



Over the wall ...

Alan Maley
sends things up.

Satire has been around for as long as literacy, and probably as long as language itself. Human beings seem to have an irresistible desire to mock, especially to mock things they do not like and which they may be powerless to criticise in any other way.

It is likely that we continue to read (if anybody does nowadays!) works like Aristophanes' *The Wasps*, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly*, Swift's *A Modest Proposal* ..., Pope's *Dunciad*, Voltaire's *Candide* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* more for their historical and literary interest than for their satirical bite. But, in their day, they were as acidic and as subversive of authority as *Private Eye* or *Le Canard Enchaîné* are today. And the penalties for satire were more extreme. Authority does not like to be laughed at. Even today, there are limits which most writers are careful not to transgress. It is instructive to observe how contemporary satirists tend to stick to soft targets – the ones which don't bite back.

Closer to our own times (though, amazingly, it was published nearly 60 years ago), Orwell's *Animal Farm* continues to be depressingly current. There are still all too many exploitative pigs like

Napoleon, sycophantic spies like Squealer and long-suffering, exploited workhorses like Boxer in the world, which is doubtless one of the reasons why *Animal Farm* continues to be read. We are simultaneously amused by the satire and appalled by the reality it satirises. Even closer in time, books like Spike Milligan's *Adolf Hitler: My Part in His Downfall*, which satirises the whole military and political establishment, continue to amuse. Milligan's zany, Goon-Show humour is so far-fetched we can afford to laugh at it light-heartedly. But Yes, *Minister*, which began as a BBC TV series, and is now widely available in book form too, was so uncannily close to the truth, that our laughter feels slightly uncomfortable and nervous. Is this really the way things are done in government? Can senior civil servants like Sir Humphrey really subvert the policies of elected ministers? Better not ask, perhaps!

The Devil's Dictionary

Turning to language, we are well-served for satire, too. Ambrose Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary* is still widely read and quoted. He was not just a satirist, of course, and some of his short stories still amply reward re-reading: *An Occurrence*

at Owl Bridge Creek being just one of them. So, as an accomplished prose stylist, he was well qualified to craft some of the wickedest definitions ever. The sting in the tail of his definitions is sometimes like a fuse, which only detonates later when the penny drops. And virtually no human foible escapes his scathing wit, as the following definitions show:

ALLIANCE, n. In international politics, the union of two thieves who have their hands so deeply inserted in each other's pockets that they cannot separately plunder a third.

AMNESTY, n. The state's magnanimity to those offenders whom it would be too expensive to punish.

EDUCATION, n. That which discloses to the wise and disguises from the foolish their lack of understanding.

FRIENDSHIP, n. A ship big enough to carry two in fair weather, but only one in foul.

HOSPITALITY, n. The virtue which induces us to feed and lodge certain persons who are not in need of food and lodging.

LECTURER, n. One with his hand in your pocket, his tongue in your ear and his faith in your patience.

SELF-ESTEEM, n. An erroneous appraisalment.



Fraffly Well Spoken

Some have chosen to satirise the very sound of the language we use. Mocking people who do not speak like us by mimicking their accents and parodying their linguistic mannerisms is a time-honoured device of satire. Shakespeare was an adept, for sure: the pompous verbosity of Holofernes in *Love's Labour's Lost*, for example, or the regional caricatures of Fluellen, Jamy and Macmorris in *Henry V*.

More recently, one of the masters of this genre was Afferbeck Lauder (alias Alistair Ardoch Morrison), who started out by satirising the Australian idiom in *Let Stalk Strine*, and went on to send up the cut-glass accents and clipped phraseology of the British upper classes in *Fraffly Well Spoken*. The trick is to find a way to re-spell the English language so that it sounds like the accents that are being parodied. (An earlier example, though not really satire, was the French-sounding version of Mother Goose Rhymes – *Mots d'Heures: Gousses, Rames*.)

Some examples from *Fraffly Well Spoken* convey the idea:

Folker swell: If the conditions are favourable. As in: *Folker swell we shoopie thep-eye hops four*. (If all goes well, we should be there by half-past four.)

Hammer Freddy: That elusive man who continually evades telephone conversations. As in: *Hammer Freddy's knotter tome*. (I'm afraid he's not at home.)

Hammer Freddy skonta Rirm. (I'm afraid he's gone to Rome.)

And as the blurb informs us: *Wonker noddly sair noffer bot this trooleh moffler spook*. (I will leave the deciphering to you!)

It is unlikely we shall be using this as a phonology textbook any time soon – but it is a fun read for language freaks or language teachers. And, as the social group being satirised has either become an endangered species or changed its accent, no 'hom' is done to anyone!

Postmodern Pooh

This cannot be said for Frederick Crews' *Postmodern Pooh*, however, which is a savagely satirical deconstruction (or destruction) of some of the monumental twaddle peddled by literary critics. The book purports to be the proceedings of a conference on the children's book *Winnie the Pooh* by A A Milne, involving critics from pretty well every school and group, ranging from the post-modern ramblings of Derrida and company, to Marxist critics, to Freudians, to feminist critics, to post-colonial fanatics – and even to rebel traditionalists. The names of some of the contributors should alert us to what is to come, with Sisera Catheter, Das Nuffa Dat and Dudley Cravat, among others, all with fantastical biodata to match. However, not only does Crews capture the authentic voice of each brand of nonsense, but he cunningly interweaves his fabricated material with genuine quotations and citations from real critics. It is testimony to his skill that it is quite difficult to tell the one from the other. Compare, for example, these two quotations, which convey something of the flavour of this devastatingly destructive satire:

'The rememoration of the "present" as space is the possibility of the utopian imperative of no-(particular)-place, the metropolitan project that can supplement the post-colonial attempt at the impossible cathexis of place-bound history as the lost time of the spectator.' (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) This is for real, believe it or not.

'... Foucault ... whose paradigmatic European prison and asylum cannot begin to explain how a despised indigeneity gets catachrestically imbricated in a dominant.'

(Das Nuffa Dat) This is the send up.



English teachers, bored with the mundane texts presented in many coursebooks and language materials, may find the subversive definitions of *The Devil's Dictionary*, the linguistic gymnastics of *Fraffly Well Spoken* and the incisive wit of *Postmodern Pooh* just the thing to lift their mood. **ETP**

Books reviewed

Bierce, A *The Devil's Dictionary* (www.gutenberg.org)

Crews, F *Postmodern Pooh* Profile Books 2002

Lauder, A *Fraffly Well Spoken: How to Speak the Language of London's West End* Wolfe 1968

Other books mentioned

d'Antin van Rooten, L *Mots d'Heures: Gousses, Rames* Penguin 1967

Aristophanes *The Frogs* (www.classics.mit.edu/Aristophanes/frogs.html)

Austen, J *Pride and Prejudice* (www.gutenberg.org)

Bierce, A *An Occurrence at Owl Bridge Creek* (ReadaClassic.com)

Chaucer, G *The Canterbury Tales* (trans. Neville Coghill) Penguin Classics 1958

Erasmus of Rotterdam *In Praise of Folly* 1511 (www.gutenberg.org)

Jay, A and Lynn, J *The Complete 'Yes, Minister'* BBC Books 1989

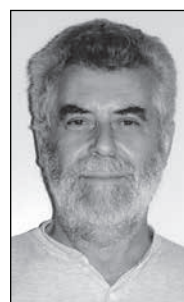
Milligan, S *Adolf Hitler: My Part in His Downfall* Penguin 1972

Orwell, G *Animal Farm* Penguin 1945/1951

Pope, A *The Dunciad* (www.bartleby.com/203/163.html)

Swift, J *A Modest Proposal – For preventing the children of poor people in Ireland from being a burden on their parents or country, and for making them beneficial to the publick* (www.gutenberg.org)

Voltaire *Candide* (www.gutenberg.org)



Alan Maley has worked in the area of ELT for over 40 years in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, India, the UK, Singapore and Thailand. Since 2003 he has been a freelance writer and consultant. He has published over 30 books and numerous articles, and was, until recently, Series Editor of the *Oxford Resource Books for Teachers*.

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