" Private Eye " and the English satirical tradition

THE ENEMIES OF TONY BLAIR (and everyone else)

Geoffrey Chaucer (1340 - 1400) was arguably the first satirist of note in the English language; his "Canterbury Tales", the plots of which are often taken from European sources (notably Boccaccio), present a variety of human types — selfish, greedy, libidinous, arrogant, vulgar, absurd — which Chaucer's readership (exclusively aristocratic or clerical; no-one else could read) would have recognised and felt comfortably superior to. The satirist often claims to hold up a mirror to society in order to correct perceived failings, but it is, as Jonathan Swift wrote, " a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own."

Swift

Swift was himself a satirist of savage power: his "Gulliver's Travels", often considered to be a children's storybook, was an indictment of contemporary politics and social mores, while "A Modest Proposal" bitterly attacked rapacious English landlords for their treatment of the Irish poor; Irish babies, Swift sardonically suggested, should be fattened up for the table, thus providing a source of nourishment and income.

Rage

Satire of the order of "A Modest Proposal" goes far beyond irony, wit or sarcasm: it is born of rage, perhaps of frustration but primarily of an anger at perceived injustice that is on a very different level from the satirical lampooning of human foibles. This anger needs to be controlled, of course, in order to be effective; in the absence of control, the satirist is a mere malcontent, snarling invective, spitting poison into the wind. In the absence of rage, however, the satirist is a dilettante, a clown.

This is not to say that gentle satire of general human weakness has no place, that it is idle to poke mild fun at the absurdity of contemporary society (Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest" is evidence to the contrary); but if satire is to effect change, then it needs teeth.

Effectiveness

It is debatable whether or not satire does in fact change anything. Does a fool stop being a fool because he has publicly been shown to be one? Does an Adolf Hitler dismantle the Third Reich because a Chaplin lampoons him on the world's silver screens? Nonetheless, even if the targets of satire remain unchanged themselves, public perceptions of them may be altered. And in a democracy, those altered perceptions may be reflected at the ballot box.

Responsibility

This means that the satirist has serious responsibilities, essentially in the area of politics. In the first place, his fear and loathing must be directed: political targets should be chosen on the basis of their iniquitous beliefs and actions rather than their unprepossessing appearance (although the 'ad hominem' attack may well be both effective and apposite; Thatcher's absurdly sculpted hairstyle and adoption of an upper middle-class accent as a metaphor for her rejection of her grocer's-daughter origins, for example). Being ugly is not in itself enough to warrant public opprobrium.

Secondly, there is a danger that either exclusively ad hominem attacks or concentrating on unimportant absurdities may lessen the effect of the satirical attack, and of satire in general. To ridicule a corrupt politician because he farts audibly on public occasions is acceptable only if one also points out that he hands out government contracts to his close friends and associates.

The Eye

This precarious balance between witty entertainment and investigative journalism, between humour and hard facts, is a difficult one to achieve. In the United Kingdom, one magazine has attempted it for well over thirty years. Founded in the early sixties by a group of Oxbridge graduates, "Private Eye" has attacked and offended politicians of all political parties, public figures, captains of industry, the Church of England, the Royal Family. On several occasions when its financial viability was threatened by crippling libel actions (notably by the late and unlamented James Goldsmith), its loyal readership has sent in donations to save it. In Britain, a country which seems to have irony embedded in its culture, the Eye is an institution in the best sense of the word. It bites the hand that feeds it, offends its most loyal supporters, frequently avoids any possibility of being charged with good taste, and refuses to compromise. (When threatened with yet another legal action in the case of Arkell v. Pressdram, the Eye replied via their solicitors with the famous response, 'Fuck off'.) Above all, it has avoided becoming a safety valve, the kind of pseudo-satirical magazine which allows its readers to feel briefly superior to their governing class while failing, through fear or laziness or journalistic incompetence, to tell them the real, potentially vote-changing truth. In a country in which the most widely-read 'newspaper' is Rupert Murdoch's Sun, the Eye is more than an entertainment. It is a cultural necessity.

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