

## CHAPTER I

*Satire and its discontents*

Modernism changed the way we know and feel. Modernist literary works, and the intellectual and cultural currents from which they drew force, not only chronicled but also fostered changes in what Raymond Williams has called “structures of feeling.”<sup>1</sup> Williams, recall, introduces this concept in an attempt to capture the inchoateness and complexity of an experience that is shared or social, even though it may be still emergent and therefore misrecognized as “private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating.”<sup>2</sup> Just as “no generation speaks quite the same language as its predecessors,” just as “manners, dress, building and other forms of social life” evolve gradually over time, so, Williams posits, an ever-changing but pervasive “set” of interlocking affective dispositions exists across a culture, forming a complex “structure” that can be discerned in “characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone.”<sup>3</sup> Like most talk of feeling, this is pretty fuzzy, but it furnishes a theoretical starting-point from which history can attend to the felt quality of experience and from which feelings, which common sense might take to be unchanging and universal, can be historicized.

As students of affect theory are aware, exactly such a historicization of feeling has recently been taken up by scholars in literary studies, who have argued that because modernity constitutes a new and in many ways unique social formation it cannot help but impinge on the ways that life is lived and feelings are felt. Sianne Ngai contends that a new set of minor, noncathartic, “ugly” feelings are characteristic of life under mature capitalism: “the nature of the sociopolitical itself has changed in a manner that both calls forth and calls upon a new set of feelings – one less powerful than the classical political passions.”<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Goodstein looks at boredom as an affect peculiar to the last century and half, when a modernity born out of processes such as “secularization, rationalization, and democratization” produced “experiential transformations” that “literally altered the quality of human being in time.”<sup>5</sup> And Justus Nieland, examining modernism’s

representation of public performance, argues that feeling within modernism was reconfigured by seismic shifts in the character of an always mediated public sphere, shifts to which human beings as individuals and as collectivities were required, often abruptly, to adapt.<sup>6</sup> Without disavowing *all* continuity of human experience over time, then, we might recognize that during the era of modernism people were experiencing – were feeling – their world in new ways. As Ezra Pound put it in 1913: “if we still feel the same emotions as those which launched the thousand ships, it is quite certain that we come on these feelings differently, through different nuances, by different intellectual gradations.”<sup>7</sup>

Feeling, then, has its own story *within* modernism, and one of the central points of this book is that an account of satire – specifically what I call late modernist satire – is indispensable to telling that story. This claim might seem surprising, since the great age of satire is generally held to be the eighteenth century, and satire’s presence in modernism is often taken to be minor and peripheral.<sup>8</sup> Yet it is equally possible that the low profile of modernist satire derives from its very centrality: that satire is not spoken of simply because it goes without saying. Chris Baldick makes this point in claiming that, in modernist-era Great Britain at least, “Satire was invisible because omnipresent,” inherent in the attacks on the “false idols” of Victorian culture that dominated new thinking about sex, religion, and politics.<sup>9</sup> Baldick quotes Cyril Connolly’s 1938 diagnosis: “This is a satirical age and among the vast reading public the power of an artist to awaken ridicule has never been so great.”<sup>10</sup> Yet what Connolly attributed to a plethora of good material might also be seen as an increased disposition and ability to *find* material, a change in a structure of feeling, the rise of a *modernist sensibility*. The raw material for satire may always have been there; what was new was a way of seeing the world that made this material available to ridicule.

Of course, particular modernist-era writers have long been recognized and studied as satirists, but these studies have generally been cordoned off from larger discussions of modernism or buried in the notoriously unfunny stacks of “humor studies.” Only recently has the confluence of modernism and satire been looked at more closely, most notably in Tyrus Miller’s *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars*.<sup>11</sup> James English and Michael North have at the same time reopened the topic of the comic novel, and Nieland has included a section on comedy in his discussion of “eccentric feeling” in modernism.<sup>12</sup> This book seeks to build on the work of these scholars and others by positing satire as a way of thinking, feeling, and writing central to modernism – to the very notion of what it meant for modernists to be modern.

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In the analysis that follows, I use a variety of terms – satiric and sentimental, ironic and comic, grotesque and uncanny – which, like most genre terms, provide markers for the ways in which various kinds of literary works have engaged (or disengaged) their readers' feelings. Understanding the dynamics of satire and of the sentimentality it ostensibly refuses will then help to recast an account of modernism as one in which different affective possibilities are always contending and jostling, and in which modernism itself can be seen as an effort, or a variety of efforts, to grapple with the problem of how to feel.

THE DOUBLE MOVEMENT OF SATIRE

Most definitions of satire – too many to cite here<sup>13</sup> – have seen a moral aim as a necessary component of the mode.<sup>14</sup> The satirist is a “moral agent” according to George Meredith, is “an *ipso facto* moralist” according to Harry Levin, “takes a high moral line” according to Northrop Frye.<sup>15</sup> This moral element separates satire from pure comedy; the objects of satiric laughter are experienced not as trivial but as “harmful or destructive.”<sup>16</sup> It also tends to make satire a conservative mode, the argument runs, since satire paints its target as deviating from a strong and stable set of communally held beliefs and at least implicitly urges reform. Such “conservatism,” suggesting both a certainty of authorial meaning and a promotion of social consensus, resembles what Wayne Booth has called “stable irony”; irony is stable, according to Booth, if “once a reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions.”<sup>17</sup> This conservatism describes something different from a writer's overt political views; while in a case such as Evelyn Waugh's the writer's outspoken traditionalism appears to reinforce his satiric ridicule of all that departs from age-old standards, a novelist on the left like Nathanael West has just as frequently been read as conservative in the sense that, in his biographer's words, “his satire was designed to return man to himself, to his ‘lawful callings’.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, while satire is sometimes thought to trade in politics to the fault of being trivial – does anyone really care that the Treasurer of Lilliput was meant to represent Robert Walpole? – it is equally often felt to be redeemed by a metaphysical insight into that chimerical entity called human nature.<sup>19</sup>

Yet even if in satire the timely ultimately gives way to the timeless, political carping to moral vision, unadulterated moralism does not, according to the typologists, produce satire, but leads instead to sermon, invective, or

polemic. To achieve its moral aims, satire has been understood to deploy techniques that involve wit, play, and fantasy. According to Alvin Kernan, satire has “two poles,” “a rigid moral system” and “a graceful style”; Frye sees a “token fantasy” as well as “an implicit moral standard” as essential.<sup>20</sup> This playful or provocative dimension of satire, moreover, is not purely festive or comic, but involves mockery, malice, and derision.<sup>21</sup> The result is that satire can appear anarchic, subversive, and destructive. Kernan’s “two poles” of satire create an unstable force field in which an ethical content clashes with a playful and often destructive form, in which subversive means are used to promote conservative ends.

It was, however, the peculiar achievement of modernist-era thinkers to attempt a theoretical resolution of this paradox by recognizing in the moral motive of satire a mere disguise for more primitive delight in the depiction of corrupt targets. A key figure here is Wyndham Lewis, who, in his 1934 treatise, *Men Without Art*, announces that “the greatest satire is non-moral.”<sup>22</sup> “There is no prejudice so inveterate,” he claims, “even in the educated mind, as that which sees in satire a work of edification. Indeed, for the satirist to acquire the right to hold up to contempt a fellow-mortal, he is supposed, first, to arm himself with the insignia of a sheriff or special constable.”<sup>23</sup> But Lewis rejects these reformatory and didactic claims of satire and seeks instead to recover ridicule for its own sake as healthy, primary, and pleasurable. Lewis describes a “perfect laughter” that, if it could be realized, “would be inhuman” – one that would not let moral compunction prevent it from taking delight in “the antics dependent upon pathologic maladjustments, injury, or disease.”<sup>24</sup> This non-moral conception of satire, as Martin Puchner has pointed out, owes a debt to Nietzsche, who already in his *Genealogy of Morals* rejects what he calls an “ethics of pity” by invoking the origin of the modern European novel:

Consider, for instance, Don Quixote at the court of the Duchess. Today we read *Don Quixote* with a bitter taste in our mouths, almost with a feeling of torment, and would thus seem very strange and incomprehensible to its author and his contemporaries: they read it with the clearest conscience in the world as the most cheerful of books, they laughed themselves almost to death over it.<sup>25</sup>

Hence Nietzsche’s famous slogan: “To see others suffer does one good. To make others suffer even more.”<sup>26</sup>

If Nietzsche is Lewis’s direct precursor in rediscovering the primal cruelty of literary satire, Freud is an equally important antecedent.

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Freud, like Nietzsche, exposes the ruses of morality, the ways in which morality serves as cover for repressed motives and desires. In his 1905 study of jokes, Freud not only makes the fairly obvious observation that satire partakes of the structure of what he calls tendentious jokes;<sup>27</sup> more fundamentally, he posits that the sources of pleasure in such tendentious attacks are multiple and layered. In distinguishing between the “joking envelope” and the “thought it contains,” Freud argues that the pleasure of a joke is – to use the word he made famous in discussing dreams – overdetermined.<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, “the pleasure in a joke is derived from play with words”<sup>29</sup> – from the indulgence of a childish, playful tendency to “jest” that in the adult has been suppressed by critical reason. On the other hand, however, the jest is supplemented with meaning that is “intended to protect that pleasure from being done away with by criticism.”<sup>30</sup> The meaning of a joke protects the pleasure that the playful content produces. Yet when Freud arrives at his specific analysis of the *tendentious* joke he reverses his terms; in this special case, he contends, the authority to be circumvented is not just the inhibitory critical faculty but the repressive one.<sup>31</sup> Now it becomes the “envelope,” or form, of a joke that serves as protection, offering an “incentive bonus” or “fore-pleasure” that relaxes moral inhibitions so that the transgressive content of the joke can be enjoyed.<sup>32</sup> The pleasurable *form* now protects the (tendentious) *meaning* from censorship. Thus it is that “the highest stage of jokes, tendentious jokes, often have to overcome two kinds of inhibition, those opposed to the joke itself and those opposed to its purpose.”<sup>33</sup> Freud thus reconciles how contradictory impulses work in concert: the moral pretenses of satire do not simply contradict but in fact *make possible* its aggressive sources of pleasure.<sup>34</sup> In satire, moral outrage and sadistic pleasure *have the same stimulus*; whether a joke appears in good or bad taste depends only on the strength of internal and external inhibitions.

To this Nietzschean-Freudian move beyond good and evil, Lewis adds a Bergsonian concern with the materiality of the human. Already in his earlier (1927) account on comedy, Lewis riffs on Bergson’s famous theory of the comic as “something mechanical encrusted on the living.”<sup>35</sup> Writes Lewis: “The root of the Comic is to be sought in the sensations resulting from the observations of a *thing* behaving like a person.”<sup>36</sup> Despite his predominant anti-Bergsonism, Lewis here retains Bergson’s link between laughter and the recognition of the human as thing-like, and endorses the premise of a fundamental contradiction between matter and mind. Yet, as Justus Nieland notes, Lewis’s formula is “a reversal of the humanist

terms of Bergsonian laughter” that locates the comic in the human-like behavior of the thing, rather than the other way around.<sup>37</sup> While Bergson’s account of comedy tells a story in which human flexibility or “spirit” is ultimately triumphant, Lewis drops this last step, concluding with the recognition of the human being as mechanical: “But ‘men’ are undoubtedly, to a greater or less extent, machines. And there are those amongst us who are revolted by this reflection, and there are those who are not.”<sup>38</sup>

Rejecting the Bergsonian “internalist” interest in flux and subjectivity and interiority, Lewis favors instead an “external approach,” the method of the eye, which he associates with scientific objectivity and Hulmean classicism. His surface-oriented satirist offers no recognition of human elasticity: “It will be his task . . . like science, to bring human life more into contempt each day . . . It will, by illustrating the discoveries of science, demonstrate the futility and absurdity of human life.”<sup>39</sup> The ugly materiality of the human body for Lewis turns out to be only one more source of pleasure: “What you regard as hideous has the same claims on us even as your ravishing self. We are the reverse of squeamish . . . This *matière* which composes itself into what you regard I daresay as abortions, is delightful to us, *for itself*. No artist yet has experienced any personal repulsion for a grotesque that sprang up beneath his hand.”<sup>40</sup>

Thus, as Michael Seidel notes, for Lewis “the creative, meliorative, or restorative role of the satirist is part of a preserving fiction, a mere saving of appearances,” and consequently the satirist is always “implicated in the debasing form of his action.”<sup>41</sup> Like Swift’s broomstick, he becomes dirty in the process of cleaning; he is a moral garbage collector who reveals his affinity with the filthy material he purports to purify. So described, the satirist is a perfect example of what William Ian Miller calls a “moral menial,” a class of people that includes lawyers, politicians, and hangmen (not to mention Lewis’s “sheriff or special constable”). Moral menials, according to Miller, “perform functions in the moral order similar to those played by gargamen and butchers”: “Moral menials deal with moral dirt, or they have to get morally dirty to do what the polity needs them to do. And despite the fact that we need to attract people to this kind of labor, we still hold them accountable for being so attracted.”<sup>42</sup> The existence of such border guards reminds us “that the boundaries that separate vice from virtue, good from evil, pure from polluted, are permeable, and worse, necessarily permeable.”<sup>43</sup> Walking this line, the satirist experiences the classic ambivalence between enjoying an illicit desire and experiencing guilt over that enjoyment – what Italo Calvino

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describes as “the mixture of attraction and repulsion that animates the feelings of every true satirist toward the object of his satire.”<sup>44</sup>

Thus emerges what I will be calling the *double movement of satire*: on the one hand, the satirist speaks for a community, exaggerating and ridiculing his target in order to urge reform; on the other, he is a renegade who enjoys the subversion of traditional values, delights in his own aesthetic powers, even savors the cruelty he inflicts.

SATIRE, MODERNITY, AND THE GROTESQUE

Of these two notions of satire, “conservative” and “subversive,” it is surely the first that Evelyn Waugh had in mind when, in a 1946 piece for *Life* magazine, he rejected the word as a description of his own works:

Satire is a matter of period. It flourishes in a stable society and presupposes homogeneous moral standards – the early Roman Empire and eighteenth-century Europe. It is aimed at inconsistency and hypocrisy. It exposes polite cruelty and folly by exaggerating them. It seeks to produce shame. All this has no place in the Century of the Common Man where vice no longer pays lip service to virtue. The artist’s only service to the disintegrated society of today is to create little independent systems of order of his own. I foresee in the dark age opening that the scribes may play the part of the monks after the first barbarian victories. They were not satirists.<sup>45</sup>

In suspiciously similar language, Waugh’s sometime nemesis, W. H. Auden, writing only six years later, dismissed the relevance of satire to the modern age. His analysis diverges from Waugh’s only in that Auden’s despair arises not from the scope of the century’s democratic tendencies but from the scale of its brutality:

Satire flourishes in a homogeneous society where satirist and audience share the same views as to how normal people can be expected to behave, and in times of relative stability and contentment, for satire cannot deal with serious evil and suffering. In an age like our own, it cannot flourish except in intimate circles as an expression of private feuds: in public life the evils and sufferings are so serious that satire seems trivial and the only possible kind of attack is prophetic denunciation.<sup>46</sup>

Waugh and Auden alike voice nostalgia for a bygone age when satire was possible, and both men understand their own age as qualitatively different from past history. Their statements thus share not only an implied theory of *satire*, but also assumptions about *modernity*: both agree that the extent of modern corruption, no matter what its source, has led to the

endangerment, if not the outright extinction, of a once-great genre. Auden's "prophetic denunciation" and Waugh's monastic withdrawal similarly interpret modernity as an era of unprecedented rupture, and posit a thorough redefinition of the role that literature can take in the heterogeneous social formation of modern democracy.

A third contemporary, Theodor Adorno (born the same year as Waugh, three years before Auden), also claimed, in 1951, that modernity makes satire impossible. For Adorno too, the loss of satire stands for the loss of much more:

The impossibility of satire today should not be blamed, as sentimentality is apt to do, on the relativism of values, the absence of binding norms. Rather, agreement itself, the formal *a priori* of irony, has given way to universal agreement of content. As such it presents the only fitting target for irony and at the same time pulls the ground from under its feet. Irony's medium, the difference between ideology and reality, has disappeared. The former resigns itself to confirmation of reality by its mere duplication. Irony used to say: such it claims to be, but such it is; today, however, the world, even in its most radical lie, falls back on the argument that things are like this, a simple finding which coincides, for it, with the good.<sup>47</sup>

Those familiar with Adorno's vision of an administered culture will recognize his central complaint: when culture cannot stand outside of ideology, what results is a thoroughgoing conformity and a Panglossian refusal to imagine a better world. Adorno's argument is thus a mirror image of Waugh's. He maintains that modernity has produced not a "disintegrated society" but an overly integrated one, too monolithic for any critic to surmount: "There is not a crevice in the cliff of the established order into which the ironist might hook a fingernail."<sup>48</sup> According to Adorno, in fact, the belief Waugh expresses is "sentimental" – presumably because of the benign, if not affectionate, view it takes of obedience to inherited norms. (More on sentimentality, however, in just a bit.)

With some distance from these midcentury assessments, we can say, I hope, that the century just past, despite its indisputable evils, was neither as shamelessly libertine as Waugh complained nor as stupidly conformist as Adorno feared; and we do not diminish its horrors by noting that it has mercifully allowed modes of expression other than Auden's "prophetic denunciation." All these assessments may feel slightly off the mark, then, not only because they rely on an overly narrow definition of satire but also because they give us pictures of modernity that too greatly betray their authors' preoccupations – pictures of a present that, in the massiveness of its corruption, utterly overwhelms the possibility of any critical



engagement at all. Yet in complete opposition to this view, I suggest not only that modernism and satire are not incompatible, but that they are very nearly *the same thing*. For modernism's complex relation to the past can actually seem to align it with satire; if, as Seidel argues, satire undermines and disrupts the inheritance of traditional literary forms, then satire itself can be viewed as a force or agent of modernity.<sup>49</sup> Satire and modernism are similarly susceptible to the (incompatible) accusations of both rearguard conservatism and decadent libertinism. On whichever side we place any of the major writers and thinkers of the time, what is clear is that satire, like modernism itself, requires a *rift* between the new and the old; it can only exist in the space opened between them.<sup>50</sup>

The modernity of satire, then, lies less in a particular moral, religious, or philosophical set of *values* that critical interpretation might recover from a novel or poem or film or play than in a kind of temperament or outlook, a satiric *sensibility* – a characteristic of the implied author and reader who savor the transgressive pleasures that satire affords, who may deride the chaos of modernity but also need it, even help to create it. Hence what I call (modifying a term from Richard Rorty) *ironic redescription* proves a central operation of modernist satire. “Anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed,” notes Rorty, and what else is satire but a way of redescribing things in order to make them look bad?<sup>51</sup>

In making things look bad, satiric redescriptions frequently produce the grotesque. This term, which we have already seen Lewis invoke in his defense of satire, is at least as imprecise as “satire”;<sup>52</sup> Mary Russo points out that the term can refer either to “discernible grotesque figures or style” or to “the rather vague and mysterious . . . category of ‘experience.’”<sup>53</sup> The grotesque can describe either objective *content* – often, but not necessarily, deformed, misshapen, or hybrid bodies – or subjective *experience* – the emotional instability that grotesque content tends to produce in a reader. This emotional instability, moreover, is itself fundamentally ambivalent, mixing contradictory affective conditions. In a passage essential for theorists of the grotesque, John Ruskin saw the mode as “composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful”: “As one or the other of these elements prevails, the grotesque falls into two branches, sportive grotesque and terrible grotesque; but . . . we cannot legitimately consider it under these two aspects, because there are hardly any examples which do not in some degree combine both elements.”<sup>54</sup> The “ludicrous” element of the grotesque, its comic, playful, or “sportive” side, has obvious affinities with satire, irony, caricature, and cartoon, which stay

on the surface of the object and exaggerate or deform their targets with the aim of ridicule. The “fearful” element has a different set of generic affiliations (the Gothic, the fantastic, horror, and, most crucially, the Freudian uncanny) that hint at a troubled interiority and move from laughter to anxiety. As Ruskin notes, these two elements do not disentangle easily. The laughter provoked by the grotesque is always uneasy, nervous laughter, never wholly free from disquiet.

There is yet another dichotomy to the grotesque as a critical concept, a dichotomy in the history of theorizing about it. While analyses of the grotesque have attempted to understand the grotesque in Jungian, Heideggerian, feminist, race-theory, deconstructive,<sup>55</sup> and, above all, Freudian<sup>56</sup> frameworks, the two most influential theories of the mode, those of Mikhail Bakhtin and Wolfgang Kayser, are both over a half-century old; they offer, moreover, radically divergent interpretations. Bakhtin’s theory opposes the grotesque body to the classical. The grotesque body for him is “the epitome of incompleteness,” “a principle of growth,” “ever unfinished, ever creating.”<sup>57</sup> This material body stresses functions like ingesting and excreting and serves as one of Bakhtin’s major symbols of the concept of carnival, which brings about the festive suspension or inversion of social hierarchies. In the Bakhtinian grotesque, decay is a stage of renewal, individual death part of a collective life.

Kayser’s theory, in contrast, is based primarily in Romanticism rather than the Renaissance and emphasizes the “ominous, nocturnal and abysmal features” of the grotesque “that frighten and puzzle us and make us feel as if the ground beneath our feet were about to give way.”<sup>58</sup> Drawing on much of the same material as Freud does in “The Uncanny,” Kayser sees the grotesque in loosely existential terms, as an invocation of, and play with, a fundamental human alienation from the world. Like Freud, Kayser emphasizes subjective experience over objective content, and his focus is the individual not the collective; he stresses Ruskin’s fearful element rather than the ludicrous. For Kayser, the grotesque expresses not a fundamental unity of all things organic, but a fundamental division between self and world.

Bakhtin himself suggests a historical narrative that allows for at least a tentative reconciliation with Kayser. Whereas Bakhtin’s medieval and Renaissance grotesque thrived during an era when collective folk culture was vibrant, the rise of the bourgeois subject reduced the grotesque to a nocturnal, subterranean, isolated phenomenon. As a result, the oversized, celebratory laughter of Rabelais “was cut down to cold humor, irony, sarcasm,” and grotesque imagery “acquired a private, ‘chamber’ character.”<sup>59</sup>