviour. So the problem for the satirist is to make his treatment funny, that is, to keep the jokes coming quickly and with sufficient variety that the audience stays interested in what is going on. Nothing is staler in art than a satire which runs out of steam or which starts to repeat itself in predicable ways. That's why the staple form for modern satire is the short skit--set up, punch line, fade out. In a longer satire, like an Aristophanic play or Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* the problem is to keep the reader interested through the variety in one's stylistic technique.

Well, there are a number of basic strategies. I list them here in no particular order.

1. First, the satirist sets up a target-for instance, the poet Shadwell--which will symbolize the conduct he wishes to attack. Satire, in other words, has a clear target. Setting up the target in a way that can generate humour in a variety of ways is an important talent. The coronation of Shadwell, for instance, is not just a one-line joke about the nature of bad poetry; in the poem it becomes the source for a number of other jokes and insults which arise spontaneously but amusingly out of the dramatic setting Dryden has invented In *Gulliver's Travels*, if you go on to read it, you will probably notice a distinct let down when you reach Book III, in part because Swift doesn't anchor his satire there on a good target metaphor, or at least not on one which works nearly so well as the size metaphor in Books I and II.

2. Second, the satirist will typically exaggerate and distort the target in certain ways in order to emphasize the characteristics he wishes to attack and, most importantly, to provide recurring sources of humour. Such exaggeration and distortion are a key element in the humour. The target must be close enough to the real thing for us to recognize what is going on, but sufficiently distorted to be a funny exaggeration, often a grotesque departure from normality.

The example of a political cartoon is instructive here. When we laugh at the cartoon of a well known political leader, we are responding to two things: a recognition of the original and of what the satirist has done to distort the original so as to make it ridiculous for a particular purpose.

In that sense, all satire is, as I mention above, unfair, if by that we mean that the depiction of the target is not life-like, not a true copy. Of course, it's not. There would be no cartoon if all we had was a photograph of the prime minister or president. Making the target ridiculous means bending it out of shape (as in a distorting mirror), not beyond recognition but certainly far from its normal appearance. The point of the satire often lies in the nature of the distortion. Much of the best satire depends, in other words, on a skilful caricature or cartoon, rather than on any attempt at a life-like rendition of the subject.

So to complain that Shadwell in "Mac Flecknoe" is nothing like the real Shadwell is to miss the point. Dryden is setting up his Shadwell to symbolize in a ridiculously distorted manner certain ways of behaving which he wishes his audience to recognize as absurd. At the same time, the portrait has to have some recognizable connection to Shadwell if the poem is to make a connection with the audience. But it's important, too, to recognize that the main satire may not be directed so much at Shadwell, ridiculous as he is, but at those who worship Shadwell, who really do believe that he is an important author.

Such distortion obviously involves setting up a certain distance between the target and the audience. That is, we are not in a satire invited to consider the inner feelings of the target or to speculate on any complex psychological motives for why he behave the way he does. The satirist focuses on ridiculing external behaviour, not on speculating about possible complex psychological motivation. To do the latter is to bring the audience into the inner workings of the target's heart and mind, and once one has done that, it is difficult to respond to the target satirically. As the old French saying has it, "Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner" ["To understand everything is to forgive everything"]. For that reason it's difficult to satirize anyone whose inner psychological troubles are well known.

3. Once the target is delineated in an appropriately distorted way, the satire proceeds by an unrelenting attack. Here the satirist has a variety of weapons, ranging from rude direct insults and a lot of robust physical humour (pratfalls, misunderstandings, mock fights) to more complex assaults parodying various forms of language and belief. "Mac Flecknoe" is justly famous as a very robust satire featuring a wide variety of satiric techniques, in particular a superb mock heroic style, larded with topical references to the London literary scene, and with some skilful insults. The major pleasure one derives from this poem comes principally from recognizing the witty disparity between the heroic style and the triviality of the subject:

Now Empress Fame had published the renown   
Of Sh---'s coronation through the town   
Roused by report of Fame, the nations meet,   
From near Bunhill, and distant Watling Street,   
No Persian carpets spread the imperial way,   
But scattered limbs of mangled poets lay;   
From dusty shops neglected authors come,   
Martyrs of pies, and relics of the bum.   
Much Heywood, Shirley, Ogilby there lay,   
But loads of Sh---- almost choked the way. (94-103)

A good many of these attacks are going to draw upon the shared cultural milieu of the playwright and the audience (names of particular people and events, excerpts from particularly well known speeches or plays, references to current affairs, and so on). The aim of the satirist is to deliver an unremitting attack on the target which the audience can laugh at, so that the audience's shared response, its laughter, can effectively deal with the behaviour which the satirist wishes to correct.

In this connection, satiric irony is important. This is a technique which, as its name suggests, confronts the audience with the discrepancy between what characters say and do and what we fully understand by their actions. To appreciate satire, that is, we have to have a sense of where the satirist is coming from, so that we recognize the distortion and the ridiculous behaviour for what it is. If we fail to see the satiric irony at work, then our response may defeat the purposes of the satirist, because we will be tempted to say one of two things: (a) well, life's not like that so I don't see the point (e.g., Shadwell was never crowned and it's silly to pretend that he was) or (b) hey, I think that action by the target is just great; maybe we should all be more like that.

If we fail to see the function of the satiric irony, in other words, we may dismiss the fiction as mere stupidity or we may embrace it as something admirable. So the challenge of the satirist is to make the satiric intention clear but not overly obvious, so that the audience derives a certain pleasure from participating in the in-joke, in seeing what the writer is getting at through the humour.

That quality of satire makes it, for all its frequent crudity and knock-about farce, a much more "intellectual" genre than many others. To appreciate satire one has to be able to recognize the continuing existence of different levels of meaning (that is, of irony), and the more sophisticated the satire the more delicate the ironies. Or, put another way, satire requires a certain level of education and sophistication in the audience. People can still respond to the fun of Aristophanes, to the dramatic action and the crude fun, but with no sense for satiric irony, the point of the piece will get rather lost.

4. In assaulting the target in this way, the satirist is going to be pushing hard at the edge of what the audience is prepared to accept. If the satirist wants really to connect with the audience, then the writer is going often to be pushing language at the audience in new ways, taking risks with what they are prepared to accept. After all, if the purpose is to wake people up to the moral realities of their daily situation, then often some fairly strong language is going to be in order. That, of course, presents the risk of offending the audience's taste. If an audience turns away from the work in disgust, then they are not going to attend to whatever important moral lesson the satirist is striving to call attention to. Hence the more aggressive the satirist, the more delicately the writer has to walk along the line of what is acceptable and what is not. It's no accident that expanding the envelope of what is acceptable on the stage or in prose is often the work of our satirists. We see this in "Mac Flecknoe" in the way Dryden is fully prepared repeatedly to refer to shit, faeces, toilet paper, and so on, not the normal vocabulary of polite poetry.

This point is worth stressing, because if a satirist is really touching a nerve in the audience, then a common response is to find ways to neutralize the satire. I have sketched out four of the common methods one can use to do that: (a) take the satire literally and dismiss it as absurd or embrace it as a good idea (the satiric irony is thus lost and the point of the satire evaporates), (b) reject the satire because it is too rude or crude (it offends my taste); (c) reject the satire because it is "unfair" or not sufficiently true to life (this is very similar to point a above); (d) reject the satire by failing to respond to the ironies.