The "Intelligence" of Swift

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"BUT WHAT IN Swift is most important, the disturbing characteristic of his genius, is a peculiar emotional intensity. . . . To lay the stress upon an emotional intensity should be matter of commonplace: actually, in routine usage, the accepted word for Swift is 'intellectual'. We are told for instance that his is preeminently 'intellectual satire'. . . . We shall not find Swift remarkable for intelligence if we think of Blake."[1] This is F. R. Leavis writing on *A Tale of a Tub* in 1934. His assessment was at that time a foundation statement on Swift's art which helped to turn critical attention away from the historical background to Swift's work towards a preoccupation with the energy and emotional force of his style; a change of attention which has yielded important new insights into the mechanics of Swift's satire. But, at the same time, one which understates what is the one thing which overwhelms the reader coming to the *Tale* for the first time: its intellectual virtuosity. It is not always sufficient to call this "wit" — the sense of gamesmanship and playfulness clings inexorably to this (though that is not to deny that these qualities are equally present in Swift) — rather it is a quality of intellect, a volatility of thought in which ideas are felt concretely through the language as emotional counters. Eliot's argument that after Metaphysical poetry there was a dissociation of feeling from thought in literary culture requires the qualification that what happened was rather a narrowing of the emotional range, a narrowing which is evident throughout Augustan literature, and which resulted in a more intense fusion of these two aspects of literary sensibility. What I want to argue in the case of Swift is that he is "remarkable for intelligence," an intelligence that manifests

itself primarily as an alertness to the resonance and implications of the language. Swift marks the point at which literature becomes self conscious, at which it begins to inspect itself, and to ask quite overtly the basic questions about the nature and function of words.

The key text for beginning such a demonstration of Swift's "intelligence" must be *A Tale of a Tub*. This is not because of the clever parodying of false learning which comprises the *Tale* but because of a more fundamental concern which informs the satiric intent. Swift's preoccupation throughout the work is with the deceptiveness of language and the way in which deceptiveness makes difficult any coherent view of art or life. In pursuing this preoccupation Swift takes us to the very roots of our language, to our deep uncertainties about words and the way we describe ourselves. In this sense the *Tale* is about the problem of meaning, and as such its intellectualism is searching and demanding. Arguably it was no accident that the kind of self-consciousness I have been indicating should have been present at this moment of literary history. The eighteenth century was the first period in which literature was governed and controlled by the medium of print, and one essential feature of print is that it confers on words a new and quite startling autonomy. Swift, more than any other writer of the period, registers the anxieties over language which surface in a print culture. As McLuhan has pointed out, print not only alters our relationship to the author and the literary work but also to the language itself. Print is anonymous in its form, and totally objective; there is no individual signature to a page of type, it could come from anyone and anywhere, and whereas most writers in the eighteenth century found the impersonality of print something to struggle against, two in particular — Swift and Defoe — found it congenial to their especial talents. In Defoe's case, the impersonality of print helped him to fashion narratives that appeared completely factual. The fundamental assumption of his fiction is that people tend to believe anything in print because print is authoritative; as a medium it is impartial and objective, ideal for hiding behind, for the suppression of a real personality and the generation of a completely false one.

It is precisely the assumption of authority, the belief that we

can trust things in print that Swift questions throughout his work. He does it most obviously by playing various kinds of language games on the reader, by adopting numerous disguises, and by parodying in *A Tale of a Tub* the whole idea of the printed book itself with its dedications, apologies, explanatory notes, and digressions. There is a sense in Swift that print is a form of pride, it epitomizes the fallacy that words are to be trusted and credited because they are set down in neutral black and white, coming not from someone we know and trust, but from some unidentified person called "the author."[2] In print words do become things, they are turned into individual pieces of type, locked into place on the press and stamped out on paper. In the process of printing literature becomes an aspect of technology, words become units of knowledge, secure in their meaning because secure in their man-made universe — the page. Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*, however, demonstrates over and over again that words are not to be trusted in, that they are in fact fickle and apt to mislead us completely. Because of this they pose the most central problem of all: "how is it," Swift asks, "that we can be sure of what we know when the very words we use to describe our knowledge are frail and apt to give way beneath us?" It is a question that is deep in the texture of Swift's *Tale*, and one which is implicit in all the other questions that are being asked. It is most acutely present at those moments when Swift seems to be giving us the key to his satiric message, as for example in the following passage from Section X:

> AND, whereas the mind of Man, when he gives the Spur and Bridle to his Thoughts, doth never stop, but naturally sallies out into both extreams of High and Low, of Good and Evil; his first Flight of Fancy, commonly transports Him to Ideas of what is most Perfect, finished, and exalted; till having soared out of his own Reach and Sight, not well perceiving how near the Frontiers of Height and Depth, border upon each other; With the same Course and Wing, he falls down plum into the lowest Bottom of Things; like one who travels the *East* into the *West*; or like a strait Line drawn by its own length into a Circle. Whether a Tincture of Malice in our Natures, makes us fond of furnishing every bright Idea with its Reverse; Or, whether Reason reflecting upon the Sum of Things, can, like the Sun, serve only to enlighten

> one half of the Globe, leaving the other half, by Necessity, under Shade and Darkness: Or, whether Fancy, flying up to the imagination of what is Highest and Best, becomes over-shot, and spent, and weary, and suddenly falls like a dead Bird of Paradise, to the Ground. Or, whether after all these *Metaphysical* conjectures, I have not entirely missed the true Reason; . . . [3]

It is easy to notice the key word *"Metaphysical"* and see this passage as a clever parody of the more extravagant prose style of the seventeenth-century writers with Swift very neatly taking the mat away from beneath us as we read on. But having made the historical and satirical point there is much more to the passage than that. The deception here is beautifully managed and the problem for the reader is to know exactly what Swift is saying. He seems to be arguing that the extraordinary volatility of man's mind is always leading him astray, and at the same time making fun of himself for saying it. This is the typical double act of Swift's *Tale*. The image of the "strait line" drawn into a circle is a good one to describe the total effect of the passage. The end of it returns us to the beginning, but ironically with the effect not of denying, but of confirming it. In terms of Swift's spatial imagery it is rather like standing in mid-air.

It is the spatial aspect of the imagery which is arguably the most important ingredient in Swift's argument because the whole passage is mocking the linear process of meaning by which we as readers move on from word to word trusting to expand our knowledge but in fact being led more and more astray. It begins, disarmingly enough, with the image of man's mind as a horse which when given its head "naturally" — as Swift deceitfully puts it — rushes to "extreams." After "High and Low" and "Flight of Fancy" we realize that this is no ordinary horse, but Pegasus the winged creature of inspiration, and as such looks forward to the "Bird of Paradise" at the end. But what the reader probably has not realized is that in the process abstract ideas "Good and Evil" have become synonymous with objects from the sense world — "Height and Depth." The connection is made firmer by words that relate both to motion and to conditions of being — "transports . . . exalted." The image of motion then modulates towards one of travel with "Frontiers" and "bor-

der" which prepares us for the geographical image of "like one who travels the East into the West," and the first part of the paragraph ends with the traditional image of perfection, the circle, which has now become the image of futility.

Interwoven with the spatial imagery of the first part there is an equally fundamental image: that of the sun. Clearly the idea of Icarus lies condensed here in the idea of soaring upwards and falling "plum" downwards. But there is also a reminiscence of Plato's use of the sun in the allegory of the cave, and in the reference to "Ideas" there is a hint of the Platonic Forms. It is the image of the sun which provides the link with the second half of the passage; it surfaces in "the bright Idea with its Reverse," in "reflecting," and "enlighten." The connotations of goodness and enlightenment evoked by the suggestion of light are what are now principally important. The final image brings together all the associations of travel, motion and flight in what is surely the most beautiful simile in Swift's prose; "Fancy flying" suggests Pegasus and Icarus, "Highest and Best" recalls "High and Low," and with the falling of the "dead Bird of Paradise" we are back again to the circle.

The most impressive thing about this passage is its organic use of imagery. This is something we normally associate with Romantic poets, but there is surely no better illustration of organic form with its compression of allusion, its central controlling idea, and its startling inventiveness than this passage from Swift. And yet the imagery is present in the passage only to negate itself; the beautiful rising crescendo of the similes is let down with a bump by the cold blast of Swiftian realism; "or, whether after all these *Metaphysical* Conjectures. . . ." What the passage presents us with is a marvellously worked out argument which proceeds by the energy of the language it uses, but an energy which is thrown into doubt by the very argument it supports. The marvellous fertility of language is precisely what is being mocked by Swift, and it is this that puzzles the reader; surely, we feel, a passage so daring and imaginative cannot be simply an elaborate joke on the reader. The problem that surfaces here is the perennial one that faces the reader in trying to make sense of *A Tale of a Tub* and it has to do with the nature of language. The difficulty with

words, Swift seems to suggest, is that they are incorrigibly metaphoric. Given even the slightest of chances they will take on a life and meaning of their own and in so doing impose an authority over us they would not normally have. This is a point of course which looks forward to Sterne and James Joyce; it is the problem of controlling the overwhelming impressions contained in the fibre of the language that Joyce explores in the early sections of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* But for Swift this power is deeply suspect. What he demonstrates so superbly in the passage quoted is the way in which language betrays us. It is the most natural process to translate man's pursuit of good into a spatial context, but once we have done that we have in a sense admitted defeat; once we talk of pursing good in terms of flying, then quite easily the image takes on a logic of its own and brings in ideas of going too near the sun, and eventually the bird of Paradise. The difficulty is that it is impossible to comprehend the world of ideas without metaphor, because in metaphor the world of the unseen becomes seen. The translation of good and evil into high and low and light and dark is a way of relating abstract concepts to the sense of sight, it is making the spiritual physical. Without that transference we could not understand it, but having made it the gateway to absurdity suddenly opens. For Joyce this transference is a positive process; all language is incarnation, it is through the physical impression of words that the spiritual is made manifest, for Swift, on the other hand it is a process of corruption. Imagery is the way the body erupts into language, and the imagination is largely the expression of physiological energy. In beginning his argument with the image of the horse Swift implies from the outset that the imagination is dependent on the animal world of physical energy and this is a point that is touched on a number of times. We might notice here the slyness of the word "Bottom" in "falls down plum into the lowest Bottom of Things" and it is surely no accident that the similes end with the suggestion of sexual climax. The rhythm and movement of the bird of Paradise allusion, the connotation of "Paradise," and the flagging energy suggested by "spent, and weary" make the romantic effect of this sentence deeply ironic. The roots of the imagination, the passage suggests, lie in the anal and the erotic.

Swift's satire works by making us insecure within the language, by mocking the very linear process by which we read and by challenging the easy authority we give to words. The difficulty we experience in understanding the text is basic to its method of proceeding since it is the search for meaning which is the object of Swift's satire. The *Tale* is a dazzling display of the subversiveness of language. Beneath the apparent argument there is always a subtext of meaning which is working against the surface energy of the words. As such the tactical method of his writing is contradiction; to deny what he is affirming, and affirm what he is denying and at the same time to mean both — the strait line drawn into a circle. This is the central device for example of a passage such as the following:

> But the greatest Maim given to that general Reception, which the writings of our Society have formerly received, (next to the transitory State of all sublunary Things,) hath been a superficial Vein among many Readers of the present Age, who will by no means be persuaded to inspect beyond the Surface and the Rind of Things; whereas, *Wisdom* is a *Fox*, who after long hunting, will at last cost you the Pains to dig out: 'Tis a *Cheese*, which by how much the richer, has the thicker, the homelier, and the coarser Coat; and whereof to a judicious Palate, the *Maggots* are the best. 'Tis a *Sack-Posset*, wherein the deeper you go, you will find it the sweeter. *Wisdom* is a *Hen*, whose *Cackling* we must value and consider, because it is attended with an *Egg*; but then, lastly, 'tis a *Nut*, which unless you chuse with Judgement, may cost you a Tooth, and pay you with nothing but a *Worm*.
>
> (p. 66)

In one sense this is, as Kathleen Williams sees it, a satire on conventional aphoristic wisdom, particularly Baconian aphorisms, with Swift taking conventional analogies just that step further where they disappear into absurdity.[4] But whilst Swift is poking fun at conventional moralizers he is of course moralizing himself. There is, after all, as Gardner Stout has pointed out, a close connection between the cheese with the maggot at the centre and the *Tale* itself.[5] The suggestion that the search for wisdom is in reality a fascination with our own corruptness is itself a kind of maggot which Swift uncovers for us in the course of the argument. It links with the imagery of dirt, insects and excrement

which is continually invoked by Swift. The series of analogies ends here with another "Worm" and it is worth remembering that the Hack himself is a kind of maggot — a *Grub* street variety.

Swift's method here is to treat a conventional metaphor literally so that its metaphorical meaning seems absurd and then to use it as part of his own metaphorical design. The paradox of his metaphors in fact seem to be that they are continually working against themselves, continually pointing out that the ground of their existence is the metaphysicalizing of the body. Interestingly, the dominant image in this passage is that of food and eating; wisdom is an egg, a nut, a cheese, and it is the "judicious palate" that will enjoy the maggot. "Judicious Palate" is a good example of Swift's very sly use of language where the physical sense of "Palate" is played off against the metaphorical, supported by a word that suggests judgement but which sounds in part like "delicious." The underlying image being invoked of course is that of taste. *A Tale of a Tub* is very largely about taste, and in particular about the connection between the literal and metaphorical meanings of the word. There is, as E. H. Gombrich has pointed out a long connection in English literature between eating and literature.[6] All language is basically oral, and the mouth, tongue, and palate play a significant part both in the production of words and in the consumption of food. The deep physiological connection is one which Swift is continually able to assume in his satire; the metaphor of taste makes the point for him. Towards the end of the *Tale* he makes fun of the taste of "Courteous Readers" commenting that he has "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*" (p. 207). This is more than a comment about the lack of discrimination of the modern reader, the image assumes as part of its raison d'être a fundamental connection between eating and reading. The connection is made by the language, and this is Swift's point all the way through: that language is the external form of the body and that metaphor is simply its disguise. If we glance back at the passage quoted we can see that the food metaphor really begins with the word "Rind"; it is this that converts

the literal meaning of "Surface" into a metaphorical dimension. From this comes the whole chain of food images; the image of the cheese with its "coarser Coat" which catches up the main image of the narrative — the coats of the brothers made "thicker" by numerous accretions which are eventually torn off by Jack; and the "Sack-Posset" which gets sweeter "the deeper you go" not only because of growing drunkenness but because at the bottom are the dregs. Here again, the implication of dregs looks forward to the "Sower and the Dregs" which "Philosophy and Reason . . . lap up" (p. 174) in the Digression on Madness, and to the "poisonous juice" of critics "*whereof, whoever drinks, that Person's* Brains *flie out of his Nostrils*" (p. 100). It links up also with that other kind of fluid frequently referred to by Swift — blood; we notice here the "superficial Vein" of "many Readers" and the much later "Since my *Vein* is once opened, I am content to exhaust it all at a Running . . . " (p. 184). Implicit in these metaphors is the notion of a bodily and linguistic hygiene, but of a kind that is impossible for man to attain.

But behind these food images lies the even more fundamental spatial metaphor: the image of outer and inner and of surface and depth. Words like "superficial," "Surface" and "deeper" anticipate "that Wisdom, which converses about the Surface, to that pretended Philosophy which enters into the Depth of Things, and then comes gravely back with Informations and Discoveries, that in the inside they are good for nothing" (p. 173). The Hack's bold assertion that "in most Corporeal Beings . . . the *Outside* hath been infinitely preferable to the In" (p. 175) repeats the idea of the nut with the tooth breaking kernel, and the maggoty cheese. We can also think of the winged Pegasus of the passage quoted earlier plummeting to the "lowest *bottom* of things." The suggestion of the entire *Tale* is that the way up is also the way down, that to delve deeply is to arrive back at the surface again. It is about frustration, about the way in which nature resists comprehension, just as language resists the attempts of reason to control and order it. Extremes meet suggests Swift — even though Jack and Peter may refuse to acknowledge each other they nevertheless look alike.

The paradigm for this circularity, the intellectual source of reference, is surely the Chain of Being. Despite Swift's consistent mockery of this and every other metaphysical notion this is the background of his "strait line drawn into a circle." The implication of the chain as Swift utilizes it is that whilst man sees his situation as linear any attempt to move along the line simply converts it into a circle. Neither can man simply avoid extremes by keeping still, for man's pecularity in the scheme of things is that he is out of place; he is, in spatial terms, in thin air. Swift's satire is an elaboration of the bewildering perspectives suggested by the Chain of Being. We can see better just how much these underly Swift's writings if we look at what is arguably the best location point for the Chain of Being idea in eighteenth-century literature:

> Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
> The proper study of Mankind is Man.
> Plac'd on this isthmus of a middle state,
> A being darkly wise, and rudely great:
> With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,
> With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,
> He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest,
> In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;
> In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer,
> Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err;
> Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
> Whether he thinks too little, or too much:
> Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confus'd;
> Still by himself abus'd, or disabus'd;
> Created half to rise, and half to fall;
> Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all,
> Sole judge of Truth, in endless Error hurl'd:
> The glory, jest, and riddle of the world![7]

What Pope is offering us here, within the spatial context of the chain metaphor, is a series of contradictory estimates of man's position in the universe; and it is important to recognize that they are contradictions and not qualifications. Man as a being "darkly wise and, rudely great" is an anomaly; there can be no such thing as ignorant wisdom, nor vulgar nobility, as the line suggests. Pope's antitheses have the force of facing us with things which are entirely unreasonable. Neither does his irony imply the

existence of a comfortable norm or golden mean that man can inhabit; the "isthmus of a middle state" is not a haven or refuge but rather a battleground over which the various conflicting human energies wage continual warfare. Man is a "riddle" in the universal scheme because he does not belong to any particular category either of the natural or the supernatural world. The fact of man's not belonging, of his being in an endless struggle with nature is something that in the nineteenth century, in the novels of George Eliot and Hardy led to a tragic view of man. In Pope's lines, however, we recognize in the act of reading that the scepticism of his viewpoint is contained within the security of the verse couplet. His destruction of man's confidence in himself is part of an overall Christian conviction about man's destiny. Man is not at home on the earth because he ultimately belongs elsewhere — it is the point which Johnson makes in *Rasselas* and which looks back to St. Paul "for here we have no continuing city but we seek one to come,"[8] and there is surely even an echo of St. Paul's "For now we see through a glass, darkly . . . " in Pope's "darkly wise."[9]

We are aware then in the Pope passage of a stable vantage point from which the human perplexities can be viewed. Although the lines suggest that man is a bewildered and bewildering creature, the nature of the paragraph is to suggest that we can make sense of this. It proceeds in a linear fashion by accumulating paradox on paradox, but nowhere does the argument turn back on itself or change direction. Swift's characteristic mode of attack, however, is to do just this. The attempt to make sense of man's nonsense Swift suggests is just another vanity. The disturbing factor in his satire is that there no longer seems to be any stable vantage point. He attacks man's confidence at its roots by destroying his confidence in the language he uses. In the face of this intellectual radicalism there are only two positions possible, one is cynicism — something which Swift has often been accused of — and the other is absolute faith. If human words cannot be trusted because of their ineradicable fickleness and fallibility then the only thing man can trust to is God's word, divinely revealed and of absolute authority; the plain coat bequeathed to the three sons. It is in this sense that we must understand the pecu-

liar mixture of the radical and the authoritarian, the modern and the traditional in Swift's satire. Deeply ingrained in *A Tale of a Tub* is the suggestion that art is really a form of sublimation; it is the body in disguise, and part of Swift's puritanic moral fervour is the desire to tear down that disguise and expose the truth. But complicating that idea is the realization that certain fictions are necessary, even though it may be important to recognize that they are fictions. To try and uproot the various sublimations that compose social life is to drive more deeply into neurosis, it is to risk doing even more violence, not only to the social fabric but to the language which is its currency. What bedevils the precise use of words is that language is not a neutral and objective instrument; it is a human creation, and to that extent redolent of humanity. The fictions by which man lives are deeply grounded in the words he uses such that to attempt to strip language completely of metaphor would be to violate the values and attitudes it supports. At the root of Swift's discontent with language is his discontent with man.

One of Swift's major concerns in his satire is consequently with the nature of human fictions and in particular with the linguistic process by which they are generated. In his early satire Swift is largely concerned with the fictions generated by the creative imagination — intellectual structures, religious schemes and works of art. In his later satire he is more concerned with the moral fictions that govern human thinking, with assumptions of goodness, of right and wrong, and most fundamentally with the assumption of being human. When, for instance, in Book I of *Gulliver's Travels* Gulliver learns of the Lilliputian plan to starve him to death so that the "stench of your carcass," would not be "so dangerous," the reader is immediately jolted by the word "carcass" (p. 108). Literally it is quite correct of course, but it is a word normally applied to animals not humans. The word we would expect is "body." The fact that we normally apply one word to animals and another to human beings is an indication of the way words acquire values over and above their literal meanings. Swift's use of "carcass" here is deliberately provocative; it makes the point of course that to the Lilliputians Gulliver is a huge, physical problem, but more than that, it raises the

whole question of Gulliver's assumed superiority to the animals. That assumption is in our language, but to what extent is it more than a fiction forged by the ego?

Swift's attack on language in his later work is more concentrated than in his earlier. Rather than mocking exotic and extravagant imagery, as in *A Tale of a Tub*, he is concerned with the way in which certain values are deeply ingrained in our language and as such his work constantly debates the relation they bear to reality. "How far," Swift seems to ask, "are human values more than cosy linguistic fictions?" In his most savage outbursts he draws on these values only to undermine them and confront the reader with his own complacency. This is the developed technique of *A Modest Proposal* where Swift exploits the language of concern to suggest its fundamental hollowness. In the following passage for instance Swift's irony takes its force from the duplicity of such language:

> I THINK it is agreed by all Parties, that this prodigious Number of Children in the Arms, or on the Backs, or at the *Heels* of their *Mothers*, and frequently of their *Fathers*, is *in the present deplorable State of the Kingdom*, a very great additional Grievance; and therefore, whoever could find out a fair, cheap, and easy Method of making these Children sound and useful Members of the Commonwealth, would deserve so well of the Publick as to have his Statue set up for a Preserver of the Nation.[10]

This looks very much like humanitarian concern, and in one sense it is a totally sincere passage, but what is significant about it is the way in which Swift has cleverly faked philanthropic feeling. A phrase like " a very great additional Grievance" suggests concern because "Grievance" through its connection with "grief" implies that the plight of the children is a monstrous injustice. Intensified by "great" and backed up by "fair" in "fair, cheap, and easy" the implication of concern and of the need to provide a just and humane solution seems clear. But "fair" can simply mean economically equitable as in "a fair price" and in this sense it takes some colouring from "cheap, and easy," whilst "Grievance" can simply mean irritation; and here we notice the sly use of "additional" because the grievance is really one of addition — the concern is not over the children but the "prodigious

Number" of them. The reader is misled into thinking the humane interest is genuine because the words themselves are deceptive. In this way Swift raises the question as to how far humanitarian concern for Ireland really exists and how far it is a complacent assumption supported by the way we use words. Notions of fairness, goodness and kindness are ingrained in our language but are they more than convenient fictions which allow man a comfortable faith in his own humanity?

Swift suggests that the language of concern holds within it a grisly truth — it has its own maggot — and as in the *Tale* it is presented as a food image. The children will of course become "sound and useful Members of the Commonwealth," because they will be consumed by it. Again, there is a double meaning in "Commonweath" because it is money which is at the root of the problem, and the tract connects together economic devouring with its literal counterpart. As in *A Tale of a Tub* Swift empties the conventional metaphors of their traditional meanings and creates new ones; he is able to do this because the metaphors he turns upside down are really various kinds of euphemism, they are ways of conveniently avoiding reality. There is a particularly gruesome example of this in the suggestion about buying the children alive and preparing them for the table one's self: "Butchers we may be assured will not be wanting; although I rather recommend buying the Children alive, and dressing them hot from the Knife as we do *roasting Pigs*" (p. 113). "[D]ressing" carries within it considerable violence as Swift uses it. The way in which children are dressed — by kind and attentive adults — is quite different from the way animals are dressed in order to be eaten. The fusing of human concern and disembowelling is achieved through the ambivalence of "dressing." It would be difficult to find a better example in eighteenth-century literature of Johnson's description of metaphysical wit as the yoking of "The most heterogeneous ideas . . . by violence together."[11]

The use of the term "dress" to describe the preparation of animals for eating is of course a euphemistic way of avoiding the reality of what is done. The fact that we use language to hide behind allows Swift to confront us with the thinness of that disguise. If language is the "dress of thought" then the thought it

covers is not a very attractive one. Nevertheless, to tear that dress down completely and expose the truth is liable to lead us into another kind of error. When the projector starts talking about "Breeders"; of a child "just dropt from its dam" or "the carcass *of a good fat child*" (pp. 109, 112) another kind of violence is being done to the language. Literally of course these terms are correct, but they offend because they avoid the euphemism of words that apply strictly to the human world. *A Modest Proposal* suggests that the language of concern is hollow and worn out; it consists of euphemistic clichés that only imply human sympathy. But on the other hand to strip euphemism away completely and restrict one's self to the literal is to sink into barbarity. The extremes of *A Tale of a Tub* yawn beneath us — either of over adornment or of nakedness — both of them embodied in the mad projector of the *Proposal.* In this dilemma the only way of showing real concern is through satire. By making fun of conventional forms the satirist makes the reader self-consciously aware of his dependance on euphemism and in this way he is able to recover the moral energy that lies behind the cliché.

Swift's technique then in his major satires is to exploit the duplicity of language, its essential fickleness, and to see in that an image of the larger duplicity of man. He asks the fundamental question of how far the civilized values we live by are simply fakes. This is most devastatingly so in the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels* where again and again Swift undermines the acquired and socially accepted meanings of words. A word such as "honourable" for example in the passage giving the reasons for war (p. 293) becomes the focus for two quite different meanings: the literal one implying "rewarded with honours" — titles and wealth — and the moral one suggesting justice and integrity. The literal and the euphemistic are brought together in the Swiftian context and left to challenge the reader. Swift's satire suggests that we use words neurotically. At the root of both the creative and the moral imagination lies a preoccupation with perversity. And it is at this point that we are aware of the tremendous narrowing of sensibility represented in Swift's work, a narrowing that reflects much broader cultural and social changes. What is lost in the work of Swift is the belief that nature inher-

ently means anything. This is fundamental to the Shakespearian concept of the imagination. The Elizabethan view of nature as God's metaphor invested everything with the possibility of transcendence. What has triumphed in Swift's satire is Iago's view of nature, but it is a view that the creative writer has to struggle against. And it is in this that the central tension of Swift's satire lies, between on the one hand his own powerful imagination, and on the other his deep misanthropic instincts. The question as to whether nature means anything over and above the simple level of conflict and survival is also a question as to whether words really mean anything over and above their primary literal sense. When the Hack promises to write a treatise on nothing in *A Tale of a Tub* there is an uncomfortable feeling that Swift is more than half serious. But what is also apparent in Swift's satire together with the mistrust of language is a fundamental respect for the medium he uses. One of the enduring paradoxes of his satire lies in the belief that whilst words may mislead man they can also confront man with the truth about himself. What is apparent in all his work is the driving idealism of his attitude to language — the desire that words should mean what they say. His satire is devoted to the gaps in meaning between the apparent and the real meanings of words; it reveals the basic need for certainty, definiteness and concreteness. Satire renews language by making man aware of the frailty of the support on which he bases his claim to being human, but such awareness is itself a sign of hope.

In Swift's view of course definiteness is to be found finally in abasement before God. He can demolish man's pretentions to being moral and reasonable in the belief that this is only to demonstrate the absolute transcendence of God. His basic concern is not to make man more moral but to make him discontented with himself — to "vex" him — in order to drive him closer to faith. A future age like ours cannot accept such a route, but we see in his satire a disclosure of an attitude to language and to nature which is inherently part of the modern world, and it is in the struggle to come to terms with what Swift has to say and to recover meaning in nature that much post-eighteenth-century literature has been written.

NOTES

[1] "The Irony of Swift," *Scrutiny*, vol. II, no. 4 (March 1934), 365 and 368.

[2] It is interesting to note that the Houyhnhnms "have no letters," as Gulliver discreetly puts it; see *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. P. Dixon (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 321. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[3] *A Tale of a Tub*, ed. A. C. Guthkelch and D. Nichol Smith, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1958), pp. 157-58. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[4] *Jonathan Swift*, Profiles in Literature Series (London: Routledge, 1968), pp. 138-39.

[5] "Speaker and Satiric Vision in Swift's *Tale of a Tub*," *ECS*, 3 (1969), 175-99.

[6] See *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* (London: Phaidon, 1963), p. 39, and also Lionel Trilling, *The Opposing Self* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1955), pp. 15-19.

[7] *An Essay on Man*, Epistle II, ll. 1-17. Quoted from *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. J. Butt (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 516.

[8] Hebrews, chpt. 13 v. 14.

[9] 1 Corinthians, chpt. 13 v. 12.

[10] *Jonathan Swift; Irish Tracts 1728-1733*, ed. H. Davis (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), p. 109.

[11] The Life of Cowley, *Lives of The English Poets*, ed. L. Archer Hind (1925; rpt. London: Everyman, 1961), I, 11.

CORRECTION: A printing gremlin dropped a word from Kirstin Holst Petersen's article *The Personal and the Political: The Case of Nurrudin Farah* in our African number (July 1981). The sentence on page 94, lines 20-21, beginning "Looked at in that way he is at least interesting . . ." should begin "Looked at in that way he is at his least interesting . . ." We apologize for any distress this inadvertent reversal of meaning may have caused Dr. Petersen.
