

Because We Smile: Jonathan Swift's Enthusiastic Magnifying Glass

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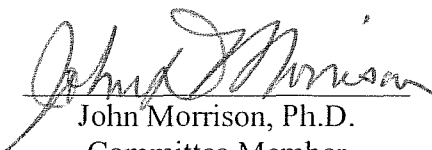
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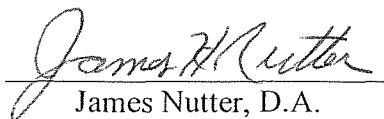
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Abstract

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) was intellectually before his time. His insights into the human condition reveal a belief in the not-hopeless corruption of humanity. To capture this state of the human condition, he used two key symbols: wind and machine. These two symbols represent the two sides of the dialectical argument into which Swift forces his readers. What guide should direct humanity—enthusiasm and emotional stimulation (wind) or reason and “objective” systems (the machine)? Preoccupied with these two ideas, Swift uses his scatological satires to level all of humanity. Swift forces his readers onto their knees in the mud and mire and only after moving them toward repenting of all vain pride does Swift allow his audience the redemption of laughter.

Because We Smile: Jonathan Swift's Enthusiastic Magnifying Glass

“Deride our weak forefathers’ musty rule,
Who therefore smiled, because they saw a Fool;
Sublimier logic now adorns our isle,
We therefore see a Fool, because we smile.”
—Alexander Pope

“It is with *Wits* as with *Razors*, which are never so apt to *cut* those they are employ’d on,
as when they have *lost their edge*. Besides, those whose teeth are too rotten to bite, are
best of all others, qualified to revenge that Defect with their *Breath*.”
—Jonathan Swift (*Tale* 288-289)

Eighteenth Century Backgrounds: Motion And Self

In the eighteenth century, the age of reason and the rise of modern philosophy left their marks on the masses. One such mark was the growing concern for the inner working of the mind and body. The thinkers and writers of the age—men of reason, or “Moderns”—believed that, through reason, anyone could comprehend truth independently of community or tradition. The Moderns viewed their age as a new and better one because with the aid of science, reason, and machines they were discovering new, better truths. With reason as the new guide to truth, tradition becomes nothing more than a record of past errors. In addition to the new emphasis on reason, the body—with its emotions and internal motion (what Swift calls “wind”)—became an increasing concern. In 1650, Thomas Hobbes wrote:

For men measure not only other men but all other things, by themselves;
and, because they find themselves subject after motion to pain and
lassitude, think everything else grows weary of motion, and seeks repose
of its own accord; little considering whether it be not some other motion
wherein that desire of rest they find in themselves consists. (66-67)

Hobbes expresses the age's growing concern for the inner working of the mind and body. *Reason* and the *body* were both key concepts of the age, and each idea fueled the other. Just as thinkers were fascinated and proud of their ability to reason, they were intrigued by the internal mechanism of the human body. As Hobbes reveals, motion became an important concept for the explanation of reason and the mechanism of the human body.

This growing emphasis on reason and the concern for man's inner self gave rise to the development of *enthusiasm*, the belief that one has been personally inspired by God. The "wind" symbol served to represent both the Holy Spirit and, as Hobbes reveals (67), the constant physical motion of the inner man. Many stimuli contributed to the development of enthusiasm but, as Hobbes' passage suggests, human nature naturally encourages such a belief. Swift's A Tale of a Tub was written directly in response to Hobbes's "Leviathan":

Sea-men have a Custom when they meet a *Whale*, to fling him out an empty *Tub*, by way of Amusement, to divert him from laying violent Hands upon the Ship . . . The *Whale* was interpreted to be Hobbes's *Leviathan* . . . The ship in danger, is easily understood to be . . . the *Commonwealth* . . . And it is decreed, that in order to prevent these *Leviathans* from tossing and sporting with the *Commonwealth* . . . they should be diverted from that Game by a *Tale of a Tub*. (284)

Swift believed that the aspect of human nature that promoted enthusiasm was pride and that the new intellectual developments of his day—such as Hobbes's work—only helped

to fuel that pride. Thus, the tendency of the Moderns to rely on reason and enthusiasm—apart from intellectual or literary traditions—was bred by and fed upon pride.

Swift was before his time, bridging the modernist scientific revolution and the Romantic movement and warning readers of the errors of both approaches to life. Both in the A Tale of a Tub and The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit, Swift presents the reader with two symbols—wind and machine:

The Augustans, at their most characteristic, disproved of strong emotion as necessarily disruptive, subordinated even those emotions they could not exile to the stern control of “Right Reason,” and found no place for “feeling” in their search for “truth.” This attitude we might decide, is doomed to failure by the actual nature of man—and Swift, by driving reason and emotion to opposite poles . . . reveals just how impossible it is.
(Dyson 682)

Swift uses the symbols of wind and machine to help divide the two ideas and reveals the complexity of the human mind and soul. While expressing both ideas, Swift does not wish to leave the reader desiring one over another. Robert Adams writes, “The wind and the machine are of central, summary importance to Swift, his book, and his time; he is equally hostile to both, and, though he generally uses one to mock the other, he sometimes plays audaciously at identifying them” (707). Swift presents his readers with two powerful images and lets the gentle reader find the middle way between the two. While Swift leaves room for the Newtonian-“single perspective” on truth—the true meaning of the text—he also makes room for multiple perspectives on that meaning. The ambiguousness of his text forces the reader to deal with the deeper intellectual

issues of the day and continues to provide readers with an important reminder about the relationship of reason and emotions. Robert Adams continues, “Swift saw . . . a good deal deeper into the human dilemma of the day than any of the formal philosophers of his time” (711). The meaning of the text is not found in an objective system, nor is it found in a personal perspective. Although Swift’s text is ambiguous, there is a purpose in reading it; because there is purpose, there is hope. The hope comes because reason and emotion, as corrupting as they are in their extremes, are the very medium through which Swift expresses his profound knowledge of the problems of human nature: Swift has written his violent, witty commentaries on the human condition—the corruption has been caught, examined, and judged. And the final response to the dilemma is a laugh.

Jonathan Swift hated the arrogance of his age. He also foresaw the dangerous effects that enthusiasm and reason could have upon the religious, literary, and intellectual structures of his day. Without tradition, reason and enthusiasm allow religious inspiration to be personally governed and controlled. T. S. Eliot points out that without the backbone of tradition, the common code of behavior, instead of imitating and approaching truth, becomes a “matter of habit” which exposes the common code to “prejudice and to change” (“Religion and Literature” 389). Swift understood this principle. Without tradition, there is nothing to ensure that the machine of reason is not foolishness and that the wind of self is not merely a breeze from man’s lower nature. Swift uses satire to fight against the pride of reason and enthusiasm, attacks this characteristic human desire for control, and exposes the errors of the new systems. Swift takes the symbols of machine and wind, exaggerates the metaphors, and contorts their meanings. Swift plays with the basic assumptions of his age and deconstructs them for

the correction of humanity. He writes in the Preface to The Battle of the Books, “Satyr is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover every body’s face but their own; which is the chief reason for the kind of receptions it meets in the world, and that so very few are offended with it” (375). Swift’s satires reflect a distorted image of his age. The distorted image is achieved through dialectical argument which corners the audience and allows Swift to indict and level all humanity by using scatological humor, irony, and negation; Swift’s indictment destroys pride, leading to offense and then, ultimately, to the dignity and redemption of laughter.

Dialectic of Individuals in Community

The twentieth-century critic T. S. Eliot offers insight into the way in which Swift’s satirical, dialectical process works. The dialectical process is essential for gaining a critical approach to life. Two primary purposes of education are to know self and to understand the nature of the world one lives in. T. S. Eliot writes that reading helps gather other people’s perspectives on the “knowledge of life” (“Religion and Literature” 395) through such a dialectical process. This knowledge allows for one to become an individual because a reader is able to distinguish herself from the body of reading she has experienced. The various authors establish dialectic between themselves and the reader. Eliot says that a wide range of reading is important:

in the process of being affected by one powerful personality after another, we cease to be dominated by any one, or by any small number. The very different views of life, cohabiting in our minds, affect each other, and our own personality asserts itself and gives each a place in some arrangement peculiar to ourself. (“Religion and Literature” 395)

Eliot says that reading is helpful only if the authors read are substantially different from the reader (396). If the reader experiences only one type of knowledge of life, her perspective will be skewed. She will not understand “that which is common to all.” Instead, she will only understand “that which is common to her culture.”

Swift’s satires force the reader to distinguish herself from the satiric object. In so doing, the reader is forced to stand out from her culture and be affected by Swift’s writing. Satire is written to persuade an audience to change (Sutherland 5), and Swift hopes to change his readers from consumers of culture to critics of culture. Self-knowledge is an important component of the individual-making process because it is through self-knowledge that an individual learns to discern between her culture and herself.

In “Religion and Literature,” Eliot writes that there are two literary judgments that all good readers will understand: “what we like” and “what we ought to like” (399). He says that “it is not enough to understand what we ought to be, unless we know what we are; and we do not understand what we are, unless we know what we ought to be. The two forms of self-consciousness . . . must go together” (399). Understanding the self and the world through involvement in one’s community is a fundamental and integral component of education. Without such a dialectic, the reader is lost in a world of particulars and, as in the error that Swift reveals is behind the puritan “round-heads,” custom becomes first nature rather than second (MO 402). Without dialectic, the members of a particular society are able to assume that their culture is correct in all areas—they become the standard for themselves and, like the “round-heads,” formulate their own exclusive means of “inspiration.”

To pursue truth, one must know what one is and what one ought to be. To reject this self-knowledge is to abandon the pursuit of truth. The human desire to find truth and order without self-knowledge creates a world incapable of being lived in—existence remains but any chance for a loving, responsive relationship with a community is destroyed. This is the error of the enthusiastic preachers of Swift's The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit:

For, it is to be understood, that in the Language of the Spirit, *Cant* and *Droning* supply the Place of *Sense* and *Reason*, in the language of men: Because, in the Spiritual Harangues, the Disposition of the Words according to the Art of Grammar . . . For this Reason, it hath been held by some, that the Art of Canting is ever in greater Perfection, when managed by *Ignorance*. (408)

When canting displaces the substance of religion—reason and sense—the carnal nature of man takes over. Swift continues:

A Master Work-man [enthusiast] shall *blow his Nose so powerfully*, as to pierce the Hearts of his People, who are disposed to receive the *Excrements* of his Brain with the same Reverence, as the *Issue* of it . . . BUT, among all Improvements of the *Spirit*, wherein the Voice hath born a Part, there is none to be compared with That of *conveying the Sound thro' the Nose*, which under the Denomination of *Snuffing*, hath passed with so great Applause in the World. (MO 409)

In the eighteenth century, the nose was understood to symbolize male anatomy and, as Wotton's footnote reveals, "snuffing" occurred when a man lost his nose through "lewd

Courses” (cited, in Swift, MO 409). When the enthusiasts substitute divine inspiration for a form of canting, their gospel quickly falls to pieces just as their venereal diseases eat away their noses. Substance is replaced by form; meaningful relationships are exchanged for carnal, selfish desires. And the community of believers becomes nothing more than an assortment of persons seeking physical gratification.

Yet, a true community is impossible without individuals. Without dialectic, the members of a group will become smaller versions of themselves—all perspectives on life will become the same group perspective. Each member of the group will repeat the errors of the group unknowingly. As a result, the members of the group will become either a mob—mindless cattle wandering towards the canyon edge—or they will become cut off from each other because, as each is like the other, none will have anything different. As the members of a group isolate themselves from each other they will all think that they are as “good” as any other member of the group—each will think himself self-sufficient and *the* standard of judgment. Martin Price writes:

When the end of man is self-love and distinction and his means singularity or fashion, he has no standards which endure, no integrity. In a sense, he has ceased to have a soul at all, for when religion and the soul cease to be regulatory and moral they have become lackeys rather than masters and not longer deserve their original names. (“Swift’s Rhetorical Art” 701)

Both mindlessness and isolation result in an inability to love: to connect with, respond to, and respect others despite their differences. As Price points out, without a community, religion will cease to regulate morality. This thought dovetails with T. S. Eliot’s statement that when tradition is ignored, “the common code of behavior”

becomes a matter of habit and can be easily corrupted. These principles are echoed in Jonathan Swift's essay The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit.

Swift used a persona to shroud his meaning from the reader and to depict the very view he was trying to criticize. One such persona is the Hack writer of the Tale of a Tub. In the Hack, Swift reveals the negative consequences of enthusiasm, lack of community, and systems. The Hack, like the other Moderns, believes that he can arrive at all truth independently:

We whom the World is pleased to honor with the Title of *Modern Authors*, should never have been able to compass our great Design of an everlasting Remembrance, and never-dying Fame, if our Endeavors had not been so highly serviceable to the general Good of Mankind. (Tale 326-327)

The Hack fails to realize is that his writing is completely unserviceable because it is inscrutable. The Hack's inscrutability arises out of his pride—he holds himself up as the standard:

THERE are certain common Privileges of a Writer, the Benefit whereof, I hope, there will be no Reason to doubt; Particularly, that where I am not understood, it shall be concluded, that something very useful and profound is coucht underneath, And again, that whatever word or Sentence is Printed in a different Character, shall be judged to contain something extraordinary either of *Wit* or *Sublime*. (Tale 287)

The Hack denies any external authority and claims that he and the rest of the moderns have now eclipsed the “weak glimmering Lights of the *Ancients*” he foolishly reveals his

error: he and the moderns are only capable of obstructing the light of truth as revealed by the Ancients (327). While believing in his sublime reasoning abilities, the Hack can do nothing more than digress into mindless gibberish. Kathleen Williams writes:

[T]he Author of the Tale . . . has the specific function of plunging us into chaos, confusion, self-deceit, a world of upheaval and destruction in which our own task, as readers, is to collect the scattered raw materials and rebuild our own attitudes to form a structure more firmly based upon reality. (“Giddy Circumstance” 694)

The Hack creates dialectic between the stated meaning—his gibberish—and Swift’s actual beliefs. In the Apology, which precedes the Tale, Swift’s Hack writes that there are parodies through out the work but that:

There are three or four other passages which prejudiced or ignorant Readers have drawn by great Force to hint at ill Meanings; as if they glanced at some Tenets in Religion, in answer to all which, the Author solemnly protests he is entirely Innocent, and never has it once in his Thoughts that any thing he said would in the least be capable of such Interpretations . . . (267)

While the Hack’s statements may be true, he never explains which passages the reader should interpret and which should be left alone. The ambiguity of the text forces the reader to study the Hack’s mistakes in order to learn where the Moderns err.

Like the Hack writer, the enthusiastic preachers of The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit also suffer from self-deceit. They have replaced the “primitive way of inspiration” which actually involved the Spirit of God with a new system (Swift, MO

403). The enthusiasts believes that primitive inspiration is too time consuming and requires fellowship and unity, which, for the Modern who is himself the standard of truth, is a foolish waste of time. The Hack writer explains the process:

But when a Man's Fancy gets *astride* on his Reason, when Imagination is at Cuffs with the Senses, and common Understanding, as well as common Sense, is Kickt out of Doors; the first Proselyte he makes, is Himself, and when that is once compass'd, the Difficulty is not so great in bringing over others; A strong Delusion always operating from *without*, as vigorously as from *within*. For, Cant and Vision are to the Ear and the Eye, the same that Tickling is to the Touch. (Tale 350-351)

The Hack reveals that when reason and tradition are rejected, self-deceit is inevitable. The refusal of the “primitive” is a refusal of the community of tradition. By refusing external tradition, the Moderns refuse internal self-knowledge. They do not know what they like or what they ought to like, what they are or what they ought to be.

Instead of tradition, the enthusiasts of The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit construct a system by which they hope to experience the inspiration of God. But their system destroys the dialectic that would give them knowledge of God. All systems destroy judgment (Price, Palace 189). Individuals cannot thrive within systems. The enthusiasts believe that they are making progress in their faith just as Swift's Hack writer believes that he is adding to the wealth of knowledge he and his fellow Moderns have accumulated. Swift shows “how easily human judgment could be distorted: his satire illustrates just how men can mistake all motion for progress, all seeing for knowing, all division for knowledge, and any individual as the measure of all men” (Louis 35). Both

the Hack writer and the enthusiast fail to realize that their systems of approaching the world are not inherently good just because they are systems. They construct a new system based on their own desires. This new system quickly falls to pieces just as the enthusiast's nose rots away with venereal disease. They refuse to recognize whom they ought to be and, losing sight of what they are, they glory in their shame.

The venereal disease is symbolic of the spiritual and mental decay of the system builders. While their noses fall off, their minds deteriorate and they ignorantly err as they attempt to exercise their learning:

A Tale of a Tub is a witty expose of confusion—the games people play with themselves and others in their attempts to learn. The continuity of the satire is the continuity of human error: wherever we look, Tale-dwellers go astray trying to read scripture, philosophy, theology, literature, and themselves. (Louis 46)

In order to ensure that the reader cannot build or rely on a harmful system, Swift leaves the reader in ignorance—denying the possibility of consensus. Swift does not allow the reader to actually learn anything from the Hack writer and thereby keeps the reader from making the Hack's mistakes. Swift brilliantly uses Wotton's footnotes in the consecutive versions of A Tale of a Tub in order to present the reader with a system that, unfortunately, destroys its own attempt to provide a meaning for the text. The Hack writes, "for the greater Part the Reflector [Wotton] is entirely mistaken, and forces Interpretations which never once entered into the Writer's Head, nor will he is sure into that of any Reader of Tast and Candor" (269-270). While reading an inscrutable text, the reader is left unstable, confused, and disappointed. But here, in the middle of the

confusing panegyric of system destruction, Swift begins building individuality in his readers.

Satire afforded Swift the opportunity to play games with his audience—simultaneously giving them order and disorder. Martin Price writes, “The dialectic [of satire] will reveal that [the] pretended order is a chaos of inconsistency or that the elaborate attempt to sustain the appearance of one order can be . . . explained . . . in terms of another” (Palace 17). In The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit Swift exchanges the actual religion of the puritans for a canting pep-rally turned orgy. Swift’s language provides him with opportunity to slip easily from one order to another and to exchange the normal, or at least *common*, order for an exaggerated, sexual, and “mad” one. Swift’s system-switching foils the reader’s attempts at systematizing the text and establishes dialectic within the satire’s borders. The satire presents both a true and false account of the object satirized, and no easy interpretation is available to the reader. Swift gives his reader nothing to stand on, but the reader must stand somewhere. In the presence of an obviously wrong system and a writer who takes pleasure in frustrating the reader but who clearly has a reason for writing, the reader must make some sort of judgment about the text. These judgments—occurring within the community of the text—are the first steps in the critical process that leads to individuality.

Swift forces his readers to participate in dialectic. As in the Tale, the reader doubts his judgments because of the unreliable puppet-like narrator who is manipulated by a semi-visible author. Frances Louis writes that “the onus of possible misjudgment lies not only on the fictitious fools, but on us: it is a kinetic satire, and all readers do not appreciate being reminded of their own fallibility” (49). The gentle reader is pressured

to make judgments—to discover the actual meaning of the text. The narrator of the Tale, on the other hand, encourages multiple interpretations but the reader only needs one—a correct one (Phiddian 158). Swift expects the reader to “recognize the subtle difference (or the gross one) between what [the characters of the Tale] do, and what they think they do” (Louis 116). Swift does not reveal his purposes to the reader but he does allow the reader the opportunity to watch the character’s mistakes. Behavior is the “common ground” between religion and fiction (Eliot, “Religion and Literature” 393). As a reader observes the actions depicted in a piece of literature, the outcome of those actions affects how she will act in the future just as her religious beliefs will affect her actions. Swift’s puppeteering forces the reader to wake up to the subtleties between action and purpose—the reader cannot sit back and have an “easy read.”

The difficulty of Swift’s text mirrors the human condition’s inherent struggle for truth. While Swift remains hidden beneath his ironic covering, the only knowledge available to the reader is found in analyzing the actions and purposes of the characters. The discrepancy between what the Hack says and what he thinks he says is monstrous. The discontinuity between action and purpose helps form the dialectical opposition essential for the stimulation of criticism. Once a reader sees how wrong an author can be, that reader will be much more distrustful of authors in the future, and, “if the Tale does nothing else perfectly, it makes [the reader] perfectly suspicious of misrepresentation, particularly that which grows out of deductive reasoning applied to false premises” (Louis 68). Swift challenges his readers with written confusion, but this confusion initiates the much-needed dialectical process and helps the reader begin challenging the systems and hidden errors of her culture.

Dialectic of Scatological Satire

Scatological satire reveals another level to Swift's dialectical strategy. He utilizes scatological humor to present the reader with an obvious quandary: is mankind an animal or a noble, spiritual being? In reconciling the two opposing ideas, the reader is forced to throw out his perverse romantic idealism. Maurice Johnson writes that, "excrement levels all humanity . . . [and] in Swift's context, human excrement is defined as the antithesis of the sublime" (117). Swift uses scatological humor to launch a direct attack against the systems of his day. Swift juxtaposes scatology with the attempted sublimity of his satirized characters—such as the Aeolists and the enthusiastic preachers—and reveals their "sublimity" to be foolish and bawdy. The Aeolists have nothing divine in their worship—only excess gas and spleen—and the priests are sensually mechanistic rather than "sacred" (Lee 79). Swift "see[s] the enthusiasts as self-directed, relying on their own false inspiration, rather than seeking divine guidance" (Lee 80-81). By using scatological references, Swift attacks the inspiration of the enthusiasts and reveals their imperfections. Scatology dramatizes the imperfections of humans and forms the ideal medium for expressing the failure to "reconcile the physical imperfections and animal nature of man with his decent and spiritual side" (Lee 83). Both the Tale and the MO reveal that when man attempts his own form of inspiration, this inspiration is inevitably and fundamentally an expression of his animal nature—without the "primitive" context of tradition, humanity's only two abilities are excremental production and sexual reproduction. Swift's satires echo Augustine's statement: *Inter urinus et faeces nascimur*.

Swift has been accused of having many problems. He has been accused of misogyny, misanthropy, and insanity. Aldous Huxley writes, “Swift’s greatness lies in the intensity, the almost insane violence of the ‘hatred of the bowels’ which is the essence of his misanthropy and which underlies the whole of this work” (101). But such accusations, according to William Frost, are “unqualified, and amount to a portrait of an evil genius, a literary Satan whose creative energies are perverted to destruction because his true nature is one of active malice” (685). Norman Brown believes that condemnations like that of Huxley represent not a clean objective psychoanalytic diagnosis of Swift but an emotional reaction (613). Indeed, Brown says, “common humanity makes us turn in revulsion against Huxley” (615). Rather than accusing Swift, Brown believes that all humanity suffers from “universal neurosis” (616); therefore, “psychoanalysis becomes a method not for explaining away but for explicating Swift (616). Brown believes that the real conflict revealed in most of the scatological writing derives from “the conflict between [the] animal body, appropriately epitomized in the anal function, and our pretentious sublimations, more specifically the pretensions of sublimated or romantic-Platonic love” (617). Again, Swift confronts his reader with a difficult dialectic—love and biological functions.

The frustration of love occurs because of the unresolved dialectic between the animal and mental aspects of man. In an attempt to correct this problem, humans will sublimate the less desirable. Sublimation is obviously a key concept of Swift’s ironic intent:

Lovers, for the sake of Celestial Converse, are but another sort of
Platonicks, who pretend to see Stars and Heaven in Ladies Eyes, and to

look or think no lower; but the same *Pit* is provided for both; and they seem a perfect moral to the Story of that Philosopher, who, while his Thoughts and Eyes were fixed upon the *Constellations*, found himself seduced by his *lower Parts* into a Ditch. (Swift, MO 414)

Swift's platonic thinker attempts to separate the biological from the ideal and believes he can attain the latter and discard the former. But idealistic lovers, like philosophers, are constantly being faced with the real—and biological—aspects of life. Swift reveals that, when faced with the biological, the idealist attempts repression. Swift presents the idea that the repression of sexuality only causes it to erupt in other channels. Swift, writing about an enthusiast, says, "He wrestled with the Flesh so long, that he at length subdued it So the Disease repell'd from its first Station, fled before the Rod of Hermes, to the upper Region, there fortifying it self; but, finding the Foe making Attacks at the *Nose*, broke down the *Bridge*, and retired to the *Head-Quarters*" (410). The re-channeling of sexuality is one of Swift's main points in the satire. Man is incurably sexual. As a result, "the *Thorn in the Flesh* serves for a *Spur* to the *Spirit*" (413). Thus, the MO serves as a warning against the naïve belief that man can cure himself of his animal nature by repressing and finally driving it out. The real and the ideal are met in humanity and must continually be reconciled.

Swift's scatology is his most powerful negation of the human existence, but allows for a "potential tragedy" if his reader fails to reconcile his perspective with reality (Lee 83). Swift attacks the human condition with such violence:

When fiction takes hold of man's imagination or vice versa, man blinds himself to moral reality about him and becomes impervious to conditions

that should provoke fierce indignation in a man of reason. Worse yet, such a man becomes a victim of presumption about his own moral and intellectual perfection. (Lee 97)

When a man rejects the world he lives in for the world he wants, he relinquishes his ability to understand himself. Because Swift writes to modern readers who had all been affected by the virus of enthusiasm—each believing himself to be the measure of all men—Swift attacks his audience in the most fundamental and irreverent way possible. He wants his world to be honest. This requires that his audience learn to understand that their true condition as humans is not entirely unlike that of the animals. Knowledge like this, Lee writes, should instill humility in the reader (97). Swift's scatological negation of the human condition is overpowering. In satire, the reader is required to supply the positive. If a positive is not supplied, then despair is inevitably the result. Swift pushes his readers to the edge of the tragedy. The tragedy will be realized if the reader cannot reconcile the decency of man with the animal passions.

Swift uses negation to capture his reader's attention and force him to take a long look at fundamental qualities of human nature. T. S. Eliot writes, "The contemplation of the horrid or sordid or disgusting, by an artist, is the necessary and negative aspect of the impulse toward the pursuit of beauty . . . The negative is the more importunate" (The Sacred Wood). By using the art of negation, Swift focuses on ugliness and, in a backwards way, directs the reader towards beauty. Because of the nature of satire, "the reader must supply the positive for the satirist's negative" and must also interpret the whole system of allegory and/or symbolism (Sutherland 20). The reader must embark on an exploration of possible meanings and must attempt an ordering and systematizing

of the text. Swift understood that individuals easily “delude themselves and see order and beauty where none exists” (Lee 90). By directing the reader to scatological subjects, Swift easily draws his readers away from false notions of beauty. Swift fills the mind of the reader with images that tinge the reader’s mental picture of the object being observed and reveal the fundamental disorder of humanity. Negation serves Swift because, “far from wishing to enrich the world by adding his own mite to its possessions, he wants to make it poor but honest” (Donoghue 30). Swift tears down any mental constructs of beauty that his readers may have built. The reader, in turn, must supply an opposite view—a positive view—in order to balance Swift’s statements. Because of the violence of Swift’s negation, a positive view is extremely difficult to secure, leaving the reader poor but, surely, honest.

Because a positive view must be supplied to the writer’s negation, for the reader, satire functions much like tragedy. Tragedy, in the moment of catharsis, reveals that something good and meaningful has been lost. Through catharsis, tragedy affirms the reality of truth, beauty, and meaning. Like tragedy, satire, too, affirms the presence of goodness, but it is the reader who must supply the cathartic moment. The reader must provide a positive view of life in order to escape the horror of Swift’s satires. Without a positive view, the reader is unable to experience a catharsis and the point of reading is lost—there is no redemption following the feelings of loss and frustration. The reader’s positive view is the beginning of the pursuit of beauty without which Swift’s writing becomes nothing more than horrid, disgusting, and pointless. Swift forces his reader to work to attain beauty, but the journey is a backward one. Rather than helping to provide

something beautiful for the reader, Swift tackles the reader into the mud and leaves the reader to climb out on his own.

In direct contrast to Swift, a man like John Milton pursued beauty from the “positive” direction. At the beginning of Paradise Lost, Milton writes:

What in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support;
That to the height of this great Argument
I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men. (22-26)

Milton hoped to soar to the highest spheres of heaven and record the journey in the most beautiful language possible. Samuel Johnson believed that Milton was successful in his journey, but that the pursuit of beauty leaves the reader behind:

Paradise Lost is one of the books which the reader admires and lays down, and forgets to take up again. None ever wished it longer than it is. Its perusal is a duty rather than a pleasure. We read Milton for instruction, retire harassed and overburdened, and look elsewhere for recreation; we desert our master, and seek for companions. (348)

Milton leaves the reader behind as he soars the heavens, revealing truths about the nature of good and evil and justifying God’s ways to man. Milton’s pursuit of beauty is a positive one. Like Milton, Jonathan Swift is no less a harasser and overburdener—although his medium is negative. Swift and Milton both tax their readers, demanding attention and skill that their readers rarely possess. But, of the two, Swift is the more difficult and taxing read because, while Milton only soars too high, Swift attacks his

reader's weakness. Perhaps it is because of this antagonism that Samuel Johnson did not like Jonathan Swift's satires (although, as has been suggested, writing a dictionary covers a multitude of sins). Swift does not attempt to be the reader's "master," but is content to be the worst of enemies.

Swift shows his readers the huge gap between themselves and the great writers of the past. Swift attacks the reader to ensure that he does not attempt to replace inspiration of the Miltonic sort for an artificial form—either a reasoning system or a wind of strong emotion. In the pursuit of beauty, rather than using heightened language, Swift uses dung.

Yet, Swift's satires are meant to be as redemptive as Milton's epic. Unlike Milton's, Swift's redemption does not arrive in the form of the author's justification or explanation, but through the reader's response to the correction offered by satire. The correct and redemptive response is laughter. Through laughter the reader begins to supply the positive view to Swift's negative one.

Dialectic of Laughter

In the eighteenth century, laughter was understood to be as a tool for expressing human depravity and for measuring the "irredeemable corruption" of humanity (Ingram 6). During a laugh, "man, the laughing animal, stands out stark and completely self-centered, his inner nature suddenly revealed in the 'grimace' distorting his countenance" (11). A laugh reveals self-centeredness because it functions in two ways: it endorses and excludes (81). A laugh holds together a fellowship while alienating the satirized person or object. Ingram writes:

The reader's desire for self-commendation . . . will overcome loyalty to one side, seeking out the easiest route to gratification. The most effective satire, therefore, will be that which anticipates the victim's reactions and provides . . . the means whereby those reactions can be engulfed by the original attack. (81)

Readers do not want individuality; they want security—they want to belong to the fellowship of the laughers and stay as far away from the satirized object as possible.

But Swift's irony draws us in. His ambiguities catch us in a net. Irony is flattering because the reader believes he "gets it." Wayne Booth writes that there is a circle of inferences that entwine the reader and author in an intimate and "intricate intellectual dance" that leaves the reader believing that he and the author are somehow deeply akin (31). But this intimacy quickly turns against the reader. Because of the intimacy, the pride of the reader is aroused at the first hint of a threat—which comes immediately with the first misunderstandings. Booth writes, "When I am 'taken in,' my profoundest beliefs and my most deeply rooted intellectual habits are under judgment" (44). Irony betrays the reader. A. E. Dyson writes that this "technique" of taking in the reader "is, of course, one of betrayal" (675). Irony betrays the reader and reveals the reader's weaknesses and pride. The reader laughs at the irony, believing that he laughs with the author at the foolish satirized object. But this position is impossible with Swiftian satire:

A state of tension, not to say war, exists between Swift and his readers.

The very tone in which he writes is turned into a weapon. It is the tone of polite conversation, friendly, and apparently dealing in commonplaces.

Naturally our assent is captured, since the polite style, the guarantee of gentlemanly equality, is the last one in which we expect to be attacked or betrayed. (Dyson 675)

Swift's humor turns vicious and catches the reader in a moment of weakness. Swift's irony, which was at first understood to be an attempt to mend the world, "transmutes itself into a savage exploration of the world's essential unmendability" (Dyson 676). The heart of this unmendability is the reader himself—the pride and arrogance at being better than the satirized object.

The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit is considered Swift's most bitter satire. It appears that Swift approaches perversity in his relentless attack upon the reader. But, because Swift had the courage to write the satire, the reader can have hope that the human condition, although corrupted, is not hopeless. The satire serves as a form of redemption—as an insightful look into the confusion of the human condition. Swift attacks the perversity of human nature as it appears in everyone—including himself. The satire is a profound warning of the corruption of the senses and the exchanging of nature for customs. This warning is for himself first and then for anyone who wishes to gain self-knowledge. The MO is so bitter because Swift is revealing his own inner nature. Swift reveals the sexual substructure that underlies all human interactions—both religious and secular—and shows that humanity is corrupt, fractured, and irreparably damaged.

Frances Louis accuses Swift of not including himself in his own satires. Louis writes, "Swift tried to immunize others to the ego epidemic even as it infected him; he is as cocky as any booby he puts down. His role as superior, self-assured critic of all petty

individuals who irk him is a most ironic one: the ego he assaults might well be his own” (33). Louis accuses Swift of condemning everyone but himself. Apparently, Frances Louis did not read the Preface to The Battle of the Books in which Swift writes, “Satyr is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover every body’s face but their own; which is the chief reason for the kind of receptions it meets in the world, and that so very few are offended with it” (375).

Taking Swift’s own statement about satire into consideration, it is evident that Swift understood that he must include himself in the satirized object. In Swift’s “A Meditation Upon a Broom-stick,” he writes,

And yet, with all his faults, [man] sets up to be a universal Reformer and Corrector of Abuses; a remover of Grievances; rakes into every Slut’s Corner of Nature, bringing hidden Corruption to the light, and raiseth a mighty Dust where there was none before; sharing deeply all the while in the very same Pollutions he pretends to sweep away. (421-422)

Swift clearly says what he means—he is as dirty and sexual, as proud and ignorant, as the worst enthusiast. Given the eighteenth century understanding that laughter revealed depravity, Swift condemns himself more completely than any other person he satirizes by laughing longer and harder at everything and everyone. Lee says, “Swift identifies himself with the victim of his humor so that we may all share the humor as equals” (122). As equals, Swift wants to focus the reader’s attention on the ugliness that is common to all—everyone can laugh because everyone is guilty and in need of love.

In the MO, Swift violently condemns humanity for everything: for being both animalistic and ideal, for attempting expression and revealing sexuality, for ignorance

revealed in self-pride, and finally, for laughing. This total condemnation of the human condition brings Swift's to a level which only comedy reaches (Quintana 59). But the comic twist proves stronger than the ugliness of the human condition. It is only through laughter, and only through a condemned laugh, that Swift allows redemption. Swift writes: "as Wit is the noblest and most useful Gift of humane Nature, so Humor is the most agreeable, and where these two enter far into the Composition of any Work, they will render it always acceptable to the World" (Tale 273). Ironically, Even while condemning the laughter, Swift meant his satires to be enjoyed. Dyson says:

Clearly, Swift enjoyed his control of irony: enjoyed its flexibility, its complete destructiveness, his own easy mastery of it. Clearly, too, he expects his readers to enjoy it. The irony is not only a ballet, but a game: a civilized game, at that, since irony is by its very nature civilized, presupposing bit intelligence, and at least some type of moral awareness.

The "war" is a battle of wits. (683)

While Swift is at war, he is also simply playing a game of wits with the reader. This game is meant to instruct and please, attack and entertain, correct and condemn. Jae Lee writes that "the more heartily we can laugh by means of scatological humor, the more completely we accept ourselves as mortal beings" (122). Swift stimulates purgative laughter. Instead of crying out in despair, Swift invites the reader to laugh off the pain of the human condition and to see the human body as a kind of practical joke—thereby playing the tragedy for a farce (Price, Palace 188).

As Swift points out in preface to The Battle of the Books and the MO, satire should level all humanity. Instead, satire gets a negative reception because humans,

ironically, do not see the face peering out of the glass. The reader of satire does not see her own face because humans are self-centered and think only of self-preservation. No one escapes this accusation. We should all be offended and should laugh at ourselves for not seeing what is so obvious.

Conclusion

In writing about the influence of twentieth-century literature, T. S. Eliot says, “[Literature can only do] what people are capable of having done to them” (396). Swift’s writing reveals the truth of this statement: Can we see our faces? Can we laugh? Do we have the wisdom and wit to play Swift’s game? Swift understood that the contemplation of the sordid and ugly was more importunate in approaching beauty. Instead of condemning his era with praise, Swift condemns it with satire in the hope of saving it. Swift writes, “I am wonderfully well acquainted with the present relish of Courteous Readers; and have often observed, with singular Pleasure, that a Fly driven from a Honey-pot, will immediately, with very good Appetite alight, and finish his Meal on an Excrement” (370). Through his satires Swift provides the reader with examples of the errors of the age: self-centered systems and enthusiasm. He submerges his reader in grime in order to reveal humanity’s need for the honey of individuality, for community, for love, and for truth. He demands that his readers become critical thinkers by forcing them into the middle of dialectical argument. Swift overcomes the systems and enthusiastic lies of his age and forces his readers to begin the process of discerning the difference between honey and dung. Swift keeps his readers from rest, understanding, and the happiness of safety in order to give them the mental and spiritual maturity

necessary for individuality, community, and love. Swift remained true to his chief end in all his labors: to vex the world rather than diverting it.

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