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Studies in American Humor, Volume 4, Number 2, 2018, pp. 183-191 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press



STUDIES
IN
AMERICAN
HUMOR



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Is Satire Compatible with Free Speech?

GREGG CAMFIELD

ABSTRACT: Mark Twain was deeply interested in freedom of speech, and in particular, he was concerned about the utility of satire in furthering the benefits of free speech. A review of some of his commentary suggests that Twain's satire impedes the ability of free speech as a mode of exploration, while his humor—as a much more open-ended kind of expression—facilitates freedom of inquiry.

KEYWORDS: satire, humor, freedom of speech, paradox, sarcasm, faith, reason

History does not repeat itself, but eras demonstrate strong family resemblances. In Mark Twain's day, the rapid improvements in printing technology coupled with the birth of electronic communication in the form of the telegraph helped American political parties and their allied media to create a public sphere of stifling rancor, a virtually information-free zone in which heat replaced light. I doubt many of us would fail to see the family resemblance to our own times. Satire was one tool of resistance, and yet it contributed as much to the rancor as any straightforward attack. Again, the lineage is clear.

In this context, and perhaps useful to us, Twain investigated the values and limitations of freedom of speech. For his advocacy of American vernacular English and for his political courage, Twain is usually held up as a champion of free speech. Certainly, he made the traditional political case for free speech in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*:

I was from Connecticut, . . . [where] the citizen who thinks he sees that the commonwealth's political clothes are worn out, and yet holds his peace and does not agitate for a new suit, is disloyal; he is a traitor. That he may be the

only one who thinks he sees this decay, does not excuse him; it is his duty to agitate anyway, and it is the duty of the others to vote him down if they do not see the matter as he does.¹

Nor did he feel that his duty to speak ended at the borders of Connecticut or even the United States. He considered himself a citizen of the world who was obligated to advocate his positions broadly. Regarding *Yankee* itself, Clemens wrote in a letter dated July 16, 1889, to his British publisher, Andrew Chatto, that his “book was not written for America, it was written for England. So many Englishmen have done their sincerest best to teach us something for our betterment, that it seems to me high time that some of us should substantially recognize the good intent by trying to pry up the English nation to a little higher level of manhood in turn.”²

But here’s the problem: what’s the incentive to listen in order to be bettered? If the entire world is Hyde Park Corner (or Twitter), how does one get heard? Being louder helps, but being both loud and outrageous is better—at least for a while.

Throughout his career, Twain expressed concern that untrammelled freedom of speech encouraged people to make the most outrageous of statements in order to be heard. Among my favorite stories in which he addresses this issue is “Journalism in Tennessee,” in which as first-person narrator, he takes on the role of a mild-mannered reporter who is told by his editor to “take the exchanges and skim through them and write up the ‘Spirit of the Tennessee Press,’ condensing into the article all of their contents that seemed of interest.”³ Twain writes the facts in a gentlemanly style, only to be told off:

“Thunder and lightning! Do you suppose I am going to speak of those cattle that way? Do you suppose my subscribers are going to stand such gruel as that? Give me the pen!”

I never saw a pen scrape and scratch its way so viciously, or plow through another man’s verbs and adjectives so relentlessly. While he was in the midst of his work, somebody shot at him through the open window, and marred the symmetry of my ear. . . .

. . . “Now, *here* is the way this stuff ought to be written.”

I took the manuscript. It was scarred with erasures and interlineations till its mother wouldn’t have known it if it had had one. It now read as follows: —

“Spirit of the Tennessee Press.

“The inveterate liars of the *Semi-Weekly Earthquake* are evidently endeavoring to palm off upon a noble and chivalrous people another of their vile and brutal falsehoods with regard to that most glorious conception of the nineteenth century, the Ballyhack railroad. The idea that Buzzardville was to be left off at one side originated in their own fulsome brains—or rather in the settlings which they regard as brains. They had better swallow this lie if they want to save their abandoned reptile carcasses the cowhiding they so richly deserve. . . .

“Now *that* is the way to write—peppery and to the point. Mush-and-milk journalism gives me the fan-tods.” (45–46)

The contrast here between the first-person narrator’s gentle prose that is matched by a low volume when he speaks and the italicized, exclamation-point marred speech of the editor combined with his vituperative prose points to a connection between literal volume and outrageous ideas. The point, in part, is that such engagement is ever escalating. All of this prepares the way for the finale. Note the descriptions of the sounds of violence:

About this time a brick came through the window with a splintering crash, and gave me a considerable of a jolt in the back. I moved out of range—I began to feel in the way.

The chief said, “That was the Colonel, likely. I’ve been expecting him for two days. He will be up now right away.”

He was correct. The Colonel appeared in the door a moment afterward with a dragoon revolver in his hand.

He said, “Sir, have I the honor of addressing the poltroon who edits this mangy sheet?”

“You have. Be seated, sir. Be careful of the chair, one of its legs is gone. I believe I have the honor of addressing the putrid liar, Colonel Blatherskite Tecumseh?”

“Right, Sir. I have a little account to settle with you. If you are at leisure we will begin.”

“I have an article on the ‘Encouraging Progress of Moral and Intellectual Development in America’ to finish, but there is no hurry. Begin.”

Both pistols rang out their fierce clamor at the same instant. The chief lost a lock of his hair, and the Colonel’s bullet ended its career in the fleshy part of my thigh. . . .

They then talked about the elections and the crops while they reloaded, and I fell to tying up my wounds. But presently they opened fire again with animation, and every shot took effect—but it is proper to remark that five out of the six fell to my share. The sixth one mortally wounded the Colonel, who remarked, with fine humor, that he would have to say good morning now, as he had business uptown. He then inquired the way to the undertaker's and left. (47)

The vitriol Twain sees as the competitive norm in backcountry journalism means that ever more people would be outraged, and among the casualties would be truth and personal safety—violent speech often inspires violence.

Clearly, Twain's depiction of Tennessee journalism is satiric in its exaggerations and ironies, and these are not even remotely subtle. They bang on the reader with an intensity that is worthy of the Tennessee editor. In short, the piece is closer to invective, to the kind of railing satire for which Juvenal is known, not the subtle, multilayered ironies of, say, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.⁴ But raillery is a kind of satire, just as sarcasm is a kind of irony: it's simple, though still in the satiric tradition. In juxtaposing a quiet voice with a loud one, Twain pushes back on the value of this kind of caustic commentary, but he does not abjure it. All he seems to do here is to show that upping the amplitude does not encourage "moral and intellectual development."

Twain knew that satire could be an effective response to outrageous noise, as he brilliantly demonstrated by analogy in his October 10, 1906, autobiographical dictation about a banquet at the home of Mary Mapes Dodge. He describes a typical banquet of about twenty people, the conversation at which grows increasingly loud as people struggle to be heard. Twain subdues what he calls a riot through indirection, telling an anecdote, in a soft whisper, that parodies the situation in which he finds himself. Part of the anecdote is an inside story; the rest is about a nearly deaf man who cannot modulate his voice:

By this time the insurrection at Mrs. Dodge's table—at least that part of it in my immediate neighborhood—had died down, and the silence was spreading, couple by couple, down the long table. I went on in a lower and still lower mumble, and most impressively—

"During one of Mr. X. X.'s mute intervals, a man opposite us approached the end of a story which he had been telling his elbow-neighbor. He was speaking

in a low voice—there was much noise—I was deeply interested, and straining my ears to catch his words, stretching my neck, holding my breath, to hear, unconscious of everything but the fascinating tale. I heard him say, ‘At this point he seized her by her long hair—she shrieking and begging—bent her neck across his knee, and with one awful sweep of the razor—’

“HOW DO YOU LIKE CHICA-A-AGO?!!!”

That was X. X.’s interruption, hearable at thirty miles. By the time I had reached that place in my mumblings Mrs. Dodge’s dining-room was so silent, so breathlessly still, that if you had dropped a thought anywhere in it you could have heard it smack the floor. When I delivered that yell the entire dinner company jumped as one person, and punched their heads through the ceiling, damaging it, for it was only lath and plaster, and it all came down on us, and much of it went into the victuals and made them gritty, but no one was hurt. Then I explained why it was that I had played that game, and begged them to take the moral of it home to their hearts and be rational and merciful thenceforth, and cease from screaming in mass, and agree to let one person talk at a time and the rest listen in grateful and unvexed peace. They granted my prayer, and we had a happy time all the rest of the evening; I do not think I have ever had a better time in my life. This was largely because the new terms enabled me to keep the floor—now that I had it—and do all the talking myself. I do like to hear myself talk.⁵

In one respect, subtle satire could be simultaneously outrageous and quiet—it could be the whisper at a crowded table that would ultimately command attention or the shouted complaint set up by the whispering. However, here Twain was simply thinking strategically about being heard; freedom of speech in this sense is a function of the desire to express one’s position, one’s point of view, perhaps to convince others, perhaps to preach to the choir, perhaps just to show off. Twain understood and appreciated this desire; he also feared it.

An alternate justification for freedom of speech is that it can facilitate listening, as John Stuart Mill, Sam Clemens’s older contemporary, remarks in chapter 2 of *On Liberty*.⁶ In this sense, freedom of speech is the freedom to hear ideas that one would not normally entertain, ideas that enable one to grow and improve. This justification of free speech is connected to curiosity, to a desire to explore. It’s certainly a function that Twain explicitly valued, but one that he worried was generally discredited. His essay

“Dr. Loeb’s Incredible Discovery” speaks to this concern. True novelty, he opines in it, is usually discredited in service of the status quo.⁷ Or as he puts it in *What Is Man?*, there are none but temporary truth seekers.⁸ Most of the time, most of us are in a defensive posture intellectually, and the usual way to defend one’s ideas is to attack the ideas of others. Isn’t this how satire usually works? One begins from an assumption of moral rectitude and attacks lapses according to a certain standard, a standard that the satirist assumes is shared with the audience. Without that shared standard, conventional satire is unreadable.

I’ve discussed this conundrum in “Humorneutics,” the final chapter of my book *Necessary Madness: The Humor of Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, but instead of rehashing those arguments, I’d rather take a different tack, one provided by John W. O’Malley in *Four Cultures of the West*. O’Malley lays out a very useful heuristic to describe different conventional attitudes toward knowledge: what it is, how we come to it, how it acts in the world. These attitudes O’Malley names the prophetic tradition, the rationalistic tradition, the humanist tradition, and the tradition of the visual and performative arts. The first two are actors in countless narratives of Western history (and now, often, in histories of the East vs. the West). While we regularly set faith and reason in dialectical opposition, O’Malley points out—in a way pertinent to Twain’s art as an exercise and defense of free speech—that these two positions have much in common. They are both “hard”; that is, they both believe in truth as something absolute, as something that must be known precisely, as something that acts on us, as something that we must enact to be true to ourselves. The humanist tradition, on the contrary, is “soft.” The humanists were first and foremost teachers of virtue vis-à-vis human concerns, which are always contingent. Humanists preferred the paradox to the prophecy or the proof.

Sam Clemens as a thinker was often, in good Victorian fashion, a prophet, though he may have, ironically, often been a prophet of rationality. I believe it is justifiable to collapse O’Malley’s distinction precisely because the mode of argument for both, derived from a shared “hard” epistemology, is often quite similar. In his prophetic mode as Mark Twain, Clemens often used a caustic satire. In fact, he often collapsed the distinction between satire and humor, as when at the beginning of his career he wrote to his brother (October 19, 1865) that he was called to “excite the laughter” of his fellow creatures, when most of his humor up to that point had been the kind of newspaper

character assassination, cultural criticism, and political vituperation that he renounced in “Journalism in Tennessee.”⁹

Over time, Clemens did come to understand the differences between humor and satire, even as he very flexibly moved back and forth over the boundaries. Given that humor and satire often begin in a moment of openness and ambiguity, it should surprise no careful reader of Twain or of any other humorist or satirist that it’s not always easy to put any particular comic piece into its taxonomical box. But even if satire begins in humor, it is ultimately a way to manage the contingent, the open, the provisional, to deal with the conditional by insisting on certainty and action. At least in this respect, satire is part of the prophetic tradition. Humor by contrast is an open and contingent engagement with absurdity; it’s a humanistic engagement with paradox. To my mind, Twain’s best humorous performance is in “Jim Baker’s Blue-Jay Yarn” from *Tramp Abroad*. I think the climax of the piece is a reference to Matthew, 10:2 (see also Luke 12:6) that tortured Twain. As he puts it in “The Chronicle of Young Satan,” “Not a sparrow falls to the ground without His seeing it. But it falls, just the same. What good is *seeing* it fall?”¹⁰ The fact is death, and from a realistic point of view, that fact is hard and scientific, a rebuttal to the prophetic tradition. The jays in the “Yarn” act like dying sparrows, falling while suffocating:

They called in more jays; then more and more, till pretty soon this whole region ’peared to have a blue flush about it. There must have been five thousand of them; and such another jawing and disputing and ripping and cussing, you never heard. Every jay in the whole lot put his eye to the hole and delivered a more chuckle-headed opinion about the mystery than the jay that went there before him. They examined the house all over, too. The door was standing half open, and at last one old jay happened to go and light on it and look in. Of course, that knocked the mystery galley-west in a second. There lay the acorns, scattered all over the floor. He flopped his wings and raised a whoop. “Come here!” he says, “Come here, everybody; hang’d if this fool hasn’t been trying to fill up a house with acorns!” They all came a-swooping down like a blue cloud, and as each fellow lit on the door and took a glance, the whole absurdity of the contract that that first jay had tackled hit him home and he fell over backward suffocating with laughter, and the next jay took his place and done the same.¹¹

But this suffocation is figurative. These birds “die laughing,” which means not only that they don’t die at all but that they enjoy a transcendent experience. In a parody of religious conversion, they’re born again, and to recapture the feeling, they make annual pilgrimages to the site of their miracle:

Well, sir, they roosted around here on the housetop and the trees for an hour, and guffawed over that thing like human beings. It ain’t any use to tell me a bluejay hasn’t got a sense of humor, because I know better. And memory, too. They brought jays here from all over the United States to look down that hole, every summer for three years. Other birds, too. And they could all see the point except an owl that come from Nova Scotia to visit the Yo Semite, and he took this thing in on his way back. He said he couldn’t see anything funny in it. But then he was a good deal disappointed about Yo Semite, too. (41–42)

As much as the story mocks religion, the end seems to tie rationalism and religion in the same bundle: neither the religious point of view nor the rationalist point of view really understands the human condition.

Twain once wrote that “the function of humor is that of the screw in the opera glass—it adjusts one’s focus.”¹² But adjust one’s focus in what way? A satirist acting as a prophet often postulates, or at least assumes, absolute knowledge. If we accept O’Malley’s point that both the prophetic tradition and the rationalist traditions share a commitment to noncontingent truth, the owl that closes the yarn can give us a way to think about satire. In this piece, the refocusing does not present traditional hard-won wisdom—there’s no clarity about what to do to make a living or how to make it to an afterlife. It provides a very humanistic, soft focus. The “hard” facts of work are mocked and supplanted by the deeper fact of work’s ultimate absurdity. But rather than end in bitter satire, the tale turns once more to say that absurdity keeps one open to joy and beauty. Humor is humanistic—paradox is the name of the game.

Throughout his career as Mark Twain, Clemens found freedom of speech as a mode of *exploration*, rather than merely as a mode of *expression*, to be attractive and worth practicing. And insofar as he cared as much about finding truths as about expressing them, he turned not to satire but to humor. The distinction is often a subtle one, but one that can perhaps be best seen in the way Twain uses irony in some works to hammer home a single-minded truth in a satirical mode and in others to explore a range of possibilities.

Whenever satire is dogmatic, it certainly does not serve the best ends of free speech, and thus, when Twain was truest to his humorist gifts, he would, I think, say that although satire is perhaps not incompatible with free speech in a trivial sense, it is incompatible with free speech in the most important sense.

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NOTES

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11. Mark Twain, "Baker's Blue-Jay Yarn," *A Tramp Abroad* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1880), 41, hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.
12. Written on a scrap of paper tipped into a copy of *Mark Twain's Library of Humor*, now in the Mark Twain Papers, University of California, Berkeley.

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