

The Campus Trials of Mencken's Satire

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"I think that people like to read abuse," said Mencken to Donald Kirkley in a recorded interview of 1948. His charge prompts four trials about satire to a college-age class today.

A first trial is definitional. Most students today would agree with Mencken on the reception of satire, on enjoying verbal abuse. They delight in the one-liners of Jon Stewart and Chris Rock. They revel in rap. They think satire to be a quick jab, a hit-and-run joke, ephemerally irreverent and ultimately harmless. But Mencken wasn't commenting about satire's cause, form, or quality. So his first trial is on a conceptual charge. What is satire in its literary sense?

Satire is a distortion, a fun-house mirror that exaggerates things to mock them. It's a text that distorts its contexts. Like all art, it's an act of illusion, its artist's conception of things. More a cartoon than a portrait and less a truth than a polemic, satire aims less to inquire than to persuade. Recalling Plato's rant against rhetoric in the *Gorgias*, one may say that satire starts with, rather than establishes a supposed truth, and so it can never be philosophical in aim or fully ethical in act. It rests on analogy, but analogy has no purchase on truth, the less so if the analogy is false. So satire is ultimately an argument by ridicule.

It's the most aggressive, the most offensive of literary types. Think only of a few words that we use to talk about it: satire is a scourge, a bludgeon, a whip, and a weapon; it shoots at targets, it attacks, wounds, skewers, blasts, explodes, flays, damages, destroys, and demolishes. Long satire like Alexander Pope's mock-epic *The Dunciad* is a barrage of heavy artillery. Short satire like Mencken's essays are literature's light cavalry, skirmishing an enemy flank.

In short, satire is long as well as aggressive, far longer than the squibs of Stewart, Rock, and gangsta rap. Whatever the scale, a book or an essay, true satire mounts an argument in tactical terms. Think of Chaucer's studied assault on corrupt churchmen in *The Canterbury Tales*. Or recall Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, each of its four successive parts an attack on pride in its political, physical, intellectual, and moral garrisons, and its narrator, gullible Gulliver, personifies each one. Likewise, in *In Defense of Women*, Mencken charges with slash and salt through his smoke screen of irony to his target, quite unlike the obvious pop-gun shots of Comedy Central. Beyond the dust jacket of the book, Mencken's ironic tactical syllogism is brilliant: Women are despicable, but women are better than men. Therefore, men are very despicable. The underlying premise: Women are more intelligent than men because they can dominate men. That's how Mencken "defends" women. And that's only the textual irony. A contextual irony is that when he published the book in 1918, the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote had not yet been passed, and the controversy over women's intelligence still raged between suffragists and intractable men. So Mencken's irony wins a double-header. A difficult lesson for most students, distinguishing the literal from the ironic, the ironic from the sarcastic, and the influence of context. Still, after all of this is explained, whether students like to read abuse or not, their permanent pleasure is learning to decode a masterly satiric document, understand a satiric tactic, and intellectually enjoy a literary game well played.

As in his books, so in his essays, Mencken confirms conventional thought for unconventional reasons, always with a straight-faced irony. Take "Chiropractic," where he argues that its practice should not be banned by the government or the American Medical Association. Why? Because the only people who submit to chiropractors are idiots, so if they die, the national gene pool improves. Likewise, in "Christian Science" that faith's proscription of medicine should not be banned for the same reason. The warrants beneath most of Mencken's satire are strata of liberty and individualism: let Americans be free to do what they wish at their own expense.

And within his essays and books, little gems of irony sparkle. They always delight students. Consider: The best teacher is little better than a moron because "the business of teaching demands a certain jejunity of mind. " Or "Every professor must have a theory, as every dog must have fleas." (Why did I choose those

two?) A judge is “a law student who marks his own examination papers.” A lawyer is “one who protects us against robbers by taking away the temptation.” An historian is “an unsuccessful novelist.” “Adultery is the application of democracy to love.” And democracy is “the art and science of running the circus from the monkey cage.” Each is also a satiric sabre against conventional American thinking burnished by a trope and pointed in a sharp and memorable epigram.

After understanding his tactics long and short, most students will exonerate and even appreciate Mencken’s satire as did those students who read the green-covered *American Mercury* as they walked across American campuses so long ago.

But tactics are methods. Where’s the matter? Other trials lay ahead.

II. A second impediment to Mencken’s satire and indeed to most satire read after its day is its short shelf life. Even when a miniature masterpiece of satire, say Voltaire’s *Candide*, is anthologized, it takes ranks of marginal glosses and banks of rich footnotes to establish archaic diction, people, places, and problems that were common knowledge when it was written. And dropping an eye to those footnotes is a necessary distraction from the rush of the text, its diction, rhythm, tone, and figures of speech. So the gain in knowledge is a loss in the pleasure of savoring the style.

Still, it’s one thing for a thoroughly modern sophomore not to recognize in Mencken names like Valentino, Comstock, Ring Lardner, Carpentier, Aimee Semple McPherson, Albert C. Ritchie, and many contemporaneous marquee names and cameo appearances in his journalism. Footnotes are the preservative as they embalm and keep the corpses’ coffins open to view.

But it’s quite another thing not to know who’s who in Mencken’s allusions to Woodrow Wilson, William Jennings Bryan, Coolidge, FDR, Conrad, Bach, and even Dempsey and John D. Rockefeller, high-capital names once in the history bank of every American. That the students are ignorant of such names is not from the overusing of their iPhones. It’s from their schools’ undervaluing of content. That’s confirmed by many recent studies. The National Center for Educational Statistics, for example, concludes that students lack a factual base. And not just the schools, but the colleges, many of which are now running up the flag of “academic rigor” that rallies for more reading in every discipline from anthropology to zoology. UCLA, one campus on point, finding that students themselves think their courses too easy and that departments demand too little from their majors, now has instituted curricular reforms under that flag, and the new Common Core standards in elementary and secondary schools of forty-three states have resurrected content as central. Why? For years the K-16 prejudice had been against learning facts and for developing “critical thinking.” Besides, if facts can be looked up on the internet, who cares if that organic computer called memory will atrophy? Critical thinkers many students think themselves to be, but critical thinking without knowledge is a sculptor without a stone.

So Mencken is found guilty of a crime not his own by student juries ignorant of facts: “He’s too hard.” And his sentence: good old puritanical shunning. Chiefly because of low enrollment, the last time I taught the annual course on Mencken was 1995.

III. The third charge against Mencken is writing with intent to judge. Arguably the only word that students think now to be a curse word is judgmental. It’s how they’ve been indoctrinated through their schooling. (Not that schools mustn’t indoctrinate. Plato said in *The Republic* that there can be no vision of government without a vision of education that “grows” the kinds of citizens that the government wants. So Germans indoctrinated students in Naziism, Soviets in communism, Islamists in the Sharia, and U.S. schools now indoctrinate and “celebrate” the popular pieties of tolerance and diversity, each to cultivate the proper conduct and citizens—or subjects.) But tolerance, of course, is no cardinal virtue to the satirist—or to any thinking person. T. S. Eliot even said that “Judgment is as natural as breathing. The only question is if it’s right or wrong.” And a Baltimorean by adoption, Ogden Nash, said as much in a pointed epigram: “What is more mine, tolerance or a rubber spine?” Today’s college contingent has been cultivated for twelve years to a bumper-crop harvest where judgment and courage are only weeds. But without judgment and courage there can be no satire, and with no tolerance for judgment there can be no appreciation of satire, for at base the satirist is a critic, the very word deriving from the Greek *kritikos* or judge.

Students will tolerate the one-liner judgments of Stewart and Rock. Those judgments voice easy-to-grasp popular thoughts well phrased. And said with a smile, they seem kinder and gentler than Mencken's own, more graffiti on their targets than the carpet bombing of them. Not only the devastation, but also what the comedians' judgments lack are the complex irony and basic seriousness that are basic elements in all Mencken's satire. And they finally lack Mencken's courage as a judge.

When is Mencken not a judge, right, wrong, or otherwise—and a courageous judge at that? Answers come quickly and easily: Mencken's inveighing against the U.S. entry into World War I during the flag-waving teens, mocking both Democrats and Republicans at their conventions, laughing at Holy Rollers in the Bible Belt, going to jail for selling the Mercury in Boston, attacking Jim Crow practices on Baltimore tennis courts, causing an earthquake of reaction against his blasts against a lynching on Maryland's Eastern shore, skewering labor unions in negotiations with the Sunpapers, and attacking the business interests of Baltimore as more industry moved in: "When the cow is brought into the parlor, the milk is no better, and the carpet is ruined." Was there ever a more equal-opportunity satirist?

Still, while students profess a mild and distant admiration for his courage, often in the face of threats to his life, they claim not to like his judgmental attitude. (Isn't their claim itself judgmental?) So they will judge Mencken by their own different contemporary standards: "He's not tolerant." Do these students play chess by the rules of checkers or boo a pitcher for not punting on third down?

A lesser but related charge, believe it or not, indicts Mencken's prose style, the expression of his judgment. In these days of bumper stickers, sound bites, and slogans, brevity is king. And students themselves, ever texting in fragments and acronyms, might prompt what Mencken might have them say: "Look! I'm prehensile!" Mencken did put the question in another—of course, judgmental—way when he wrote about the folly of trying to teach students to write:

The great majority of high school pupils, when they attempt to put their thoughts upon paper, produce only a mass of confused and puerile nonsense. They write badly because they cannot think clearly. They cannot think clearly because they lack the brains. Trying to teach them is as hopeless as trying to teach a dog with only one hind leg... Even in such twilight regions of the intellect, the style remains the man. What is in the head infallibly oozes out of the nub of the pen. If it is sparkling Burgundy the writing is full of life and charm. If it is mush the writing is mush too.

Here, Mencken's own prose style is on point: short sentences in standard English syntax, each a jab of judgment. The simple-to-understand sentences let sound echo sense in what he judges a simple-minded target. Beyond simplicity, it's no wonder that students miss the train of Mencken's typically longer sentences: multiple nouns rolling like boxcars down the rails of parallel and antithetical sentences that deliver the powerful judgment. No less a writer than Conrad agreed: "Mencken's vigor is astonishing. It is like an electric current that gives you a sense of enormous power." And not only power. Students miss the sparkle of Mencken's similes and metaphors, the sonic rhythms of adjacent syllables, the spice of imported words, the flavor of disparate allusions, the slang of the street, or the cool delight in discovering meaning that sleeps in etymological cellars. In class these things are not fully a loss. They prompt the teacher to read samples aloud, playing to the ear what's dark to the eye, perhaps even repeating the common experience in Mencken's own day of having his columns read aloud in barrooms and living rooms and streetcars to someone else in delight or disgust. In this way, students, with the teacher their sponsor, if only for a short time magically become naturalized citizens of another day in a very different country. And isn't liberating ourselves from our own time and place to understand different perspectives what liberal education is finally all about?

IV. The final trial of Mencken opened in 1989 when his diaries were published and used as self-incriminating material evidence for the doom of his reputation. He was savaged for intellectual snobbery, for contempt of his colleagues, for sexism, for racism, and for misanthropy. But the heaviest charges were against what was called Mencken's anti-Semitism, a subset of racism. Celebrities, pundits, and scholars excoriated him. Robert Ward, a Towson [then State] University alumnus and screen writer for the popular TV police drama, Hill Street Blues, wrote in his New York Times book review of the diary that what is "offensive and shocking is Mencken's anti-Semitism." And in the same place Gwinn Owens, an Evening Sun editor, sniffed the same in Mencken's not mentioning "a single denunciation of Hitler." The winner of the 1985 Mencken writing prize returned his award.

Quacking in chorus were, among others, Jonathan Yardley, Les Payne, and Andy Rooney. Even that gentleman, scholar, and saint, Charles Fecher, “clearly and unequivocally,” conceded the Sage’s anti-Semitism. Perhaps more, but less-celebrated defenders, mainly letter-writers, variously noted that Mencken’s comments were standard lexical coinage in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries: Heinies, Squareheads, Huns, Jerrys, Krauts, Limeys, Micks, Paddies, Guineas, Wops, Frogs, Polacks, Greasers, Liths, Bohicks, Wetbacks, Shades, Spades, Spooks, Spicks, Redskins, Honkeys, Slants, Wogs, Chinks, Coons, and Kikes. Still, that defense at best is only a plea for leniency, not for exoneration.

Then came a definitive defense that to a sober jury would exonerate Mencken. It was written by a Towson [State] University junior—a Jewish student as well—and published, generously and wisely by the editor, Mr. Fecher, in the summer 1991 number of *Menckenia*. Under the title, “In Defense of Mencken,” Karen Polun refuted the main charges of the “prosecution.” Darrowlike, her cross-examination seared the experts one by one. (1) Charge: Twenty-seven times Mencken refers to people as Jews. Cross: That’s the fallacy of begging the question: assuming the truth of something you’re trying to prove. (2) Charge: Mencken writes of the low opinion of Jews at Johns Hopkins University. Cross: Mencken himself didn’t say that: he was quoting the history professor, Samuel Eliot Morison. (3) Charge: Mencken writes about the Maryland Club’s one Jewish member, “There is no other Jew in Baltimore who seems suitable [for membership].” Cross: Interpreted by a non-tone-deaf reader, the statement is ironic and so means quite the opposite of the literal words. (4) Charge: There’s not a single denunciation of Hitler. Cross: Neither is there mention of Pearl Harbor, the rape of Nanking, Nagasaki, or Hiroshima, rich opportunities that Mencken missed for some fine anti-Asianism. And so on rolls Karen’s cross examination. It rests on the warrant of Bernard Lewis’s definition of anti-Semitism: “the hatred of Jews grounded in the belief that they are a malignant influence in the world and should be controlled or eliminated.” Nowhere, Karen shows, are Mencken’s comments even fifth cousins thrice removed from that definition.

Her cross-examination completed, Karen turns to the defense phase of the trial. First, she puts Mencken himself on the witness stand: In a 1933 *American Mercury* article, he wrote that “Hitler’s success was certainly not creditable to the German people, nor indeed to the human race in general.” In a 1935 Diary entry, Mencken wrote that “Dreiser broke out into an anti-Semitic outrage.... I asked him why, if his sentiments ran that way, he had chosen a Jewish publisher.” Implicit is that Mencken’s own publisher was the Jewish Alfred Knopf. In a 1937 entry Mencken wrote of a link between Huey Long’s “great anti-Semitic movement now rolling up New York.” Then Karen Polun brings a character witness to the stand. Lawrence Spivack, Mencken’s Jewish assistant at *The American Mercury* and later founder of *Meet the Press*, who testifies, “It is absolute nonsense to accuse Mencken of anti-Semitism. He always talked with his tongue in his cheek, but he always felt comfortable with Jews.” Next for the defense are Mencken’s other Jewish friends and close associates: Blanche Knopf, over whose health he took a proprietary interest in finding doctors and visiting her in the hospital. George Jean Nathan, Mencken’s Jewish co-editor at both *The Smart Set* and *Mercury*; they mutually later parted company not because of any bigotry but because of editorial differences: should the magazine lean more to politics (Mencken) or the arts (Nathan)? In succession come Louis Cheslock, Jewish professor of music at the Peabody and charter member of Mencken’s *Saturday Night Club*, and many Jewish doctors, lawyers, and other professors who were Mencken’s friends. Winning her case, Karen wonders if the dead Mencken could sue for libel.

Still, while she won the case, after the 1989 Diary, the anti-Semitic reputation of Mencken remains. Reputation dies hard when myth masks truth. Towson University, in 1980 a co-sponsor with the Maryland Humanities Council for the Mencken centennial, has since 1989 rejected naming a building or even a campus lane for him. Selections of Mencken’s writing have disappeared or grown shorter in American literature anthologies, irony of ironies for the man who changed the course of American literature. Since the diary, the anti-Semitic brand is Mencken’s Jewish star.

But there’s hope. A delicious irony of Karen Polun’s victory is its implicit defense against Mencken’s own satire on students. They’re not all intellectual groundlings. Outnumbered but unbowed against the quacks, not only is she Mencken’s “enlightened citizen.” She also shows that close reading, careful research, logical thought, cogent argument, ethical purpose, and clear courage in sailing away from the coast of herdlike bromides are not dead.

Nor, thanks to this society, is the study of Mencken.

Now, because I'm in a profession paid to talk in other people's sleep, I'll raise my voice in a shout to thank you for inviting me to speak.