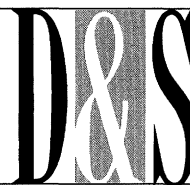


Dear shit-shovellers: humour, censure and the discourse of complaint



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ABSTRACT. In this article we analyse letters of complaint about instances of comic discourse where the humour is regarded as overstepping the mark and causing offence. We are particularly interested in how this sense of offence is registered and how complainants articulate the offence for which they seek some form of redress. In pursuing this interest, we seek to bring together two distinctive modes of analysis: linguistic discourse analysis and symbolic cultural analysis. This is methodologically appropriate to the discourse involved because of the ways in which epistolary complaints use forms of linguistic framing for offsetting potential objections to what they want to say, and because of the highly figurative language which is employed in voicing the substantive complaint and the censure of the humour that is entailed in this. Our focus overall is on the underlying ambivalence involved in negotiations between ethical and comic discourse.

KEY WORDS: *comic, discursive boundaries, figurative language, letters, offence, prolepsis, sense of humour*



A peculiar interest always attaches to humour. There is no quality of the human mind about which its possessor is more sensitive than the sense of humour. A man will freely confess that he has no ear for music, or no taste for fiction, or even no interest in religion. But I have yet to see the man who announces that he has no sense of humour. (Stephen Leacock, cited in Allport, 1937: 224)

Introduction

To announce that you have no sense of humour would be tantamount to declaring a profound deficiency in your personality. We are sensitive to the issue of possessing such a faculty not only because it is associated with who we are and what

makes us distinctive, but also because it is commonly regarded as a required attribute in a mature and rounded personality. Having a sense of humour helps you identify yourself as someone worthy of being known. To be able to laugh with others and at yourself are, for this reason, taken as personality traits to which a positive value is assigned. Few people would not want this value attributed to them either in the way others assess them or in their own self-regard. This is why we feel vulnerable when we are accused of lacking a sense of humour. It is as if there is something vital missing in our individual make-up. A person without a sense of humour is 'not simply unpleasant or bad company, but is literally an incomplete person' (Wickberg, 1998: 85). It is because we commonly perceive this that we either hotly deny the accusation that we lack a sense of humour or swing rigorously into a posture of self-defence by saying something like 'I didn't mean it like that . . .'. Likewise we view a sense of humour as a quality to be sought after and valued in friends, partners, team-members and colleagues. For example, entries in personal columns often contain the abbreviation *gsh* (good sense of humour) as a way of enhancing a self-profile and attracting interest (see Coupland, 1996; Thorne and Coupland, 1998), and if we read in a personal character reference that someone has a 'good sense of humour' we are presumably meant to interpret this as a desirable feature in a possible employee, an attribute that would make them more attractive to work with. Such examples underwrite what seems to be a consensual mark of agreement, valorizing humour as an essential ingredient in gratifying relationships.

At least two immediate qualifications should be made in relation to this warm and benign assessment of the quality of a sense of humour in ourselves or in others. First, when we use it as a reference-point in either a general or specific way, we overlook the broad distinctions that are otherwise understood as falling between different forms of humour. To give an example of these kinds of mundane distinctions and classifications: in her work on the complexities of a sense of humour in romantic relationships, Amy Bippus (2000) found that her participants referred to four types of sense of humour: active (engaging in physical humour, poking fun and pranking); receptive (laughing or smiling and choosing sources of entertainment); bonding (using pet names, joking about bodily functions and relationship issues); and censuring (condemning sadistic humour or jokes inappropriate to a particular social context).

Second, the possession of a sense of humour is historically specific as a value. In other times, humour has been regarded as the basis of aggression or envy and associated with ignorance and foolishness. Plato equated humour with a lack of self-knowledge, while Aristotle argued that the origins of humour lay in deformity and shabbiness. For them, humour was perceived as a disruptive form of behaviour, corrupting morals, art and religion (Chapman and Foot, 1976: 1). Taking a sense of humour as a positive attribute is in fact a comparatively recent development. While comedy more broadly has been valued as a social corrective and vehicle for criticizing human folly from the Elizabethan era onwards, it is only since the mid-to-late 19th century that a sense of humour has been com-

monly used as a descriptive individualizing term, valued as a desirable attribute of anyone's personality, and applied as an index of their subjective quality of mind and perception (Wickberg, 1998: 25). This application may have its deep etiological roots in the medieval typology of the four cardinal humours, but what is now identified as someone's sense of humour, not to mention the whole conception of human psychology itself, is radically different. Rather than the individual being possessed by humour, as an objective physiological constitution, humour has become accepted as an integral possession of the individual, an interiorized quality representative of who they are – or who they take themselves to be and how they wish to project themselves. In this shift the core meanings of the term 'humour' have changed unutterably.

A sense of humour combines a generalized quality that is regarded as a necessary lubricant of social life with a subjective quality of identity and outlook that helps define us as specific individuals. It is this combination that has been central to the shift in the core meanings of the term 'humour' over the past two centuries. The combination is at once potent and puzzling. It is potent in the way it brings together, in any individual's own sense of humour, what is apparently universal with what is apparently unique, and it is puzzling because it is always impossible, in any specific social situation or encounter, to point exactly to the place where what is shared begins and what is singular ends. Such a charged ambivalence may account for the exhilaration felt in collective laughter, but it can also turn humour into a hazardous social terrain suddenly full of uncertainty and insecurity. Awareness of this informs our negotiation of humour in everyday life, as for instance in the way we might pretend to get a joke when we haven't, simply in order to ward off the imputation that we are stupid or ignorant. This takes us to our central point of interest in this article, for what we find intriguing are the rhetorical defences which people use in order to protect themselves against being accused of lacking a sense of humour when, in fact, they wish to state that a particular joke or comic narrative is not funny. What seems to us equally intriguing are the ways in which such defences interact with forms of expression used in attacking comic excess, as for instance on those occasions when comic licence is seen as having gone beyond its bounds, or when the comic impulse is regarded as trespassing in areas more commonly accepted as the preserve of serious discourse.

These occasions are those which typically generate complaints about comic offensiveness. Such complaints manifest a withdrawal of permission to engage in humorous discourse about a particular topic or target, and are an attempt to define a limit. Both moves are a consequence of announcing that offence has been taken, that the humour has failed. Few people have considered what this involves. Jerry Palmer is one exception, and as he suggests, 'any theory of humour, jokes and comedy which does not have the principle of potential failure built into it, as one of its fundamental axioms, is a defective theory' (1994: 147). This is surely right, and the general principle identified by Palmer needs to be taken forward. Palmer has himself offered some useful observations on comic failure, and he draws out of them three underlying conditions of such failure:

lack of comprehension, performative inadequacy and offensiveness (see chapters 12 and 13). Here we concentrate on comic offensiveness, and we want to go beyond Palmer's concerns by considering how such offensiveness is registered, and what the discourse of complaint entails, for these are equally neglected questions in humour studies. For the sorts of reason already outlined, complaints about comic offensiveness are commonly articulated in ways which are designed to offset the imputation of lacking a sense of humour. Rhetorically the devices used in this respect seem to operate in diametrical contrast to the language of complaint in which comic offensiveness is identified and condemned. This contrast is merely superficial. As we shall go on to argue, while seemingly quite different to the symbolic and figurative expression used in the castigation of comic offensiveness, the defensive rhetorical strategies with which such expression is hedged about are directly functional for that expression. These two discursive features of the language of complaint are mutually complementary.

In order to investigate the linguistic practices employed in the articulation of complaint, we decided to draw on a common set of public forms of discourse associated with one particular location. We found a convenient stock of complaints about offensiveness in comic images and narratives in the letters sent in by readers to the satirical magazine *Private Eye*. Such letters have been a common feature of the magazine for many years, with a page regularly set aside for their publication. In taking these letters as our basic body of data, we analyse their articulation of complaint through various rhetorical devices. In particular, we focus on the strategies of offsetting or deflating possible objections to the expression of complaint by the use of prolepsis, prefacing disagreements with agreements, and pronominal displacements. These strategies form the first-stage basis for establishing the credentials of the complainant (as for instance in having a sense of humour) as well as setting up certain shields against ensuing ridicule or rebuke. They prepare the ground for the second stage where the complaint is enacted in its full fury. Here our analysis switches in its approach to attend particularly to the symbolic and figurative uses of language. Such uses are concerned to re-establish certain conceptions of order, equilibrium and the proper assignment of forms of discourse. They are concerned with forms of boundary-maintenance as these apply to ethical notions of distinction between serious and comic discourses. In attending to such forms, we draw on work devoted to the dynamics of boundary reproduction and transgression developed in cultural anthropology and historical cultural analysis. Our overriding interest in this article is the interactive combination of these two apparently opposed aspects of the articulation of complaint, moving from the opening steps of hesitancy, caution and accommodation, to the no-holds-barred heaping of execration and fulmination on the heads of the perpetrators of comic offence.

Preliminaries of complaint

We began our study by conducting a content analysis of an extensive set of

letters to *Private Eye* taken from editions 29 January 1971 (No. 238) to 16 April 1999 (No. 974), inclusive. Letters collected for analysis were derived from a total of 715 issues, spanning a 28-year period. Our overriding criterion for selecting from this material was the articulation of complaint on the part of the reader, regardless of the issue on which they had put pen to paper. From the 715 issues, 479 letters of complaint were collected in our sample.¹ As we started to attend to the discursive practices adopted in readers' letters, what was immediately striking about them was that they edge around or hesitate in the face of the actual complaint. Readers rarely state, simply and straightforwardly, that offence has been experienced. While bold statements to this effect are regular, they are usually circumscribed by qualifications which reveal a great deal about how these statements should be read. Readers include additional information or preface their complaints with the declaration that they appreciate *Private Eye* and value it as a publication. Here are some examples: 'I have read it for years, not regularly but when a copy came into my hands, I've had lots of good laughs and been pleased that England is the sort of country where all sorts really do make a world' (30 November 1973, No. 312: 10); 'Usually I find the cover of *Private Eye* highly entertaining . . .' (2 July 1982, No. 535: 9); 'I've read and enjoyed the Eye for the better part of 20 years' (4 January 1991, No. 758: 15); 'I am not much of a one for "writing letters", nor do I consider myself easily shocked or offended (if I were I wouldn't read the EYE)' (28 July 1995, No. 877: 13); 'I am a subscriber to your magazine and have been for donkeys years' (24 January 1997, No. 916: 14); 'I have read and enjoyed your magazine for years. I would go so far as to call myself one of your most dedicated readers' (16 March 1990, No. 737: 13).

These kinds of statement are erected as slipways for the entry of readers' letters into the hermeneutic circuit. They operate in two ways simultaneously. On the one hand, they offer in themselves a description of the reader as generally approving and approbatory in their stance towards *Private Eye*, as regular and (for some) 'dedicated' in their consumption of the magazine, as certainly not quick to take offence but instead, as being tolerant, open-minded and happy to live in a pluralized society 'where all sorts make a world'. On the other hand, such statements move beyond themselves to perform a definite function in setting the stage for what is to come. They anticipate a sequel that is to follow and they pave the way for the required interpretation and effective reception of what is in train. In some cases this performative function is quite openly signalled by the use of a particular lexical item, as for instance in the use of the adverb 'usually' in the example above. If we take a whole letter (8 October 1993, No. 830: 17) we can see how these two modes of operation work hand-in-hand with each other.

- 1 Sir,
- 2 I usually find your Alternative Rocky Horror
- 3 Service Book column amusing and
- 4 thought-provoking as it often exposes a creeping
- 5 error in religious circles.
- 6 But you go too far in EYE 829. Your mockery of

- 7 the Communion Service is sacrilege, poking fun
- 8 as it does at the very heart of the Christian faith.
- 9 This is not a matter for cheap, tasteless humour. It
- 10 causes deep offence to believing Christians and
- 11 is unworthy even of a publication such as yours.
- 12 Yours faithfully . . .

The condemnation of the magazine in this letter is facilitated by its opening commendation. This is an example of what Hewitt and Stokes (1975) refer to as a credentialling disclaimer where readers attempt to avoid anticipated undesirable typifications that may follow the complaint. By beginning the letter 'I usually find your Alternative Rocky Horror Service Book column amusing and thought-provoking as it often exposes a creeping error in religious circles' (lines 2–5), the reader positions him or herself as having special characteristics or credentials that prevent him or her being treated in a typical manner. The reader acknowledges that what he or she is about to write may be typified as a response given by someone lacking a sense of humour. The usual enjoyment of *Private Eye* puts him or her in a 'protected category' (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975: 4). Once secured within this category, readers will then – or so it is anticipated – be protected from typification in the usual manner as people woefully lacking a sense of humour. Further, credentialling shifts the blame of the offence onto *Private Eye*. The complainant, who usually enjoys *Private Eye* for reasons specified, is not at fault or responsible for the offence caused. On the contrary, *Private Eye* is the guilty party.

As well as looking at how the initial commendation operates in establishing credentials and positioning the complainant on the ethically correct side of the attribution of blame and guilt, we can also examine how it works as a rhetorical device for reinforcing the power of the complaint itself. The regular feature identified is 'amusing' and 'thought-provoking'. It serves a valuable critical purpose in exposing fallacious thinking. The recognition of this acts as an accommodation; it is a way of subscribing to the general achievements and purpose of the magazine as these are identified in the values of humour, intellectual stimulation and the exposure of error. Yet at the same time this accommodation goes beyond an attempt at impression-management in that it also registers an anticipation of disruption and disqualification, and seeks to negotiate an inherent contradiction in the discourse of complaint. Billig has described this additional element as creating a situation where 'the statement of a common ground serves as a brief exordium to a critical assault' (1996: 269). The opening statements of description and evaluation then mark up an initial positive attitude on the part of the reader as a way of enabling the passage into a reversal of this position and the enunciation of censorious judgement. Again, the use of the adverb 'usually' anticipates what is to be identified as a disruption of the pattern; it prepares the ground for the harder emphasis which subsequently falls on the word 'but', used as the first word in the second sentence of the letter (line 6). This word acts quite crucially as the hinge between the initial positive stance and the succeeding movement into negative appraisal, for what it introduces is indeed the precise rec-

ognition of comic excess, of the *Eye* having in this instance gone 'too far'. It then seems quite appropriate and acceptable to swing heavily into action with strong epithets of disapprobation – 'mockery', 'sacrilege', 'unworthy', 'deep offence' – and heavy accusations of 'cheap, tasteless humour'. By operating in this manner, these two halves of the letter act in concert with each other. The opening sentence anticipates objections to the succeeding sentences in order to pre-empt them or render them less forceful in advance. As well as increasing the force of the complaint in the second half of the letter, the prefatory first sentence acts ahead of the game in order to protect the letter-writer from accusations of being humourless. It is a classic instance of prolepsis.

This device is commonly used in relation to prejudice. It operates as a way of articulating prejudice while also simultaneously denying such articulation. In cases of racial prejudice, for example, prolepsis functions as a way of preventing speakers from being perceived as 'prejudiced', as for instance in the use of the disclaimer 'I'm not prejudiced but . . .' with the 'but' acting as the nodal point through which a passage into the expression of racial prejudice is effected and the anticipated accusation of prejudice is forestalled. This rhetorical figure is commonly used precisely because the cultural norm against 'prejudice' is now so general that 'the value of not being "prejudiced" is even shared by the fascist writer who is at pains to deny his own prejudice' and who endeavours, in an act of critical displacement, 'to pin the label upon liberal opponents' (Billig, 1988: 94). A similar pattern exists when authors deny that they lack a sense of humour. After explaining how much they enjoy reading *Private Eye*, readers often use the word 'but', as for instance with the declarations 'but you really slipped up last week', and 'but that can't be said about the last *Eye* No. 535', following the usual prefatory statements (30 November 1973, No. 312: 10; 2 July 1982, No. 536: 9). Other conjunctive items perform the same function, as with the following:

I've read and enjoyed the *Eye* for the better part of 20 years. However, with the inclusion of the advertisement (The Ultimate Legal High) on the Christmas edition, I have now joined the ranks of ex-readers. (4 January 1991, No. 758: 15)

These examples, of which many more could be cited, provide clear evidence of a cultural norm against admitting that one has failed to find humorous discourse funny. The frequent uses of the rhetorical device of prolepsis show not only that readers tacitly accept this norm, but that it has also become a component part of their self-identity which they have somehow to reconcile with their feeling that a given sample of comic discourse is offensive, if not to them then certainly to others on whose behalf they wish to speak. Having a sense of humour and avoiding offence, particularly to social and ethnic minorities or unjustly marginalized groups, are both held as desirable goals, but as such they can run against each other, producing a conflict between two opposed pressures for good. This conflict is integrally built into the discourse of readers' letters.

To be prejudiced is to be irrational. To be without a sense of humour is to be incomplete as a person. No one wants to appear, to themselves or to others, as

irrational or incomplete, so justifications are set up against the potential criticism that, in complaining about comic offensiveness, the complainant is either prejudiced, as for instance in appearing too politically correct, or humourless, as for instance in not being able to take a joke. In anticipating criticism, this self-defensive stance acts by suggesting an objection to what is to be said in the complaint in order to dispose of it in advance and so increase the force of the complaint. Complaining about offence caused by comic discourse nevertheless remains a fragile endeavour. In the case of *Private Eye*, readers who complain have discursively to negotiate and manage the social norm that lacking a sense of humour is self-detrimental, whilst also articulating opposition and hostility to media product. A positive value conflicts with a negative experience. Readers' letters reveal this conflict in their construction as discourse. This is why their analysis is important. Such letters transfer private thoughts, feelings and troubles into the public domain. The intention of readers

... is not simply to tell the editor what they think, but to shape policy, influence opinion, swing the course of events, defend interests, advance causes. They occupy a mid-way position between the 'official statement' and the private communication; they are public communications. (Hall et al., 1978: 121)

In the present case, the intention of complainants is to reconstruct the boundaries of legitimate satirical discourse, but the risk involved when complaining about a publication like *Private Eye* is that the initial response to the offence caused, especially by humorous sections of the magazine, could be 'well you wouldn't find it funny anyway, you've a poor sense of humour' or 'you've taken it the wrong way'. Even if only implicitly, this is to recognize a disparity between the intended purpose of a letter of complaint and the position of jeopardy in which it stands. The kind of readers' letters we are discussing register the need to ride the rapids between social norms and individual cognition. Prefacing the expression of offence with proleptic words and phrases that suggest 'I have a sense of humour, but . . .' is one strategy used when managing the delicate task of complaining about humorous discourse.

Building on the work of Pomerantz (1984), dealing with strategies for agreeing and disagreeing with forms of assessment, Mulkay's (1985) analysis of agreements and disagreements in letters written by biochemists found that almost two thirds of disagreements were 'prefaced by some kind of agreement', while 'other kinds of preface, which prepare the way for disagreement, tend to displace the responsibility for its occurrence and to explain and justify its expression'. Mulkay's reasoning for the variety and complexity of disagreements is that they 'appear to be a response to the dispreferred character of disagreements and the preferred character of agreements' (p. 201). Prefacing acknowledges the preferred response in an instance where a dispreferred response is about to be given: 'the agreement preface is a concession to the approved and expected response' (p. 207). If agreements are expected and perceived as the correct way to respond, and disagreements are deemed as improper or offensive, one way of organizing

the disagreement is to preface it with an agreement. 'The consistent placing of the agreement first suggests that writers are preparing for, and are reducing in advance the offensive impact of, the dispreferred response which appears in second place' (p. 220). In relation to the material we are dealing with here, consistently prefacing a letter with some kind of agreement is not only an attempt to diminish the force of the dispreferred response. It also clearly allows the reader to indicate that he or she has a sense of humour, usually appreciates *Private Eye*'s social and political satire, and is a rational being.

Although the use of prolepsis is a powerful rhetorical device, as in the letter fully cited earlier, it can operate simultaneously as a rhetorical shield, serving to protect a potential weak spot in the complaint. As the reader is either a practising Christian or sympathetic to the Christian faith and the sanctity of its religious ceremonies, he or she may be dismissed by *Private Eye* as a 'bible-basher' or 'religious nut', thus undermining the credibility of the case against the offence allegedly committed by the magazine. While the rhetorical power of the second part of this letter derives from the reader complaining about the offence experienced on religious grounds, the potential weakness of this in its vulnerability to criticism of the reader being a 'bible-basher' is at least partly shielded by avoidance of the words 'I' or 'we', which would immediately identify the reader as indisputably 'one of them'. The avoidance of such self-identifying words creates a more detached tone even though only those in the know, so to say, could be held to speak with any authority of what does or does not go to 'the very heart of the Christian faith'. The appearance which the letter-writer attempts to create is that what is being expressed is not his or her own personal belief or any personal prejudice about *Private Eye*. The articulation of personal prejudices or feelings of offensiveness is masked. This masking strategy simultaneously anticipates and deflects the criticism that the reader has failed to appreciate the humour, and strengthens the force of the complaint by invoking in non-personal terms the weight and legitimacy of orthodox religious faith.

This is a common strategy in letters to *Private Eye*. We define it as pronominal displacement: the shifting of a first party grievance onto an identified third party. In a letter complaining about a cartoon depicting a woman wearing a 'Women for Rape' jumper, a reader wrote in such a way as to distance herself from the complaint she made by referring to women as 'they' rather than 'we': 'Women do not provoke rape. They do not ask for it.' She expressed the view that 'this is not a joking matter for them' and referred to the cartoon as 'a degradation of 51 per cent of this country's population' (13 January 1984, No. 576: 12). Although she was clearly a member of this degraded section of the population, the use of 'them' to signify women who have suffered rape suggests that she was not a rape victim herself but is speaking on behalf of those who are. In another letter a Westminster Tory councillor complained that a particular article 'caused needless hurt' to the family and friends of someone who had died of cancer. In then going on to say that 'we would greatly appreciate your not commenting on this matter again', she inferred that she was herself a family member or friend, but

this inference was deflected by her expression of complaint being couched in terms of offence to 'other' people (28 November 1994, No. 859: 14). This displacement of the feelings of offence onto a third party implies that such feelings are not merely subjective, and to the extent that they may have a subjective dimension, this is not that of the author, who is in any case otherwise 'usually' appreciative of the *Eye's* 'mischievous' approach to politics. The effect is to suggest that the grievance is not personal, but that the letter-writer is sensitive to possible or actual offence on the part of others. This strategy acts as a way of burinishing one's own moral credentials for oneself and for significant others.

The use of such strategies as prolepsis and pronominal displacement is rhetorically important in another very significant respect. This is the way in which they prepare the ground for the forceful use of symbolic and figurative language in readers' letters. That is the importance of their prefatory status. Not all readers combine the use of these strategies with such language – some use them at the start of their letters but do not go on to use figurative language, others use figurative language without these strategies – but many letters to *Private Eye* use them in combination in order to strengthen their rhetorical power. It is this ensuing increase in rhetorical power that we are focusing on in this article precisely because it makes more effective the primary function of letters from readers of the magazine. This is the attempt to reconstruct and maintain the ethical boundaries between serious and comic discourse as these are understood, following from those instances where readers perceive them to have been illegitimately transgressed, resulting in bad taste, wanton abuse, unjust defamation of character, profanity, dishonour or blasphemy. Or in other words, some form or other of comic offence. The purpose of the letters is to redress the imbalance between serious and non-serious discourse that is alleged to have been created. Redressing this imbalance is a difficult endeavour. In his sociological analysis of humour, Mulkay (1988) highlights the subtle and complex relationship between serious and comic modes of discourse. Humorous forms of expression can have serious motives and intentions so the boundary between serious and comic discourse is sometimes unclear. It is not as if there is a simple or single line of division between them. Readers respond varying to potentially humorous discourse, have differing accounts of the relationship between jokes and serious talk and thus draw differing lines between the two discursive modes involved. In letters written by complaining readers to *Private Eye*, the differing and shifting boundaries between serious and comic discourse are discursively negotiated.

Figurations of censure

In our extensive survey of readers' letters to *Private Eye*, the most prevalent form of figurative language used in attempting to redress such imbalances is a metaphorical reference to dirt. That which is deemed to be dirty sets up a classic binarism where dirt is placed in direct contradistinction to what is claimed to be clean and pure, or in other words unpolluted. The metaphorical reference is

considered apt in these cases because the illegitimate transgression of the boundaries between serious and comic discourses has led to the pollution of the former by the latter. As 'matter out of place', in Mary Douglas's celebrated definition (1966: 35), dirt is an absolute term used in relative ways in the recognition of disorder. There is no absolute dirt as the exact cause and nature of dirt is determined by the observer, reader or hearer, but its power as a signifier is to override this distinction completely in its condemnation of what is 'out of place'. 'Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment' (Douglas, 1966: 2). But the dread of dirt equates with a fear of disorder. Building on Douglas's work, Cresswell has argued that dirt is something in the wrong place or in the wrong time. Dirt causes disgust because 'it appears where it shouldn't be – on the kitchen floor or under the bed . . . [and because it appears where it should not] it lies at the bottom of the hierarchical scale of values; dirt is valued by very few people' (Cresswell, 1996: 38). If dirt is matter out of place and thus a figure of disorder, it follows that a system pre-exists where matter is in place and an environment is ordered. In one particular application of this, language is in good order when talk or text uses words which are regarded as 'clean' because contextually they are not out of place. Such spatial principles are one way in which verbal hygiene is maintained. So-called dirty language is language out of place, language appearing where it shouldn't be, in the wrong place, as for instance in a magazine that can be bought in any high-street newsagents. 'There is a sad lack, today, of an amusing publication that isn't offensively dirty.' Thus one vexed reader to *Private Eye* in 1992, complaining that its 'filthy language' means it 'cannot be left around the house but must be hidden away in shame'. Needless to say, this reader begins the letter with 'I have bought a *Private Eye* today but . . .' (28 February 1992, No. 788: 16).

This is a relatively mild reference to what is considered unclean. Over the years, *Private Eye* has been associated with various different, and more repellent kinds of dirt. *Private Eye* journalists are dirty, they write dirty material and garbage, they write in dirt and they are associated with lousy or foul animals – such as a 'dirty dog' – and 'sewage pipes' (20 July 1990, No. 746: 15; 9 August 1985, No. 617: 11). They are even dirt themselves: 'shit', 'crap', 'vulgar', 'vile', 'foul' and 'stinking' are the kinds of vituperative adjectives by which they are characterized (29 August 1980, No. 488: 12; 2 April 1999, No. 973: 14; 11 September 1981, No. 515: 9; 6 June 1979, No. 456: 9; 9 August 1985, No. 617: 11; 24 September 1982, No. 542: 9). In an attempt at more inventive abuse, one reader reports that *Private Eye* 'reeks of editorial halitosis' (6 January 1989, No. 706: 12). Another begins her letter with 'Dear Shit-Shovellers' in what was presumably intended as an affectionate reference to their investigative journalism while also hinting at what is to come, though even then she is careful to begin with the usual observation that she has 'greatly enjoyed' the magazine 'for many years': 'Never did I dream that I would actually write you a letter of complaint.' As with all the other cases considered, she then goes on to heap abuse on one particular *Private Eye* journalist, describing him as having 'about as much appeal as a dog turd' (22

February 1985, No. 605: 13). Other readers hurl at the magazine such condemnatory phrases as 'vicious rubbish' (21 December 1979, No. 470: 9), and analogies are made between *Private Eye's* satirical discourse and that found on 'lavatory walls' (15 April 1977, No. 400: 7; 3 May 1985, No. 610: 11). These kinds of lexical items and comparative links derive their power of expression from symbolically contrasting standards of cleanliness and hygiene as a result of which we try to prevent, disguise or remove odours and dirt, an almost obsessive regard for which is indicated by the supermarket shelves replete with bath foam, bath salts, bath bombs, shower wash, shower gel, body scrub, body sprays, deodorants and talcum powder, not to mention the various kinds of polish, liquids, foams, detergents, bleach and air-fresheners which we use to scrub, dust, wipe away and spray. Identifying an item of comic offence with dirt or shit is thus part of a symbolic attempt to clean things up once again, to sanitize the environment. Metaphors of dirt are applicable because they emphatically signal the disruption felt when satirical discourse crosses over from the comic into areas considered serious, sensitive or hallowed. These are occasions when the magazine is felt to have gone 'too far', and thus become 'dirty'. Those who are involved in its production are then to be symbolically cast out, mired in the mess of their violation, and made to stand, rejected, in the odour of shame.

In making their moral and ethical objections to what they consider offensive in satirical humour, readers draw upon notions of standards and norms for what is 'correct'. As we have seen, they may negotiate around the cultural norm against 'prejudice' through various forms of qualification of what they want to say, and these increase the rhetorical force of the subsequent complaint. What follows in the complaint is usually delivered without qualification, though; there is a stark contrast between the initial qualification which attempts to pre-empt potential criticism and the ensuing protest against the violation of what is considered decent, appropriate and normal. The vocabulary chosen then matches the sense of violation felt by readers in order to assign the threat this poses to its place on the margins of normality and so reorder the hierarchy of discourse. Such choice of vocabulary is quite unusual. It is not commonly found in other letters of complaint, such as those sent by listeners to BBC Radio 4's *Feedback* programme or viewers to BBC TV's *Points of View*. In branding *Private Eye* humour as 'dirty' by using scatological language and metaphors of pollution themselves, it may be that complainants are engaged in strategic self-presentation through which they display not only the possession of a sense of humour but also the capability of using 'strong' language. They themselves may criticize such language, but their credentials for doing this rely on their knowledge of its legitimate use and the legitimate occasions for its use. Filth as a label necessarily refers to a boundary. It is a classic boundary-defining term. It is 'not a quality in itself', but rather an attribute which 'applies only to what relates to a boundary and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin' (Kristeva, 1982: 69). The strength of the pollution is then dependent on the 'potency of the prohibition that founds it' (p. 69). It is for this reason that

when social norms are seen to have been transgressed, the transgression is often 'transcoded into the "grotesque body" terms of excrement, pigs and arses'. The grotesque body functions as 'a primary, highly-charged intersection and mediation of social and political forces, a sort of intensifier and displacer in the making of identity' (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 24–5).

Filth and grotesquerie in this way become equivalent with marginality. What exists at the margins of normality does so because it is 'out of place' in its heartland – hence the characteristic association of the deviant Other with dirt, bad smell and pollution. To give just three typical examples of this: first, New York graffiti in the 1970s was referred to by the City Council President in the *New York Times* as polluting 'the eyes and mind' – 'one of the worst forms of pollution we have to combat' (Cresswell, 1996: 38). Others referred to graffiti as garbage, noise, dirt and mess. Second, police, press, farmers and members of parliament denounced travellers converging on Stonehenge – a major site of national heritage in Britain – as 'a convoy of pollution', 'vagabonds', 'spreading ringworm, tapeworms, and several viruses through their diseased dogs, cats, and goats'. *The Sun* (7 June 1986: 4) described the 'hippy' camps in this way:

The camp is squalid. Piles of litter are building up, scrap metal is being accumulated. Dogs and goats are eating off the same plates as people . . . The insides of their cars and vans are filthy. Cooking rings are thick with grease, bits of carpet are matted with dirt, stinking bedding is scattered everywhere. (Cresswell, 1996: 82)

Our third example is the treatment meted out to women at the Greenham Common peace camps in the 1980s. These women received a wealth of media attention devoted to their 'filth, smell and immorality' (*The Guardian*, 2 June 1983: 6, cited in Cresswell, 1996: 107). Along with this symbolic representation, ritually exorcistic strategies were employed where 'soldiers bared their backsides to the women, and in a sort of latter-day charivari, local vigilantes threw buckets of excrement, maggots and pig's blood into the women's benders (their home-made shelters)' (Pickering, 2001: 201; and see Gellhorn, 1989: 378–85).

Yet just as filth represents the 'objective frailty' of symbolic order (Cresswell, 1996: 39), so the state of normality remains 'clean' through its conflation of how things are and how they should be, of the otherwise differential orders of 'is' and 'ought'. Normality is in this way a moral and social construct mediating between what is considered typical and what is considered desirable; it seeks to close the gaps between them in the interests of an aspiration to be average. It is because the normal is 'not a concept of existence, in itself susceptible of objective measurement' (Canguilhem, 1989: 203), that its definitional frailty has to be protected. This requires not only constant attention to the boundaries between legitimacy and danger, but also the symbolic use of instances of infraction in the effort to define normality and provide a sound rationale for the existence of rules and sanctions governing what can and cannot be said or done – in this case within the realm of comic discourse. What is considered decent, appropriate and normal needs strong defence by any means because it is objectively frail, and the 'any

means' in the case we are dealing with include its own inverted terms in order to express a sense of offence or outrage and re-establish the discursive environment. It is as if there is a tacit recognition of the risk involved in systems of regulation of naming the opposites of what 'is' or 'ought to be' normal. Containment always carries within itself a sense of the danger posed by what it excludes, what is defined by the containment as deviations expelled to the outside, beyond its boundaries. Recourse to the metaphors of the low, base, degraded and polluted makes the recognition of this danger visible even as it intends to suppress it, to cast it out from where it shouldn't be.

The same is true of other terms of vituperation used in readers' letters to *Private Eye*. For the most part, these are associated with disease, sickness and madness. Offended readers associate the magazine with poor health or with suffering from disease. It is 'sick' and 'plain sick', 'the sickest piece of humour it has been my displeasure to read for a long time' (16 May 1997, No. 924: 15; 19 March 1999, No. 972: 14; 2 March 1979, No. 449: 8–9). Other readers are 'sickened by your sick humour' – it 'makes you puke' (9 January 1998, No. 941: 14; 5 December 1980, No. 495: 11). *Private Eye* is also recurrently described as mad. *Private Eye* journalists are referred to as 'insane' (15 February 1980, No. 474: 9), 'positively possessed' (1 January 1993, No. 810: 12) or 'requiring psychiatric treatment' (9 August 1985, No. 617: 11). It is no accident that the madness metaphor was similarly used when referring to the graffitiists in New York in the 1970s, and the peace campaigners on Greenham Common, who were described as suffering from hysteria or mental ill-health. To take an earlier example, in press coverage of homosexuality in the late 1960s, headlines represented homosexuals as defective, sick or ill. One such headline referred to 'The Sick Men of Hampstead Heath' (*The People*, 24 March 1968). Homosexual men were regarded as being 'impelled towards homosexual acts through either physiological deficiency' or 'psychological immaturity'. Whether they were to be pitied or condemned, they were seen as 'defective males' (Pearce, 1973: 286). If not defective, homosexuals were diseased. A contemporary review of Radclyffe Hall's novel of lesbian love, *The Well of Loneliness*, included such words as 'plague', 'putrefaction' and 'contagion', and stressed the need to make the 'air clean and wholesome once more' (p. 299). Uses of figurative language referring to disease, sickness and madness are evidence of attempts by readers to exert control over *Private Eye*. The shock of such language speaks of the exertion involved in trying to gag particular types and targets of humour.

This is akin to the silencing strategies used by dominant groups to efface those who are socially marginalized (Jaworski, 1993). Rather than engaging in rational debate, the powerful attempt to suppress and render inaudible the voices of sub-altern groups. This involves transforming their status and identity from a clear to an ambiguous category, as for example when Aristotle refers to women as 'deformed males' (Hill, 1986: 42). When readers refer to *Private Eye* as 'insane' or 'positively possessed' they are calling the legitimacy of its identity into question and thus attempting to place them in a way appropriate to the aberrant terms

identified in the abuse of the complaint. To refer to someone or some category as disease-like or mad suggests the need for either expulsion or containment as cure or care for security. Such attributions identify a concern with order whose sanctity is disrupted by threats to good health, public safety, normalized common-sense thinking; these threats are then symbolically associated with the cause of comic offence. Responses to such threats ritualistically invoke states of health and order through reference to their inverted terms, and the terms themselves lend vehemence to the responses of complaint. But the vehemence of the language once again betrays a sense of the fragility of that which it is designed to protect, to reconstitute and regularize.

To give another example of such figurations of censure, one reader (2 September 1988, No. 697: 12) uses the metaphors of sickness and insanity, and suggests that the 'poor twisted person' guilty of the 'offensive drivel' uttered in a satirical poem about the death of Mark Boxer should be banished to a psychiatric clinic. The powerful word 'banishment' and the idea that the 'poet' is clinically certifiable operate as vehicles for expressing the felt need for expulsion and containment of the offender. Only by such 'banishment' can there be any redress of 'the pitifully low depth' to which *Private Eye* has 'stooped in the name of humour' (lines 21–4).

- 1 Sir,
- 2 Over the past few months I have come to
- 3 read your publication on a regular basis, and
- 4 have found myself becoming hardened to some
- 5 of your occasionally purile [sic] and distasteful
- 6 attempts at humour for the sake of other
- 7 regular features which are genuinely amusing.
- 8 However, I found your 'poem' on the death
- 9 of the late Mark Boxer (*Eye* 695) to be one of
- 10 the sickest and most offensive pieces of drivel
- 11 that I have had the misfortune to read in the
- 12 pages of even your juvenile businessman's comic.
- 13 I can only feel pity for the poor, twisted
- 14 person who, in their own misguided opinion,
- 15 seriously believes that the trivialisations of the
- 16 death of a man who had been suffering from a
- 17 long and fatal illness is remotely funny.
- 18 In view of this, I think a printed
- 19 apology, if not for me, then for Anna Ford, is
- 20 the least that you could do to redeem yourself
- 21 a little from the pitifully low depth to which
- 22 you have stooped in the name of humour, al-
- 23 though the dismissal of the poem's author and
- 24 his banishment to a psychiatric clinic would be
- 25 preferable.
- 26 Yours etc . . .

Conclusion

Vehement language often involves the use of figurative expression as a way of enhancing its protective, boundary-marking purpose, but the force of this depends on the usage blurring the distinction between what is figurative and literal. Blurring this distinction increases the rhetorical power of the complaint, but in the case we are dealing with here, deploying strongly denunciatory words identified with that which is castigated may also reveal a recognition of the paradox of making serious observations about those occasions where humour is felt to have failed. The paradox which any such observation entails is the refusal of the comic impulse to be contained. Humour makes a mockery of seriousness, and that is its irresistible and glorious purpose. It challenges our closely held values and beliefs, subverts existing moral proprieties, and bares its backside to prim decency and serious demeanours. It diverges from routine ways of making sense and celebrates the ab-normal in order to defy the over-normal. To appreciate a joke or comic narrative means acceding to these conditions and consequences of their discourse. If one of the major purposes of satire is to dish the dirt, complaining about this is to miss the point, to surrender your sense of humour for a sanctimonious position on the moral high ground, to appear to be 'clean' and 'correct'.

To say that certain topics or targets are not appropriate for satirical ridicule or attack is to invite such ridicule and attack. It is to invite the response of not being taken seriously as, in the face of the regularity of protests against it, the serial offensiveness of *Private Eye* abundantly attests – the discourse of complaint against it in readers' letters is in itself a staple item in the magazine. This leads into tremendous difficulty any expectation on the part of readers for certain topics or targets to be off-limits for comedy, or for humour to be neutral when it never is – it depends on who you are laughing at and who you are laughing with. These kinds of issues came together to become the central dilemma confronting the politics of alternative comedy in the 1980s: how to reconcile opposition to the censorship of comedy and opposition to comic offensiveness (see Pickering and Littlewood, 1998). Whether these can be reconciled, whether the comic impulse should be restrained or allowed free rein, is perhaps not amenable to lofty generalization. This is why we're often caught between contrary responses. As the black journalist Gary Younge recounts, he once went to see Gerry Sadowitz as a student:

He ridiculed everyone from Mother Theresa to Nelson Mandela – 'Mandela, what a cunt. Lend him a fiver and then you never see him again'. The profane disrespect had me both wincing and laughing. Holy cows were being slaughtered, and I admit, I wanted to watch. (Younge, 1999: 100)

Yet, understandably, Younge objects to 'Paki' and 'nigga' jokes and again, this takes us to the nub of the problem, of reconciling the need to have a sense of humour with the sense of being offended, of applauding the comic slaughter of holy cows yet feeling repelled by the cruel or abusive comic treatment of specific

ethnic groups, of balancing profane disrespect with a serious respect for other people, particularly those who are already marginalized or vulnerable. To quote Young again, it is 'difficult to have a sense of humour and to be offended at the same time' (p. 100). Metaphors of dirt are a measure of this difficulty.

In trying to isolate certain unacceptable topics and targets of *Private Eye*'s satirical discourse, and delineate those areas or types of humour which are deemed appropriate for the magazine, readers draw on a conceptual hierarchy of discourses where *Private Eye* is ranked at its nadir, with the specific offence identified lowering the status of the magazine even further. This is either implicit in the terms used or openly referred to, as for instance when one 'loyal but pissed-off reader' stated: 'If I had to choose between the respectful, dignified hypocrisy of *The Sun*, or the shallow, snide, pseudo-satire of the *Eye*, it would be with joy that I would fill Mr Murdoch's coffers' (3 June 1994, No. 847: 14). Letters referring to the rules implicit in these distinctions and classifications draw on the conflict between ethical discourse and humour, but they do so in symbolic high/low terms which are not in binary opposition – as is assumed in use of the metaphors of the low or debased – but mutually complementary, symbiotically feeding off each other. As Stallybrass and White (1986) say of these relations:

... the 'top' attempts to reject and eliminate the 'bottom' for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover, not only that it is in some way frequently dependent upon that low-Other ... but also that the top *includes* that low symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life. The result is a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire in the construction of subjectivity: a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level. It is for this reason that what is *socially* peripheral is so frequently *symbolically* central ... (pp. 5–6; emphases in original)

It is the mobile, conflictual interrelations of serious and comic discourse which are thus in play in readers' letters to *Private Eye*, and it is the continual pull and push set up between them which characterizes the constitutive ambivalence of hierarchical judgement and censure in the identification of limits and centres, errors and infractions. That, rather than their binary evaluative categories, is in the end what is most significant. In stridently reasserting a sharp differentiation between ethics and social satire, the discourse of complaint ignores the creative transcodings of values and cannot easily come to terms with the ambivalence which continually re-emerges in the gap between an appreciation of humour and its censure, or rather in the problem of where precisely such a gap is to be identified. The problem is perhaps congenital to humour because, finally, humour honours nothing in the world but laughter, and laughter has no fixed target anywhere in the world. In negotiating the shifting sands between serious and comic discourse, we need to attend carefully to the symbolic distinctions and classifications set out as boundary-markers of normality and order, for it is through them that comic and serious matters are assigned to their right and proper place. This is what we have tried to do.

NOTES

1. The research proceeded through two stages. In the first stage, our content analysis involved coding the variables of author type (reader, spokesperson, officialdom), gender of author, status of reader (subscriber, regular reader, occasional reader, first-time reader), topic of complaint (such as war, death, royal family, blasphemy), specified section of *Private Eye* causing offence (such as the front cover, Street of Shame, Gnome column) and the outcome of the complaint (cancelled subscription, will not read *Private Eye* again or expect *Private Eye* to apologize). As a result of this part of our research we were able to classify readers' letters to the magazine in a number of different ways, and develop various forms of statistical analysis that helped us attain a clear overview of the general pattern of complaint involved, along with the general consequences of such complaint. We then moved to more qualitative modes of analysis, examining the data in order to see in closer detail what is involved in the articulation of complaint about comic offensiveness. This enabled us to trace the characteristic ways in which readers structured their expression of grievance.

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