

The Art of Verbal Abuse

A conscientious study of other literary genres has led me to believe in the greater value of insult and mockery. The aggressor, I tell myself, knows that the tables will be turned, and that “anything you say may be used against you,” as the honest constables of Scotland Yard warn us. That fear is bound to produce special anxieties, which we tend to disregard on more comfortable occasions. The critic would like to be invulnerable, and sometimes he is. After comparing the healthy indignations of Paul Groussac with his ambiguous eulogies (not to mention the similar cases of Swift, Voltaire, and Johnson), I nourished or inspired in myself that hope of invulnerability. It vanished as soon as I left off reading those pleasant mockeries in order to examine Groussac’s method.

I immediately noticed one thing: the fundamental injustice and delicate error of my conjecture. The practical joker proceeds carefully, like a gambler admitting the fiction of a pack of cards, a corruptible paradise of two-headed people. The three kings of poker are meaningless in *truco*. The polemicist is also a creature of convention. For most people, the street formulas of insult offer a model of what polemics can become. The man in the street guesses that all people’s mothers have the same profession, or he suggests that they move immediately to a general place that has several names, or he imitates a rude sound. A senseless convention has determined that the offended one is not himself but rather the silent and attentive listener. Language is not even needed. For example, Sampson’s “I will take the wall of any man or maid of Montague’s” or Abram’s “Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?” were the legal tender of the troublemaker, around 1592, in Shakespeare’s fraudulent Verona and in the beer halls, brothels, and bear-baiting pits of London. In Argentine schools, the middle finger and a show of tongue serve that purpose.

“Dog” is another very general term of insult. During the 146th night of

The Thousand and One Nights, the discreet reader learns that the son of Adam, after locking the son of the lion in a sealed chest, scolded him thus: "Oh dog of the desert . . . Fate hath upset thee, nor shall caution set thee up."

A conventional alphabet of scorn also defines polemicists. The title "sir," unwisely and irregularly omitted in spoken intercourse, is scathing in print. "Doctor" is another annihilation. To refer to the sonnets "perpetrated by Doctor Lugones" is equivalent to branding them as eternally unspeakable, and refuting each and every one of their metaphors. At the first mention of "Doctor," the demigod vanishes and is replaced by a vain Argentine gentleman who wears paper collars, gets a shave every other day, and is in danger of dying at any moment of a respiratory ailment. What remains is the central and incurable futility of everything human. But the sonnets also remain, their music awaiting a reader. An Italian, in order to rid himself of Goethe, concocted a brief article where he persisted in calling him "*il signore Wolfgang*." This was almost flattery, since it meant that he didn't know there were solid arguments against Goethe.

Perpetrating a sonnet, concocting an article. Language is a repertory of these convenient snubs which are the ordinary currency of controversy. To say that a literary man has let loose a book, or cooked it up, or ground it out, is an easy temptation. The verbs of bureaucrats or storekeepers are much more effective: dispatch, circulate, expend. Combine these dry words with more effusive ones, and the enemy is doomed to eternal shame. To a question about an auctioneer who also used to recite poetry, someone quickly responded that he was energetically raffling off the *Divine Comedy*. The witticism is not overwhelmingly ingenious, but its mechanism is typical. As with all witticisms, it involves a mere confusion. The verb *raffling* (supported by the adverb *energetically*) leaves one to understand that the incriminated gentleman is an irreparable and sordid auctioneer, and that his Dantesque diligence is an outrage. The listener readily accepts the argument because it is not presented as an argument. Were it correctly formulated, he would have to refute its validity. First of all, declaiming and auctioneering are related activities. Secondly, the old vocation of declaiming, an exercise in public speaking, could help the auctioneer at his task.

One of the satirical traditions (not despised by Macedonio Fernández, Quevedo, or George Bernard Shaw) is the unconditional inversion of terms. According to this famous prescription, doctors are inevitably accused of promoting contagion and death, notaries of theft, executioners of encour-

aging longevity, tellers of adventure stories of numbing or putting the reader to sleep, wandering Jews of paralysis, tailors of nudism, tigers and cannibals of preferring a diet of rhubarb. A variety of that tradition is the innocent phrase that pretends at times to condone what it is destroying. For example: "The famous camp bed under which the general won the battle." Or: "The last film of the talented director René Clair was utterly charming. When we woke up . . ."

Another handy method is the abrupt change. For instance: "A young priest of Beauty, a mind illuminated by Hellenic light, an exquisite man with the taste (of a mouse)." Similarly, these Andalusian lyrics, which quickly pass from inquiry to assault:

*Veinticinco palillos
Tiene una silla.
¿Quieres que te la rompa
En las costillas?*

[Twenty-five sticks/Makes a chair./Would you like me to break it/Over your ribs?]

Let me insist on the formal aspects of this game, its persistent and illicit use of confusing arguments. Seriously defending a cause and disseminating burlesque exaggerations, false generosity, tricky concessions, and patient contempt are not incompatible, but are so diverse that no one, until now, has managed to put them all together. Here are some illustrious examples: Set to demolish Ricardo Rojas' history of Argentine literature, what does Paul Groussac do? The following, which all Argentine men of letters have relished: "After resignedly hearing the two or three fragments in cumbersome prose of a certain tome publicly applauded by those who had barely opened it, I now consider myself authorized not to continue any further, contenting myself, for now, with the summaries or indexes of that bountiful history of what never organically existed. I refer particularly to the first and most indigestible part of the mass (which occupies three of the four volumes): the mumblings of natives or half-breeds . . ." Groussac, with that good ill-humor, fulfills the most eager ritual of satiric games. He pretends to be pained by the errors of the adversary ("after resignedly hearing"); allows one to glimpse the spectacle of abrupt scorn (first the word "tome," then "mass"); uses terms of praise in order to assault ("that bountiful history"); and then, at last, he reveals his hand. He does not commit sins of

syntax, which is effective, but does commit sins in his arguments. Criticizing a book for its size, insinuating that no one wants to deal with that enormous brick, and finally professing indifference toward the idiocy of some gauchos or mulattoes appear to be the reactions of a hoodlum, not of a man of letters.

Here is another of his famous diatribes: "It is regrettable that the publication of Dr. Piñero's legal brief may prove to be a serious obstacle to its circulation, and that this ripened fruit of a year and a half of diplomatic leisure may cause no other 'impression' than that of its printing. This shall not be the case, God willing, and insofar as it lies within our means, so melancholy a fate will be avoided . . ." Again the appearance of compassion, again the devilish syntax. Again, too, the marvelous banality of reproof: making fun of those few who could be interested in a particular document and its leisurely production.

An elegant defense of these shortcomings may conjure up the dark root of satire. Satire, according to recent beliefs, stems from the magic curse of wrath, not from reason. It is the relic of an unlikely state in which the wounds inflicted upon the name fall upon the possessor. The particle *ël* was trimmed off the angel Satanaël, God's rebellious first-born who was adored by the Bogomiles. Without it, he lost his crown, splendor, and prophetic powers. His current dwelling is fire, and his host is the wrath of the Powerful. Inversely, the Kabbalists say that the seed of the remote Abram was sterile until the letter *he* was interpolated into his name and made him capable of begetting.

Swift, a man of radical bitterness, proposed in his chronicle of Captain Lemuel Gulliver's travels to defame humankind. The first voyages, to the tiny republic of Lilliput and to the elephantine land of Brobdingnag, are, as Leslie Stephen suggests, an anthropometric dream which in no way touches the complexities of our being, its passion, and its rigor. The third and funniest voyage mocks experimental science through the well-known technique of inversion: Swift's shabby laboratories want to propagate sheep without wool, use ice for the production of gunpowder, soften marble for pillows, beat fire into fine sheets, and make good use of the nutritious parts of fecal matter. (This book also includes a strong passage on the hardships of senility.) The fourth and last voyage shows clearly that beasts are more worthy than men. It presents a virtuous republic of talking, monogamous—that is, human—horses, with a proletariat of four-legged men who live in herds, dig for food, latch onto the udders of cows to steal milk, discharge their waste upon each other, devour rotten meat, and stink. The fable is self-

defeating, as one can see. The rest is literature, syntax. In conclusion, it says: "I am not in the least provoked at the sight of a lawyer, a pickpocket, a colonel, a fool, a lord, a gamester, a politician, a whore-master . . ." Certain words, in that good enumeration, are contaminated by their neighbors.

Two final examples. One is the celebrated parody of insult which we are told was improvised by Dr. Johnson: "Your wife, sir, under pretense of keeping a bawdy-house, is a receiver of stolen goods." The other is the most splendid verbal abuse I know, an insult so much more extraordinary if we consider that it represents its author's only brush with literature: "The gods did not allow Santos Chocano to dishonor the gallows by dying there. He is still alive, having exhausted infamy." Dishonoring the gallows, exhausting infamy. Vargas Vila's discharge of these illustrious abstractions refuses to treat its patient and leaves him untouched, unbelievable, quite unimportant, and possibly immortal. The most fleeting mention of Chocano is enough to remind anyone of the famous insult, obscuring with malign splendor all reference to him—even the details and symptoms of that infamy.

I will attempt to summarize the above. Satire is no less conventional than a dialogue between lovers or the natural flower of a sonnet by José María Monner Sans. Its method is the assertion of sophisms, its only law, the simultaneous invention of pranks. I almost forgot: satire also has the obligation of being memorable.

Let me add a certain virile reply recorded by De Quincey (*Writings* XI, 226). Someone flung a glass of wine in the face of a gentleman during a theological or literary debate. The victim did not show any emotion and said to the offender: "This, sir, is a digression: now, if you please, for the argument." (The author of that reply, a certain Dr. Henderson, died in Oxford around 1787, without leaving us any memory other than those just words: a sufficient and beautiful immortality.)

A popular tale, which I picked up in Geneva during the last years of World War I, tells of Miguel Servet's reply to the inquisitors who had condemned him to the stake: "I will burn, but this is a mere event. We shall continue our discussion in eternity."