Swift's Satire and Sentiment

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Two and one-half centuries after his death Jonathan Swift towers still as the eminent satirist in English. Now at the end of a century and a millennium, it may be of interest to review even scantily the work of one who strove, as he said in his epitaph, "strenuously for human liberty."[1]

Born on 30 November 1667 in Dublin of an English father, and separated in infancy from his mother, Swift hardly knew his parents, as his father had died before Jonathan's birth. He graduated from Trinity College, Dublin in 1686. Swift felt himself to be primarily an Englishman, and for most of his professional life sought preferment as an Anglican priest and dean in England, a desire unfulfilled. From 1689 to 1727 he made many trips to England, especially visiting literary and political friends, and himself embroiled in writing, disputing and publishing. At the start of this period he becomes tutor and friend to the girl Esther Johnson (Stella), honored through her life in his letters and poems; in 1714 Swift is friend and occasional collaborator with the young poetic genius, Alexander Pope, another of his closest friends that Swift was to outlive.

Swift was awarded the Doctor of Divinity degree at Trinity College, Dublin in 1702 while prebend in St. Patrick's Cathedral, and in 1713 was appointed Dean of St. Patrick's. By 1727, with the death of

George I and the continuance in power of Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole, who had received Swift coldly the year before, Swift bore no more hopes for an English deanery and he returned to Ireland for good. Yet his spirits must have been much buoyed by the fast-growing popularity of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), of which Swift was the widely-suspected anonymous author.

Early 1728, however, brought heavy personal sorrow with the death of Esther Johnson. Yet private woe, and increasing attacks of an old disease of his inner ears which brought much pain, did not deter the satirist from wielding pen as sword once more and climactically for the public good. Five years earlier Swift had anonymously published the *Drapier's Letters* and became a hero to the Irish (they knew who wrote) for successfully arguing aginst acceptance of an English halfpence that would have debased the Irish currency. Now, in pity and indignation viewing widespread poverty and hunger in Ireland, Swift in *A Modest Proposal* (1729) creates a credible human-monster "proposer," symbolizing both absentee Irish landlords and the exploitive English government, who cogently argues that the problem should be solved for poor children and adults alike by the slaughter, sale and eating of infants.[2]

Such searing imagery and statement by the proposer, together with the fate of Gulliver at the end of his travels, has caused not a few readers through the ages to think that Swift in frustration and despair had at last gone mad. But besides avoiding the author-as-character fallacy, we should not forget the control of wit and humor found in Swift's prose works and poems of the 1730s, most being lighthearted, and even when harsh, bracing and lucid. At this time Swift writes one of his longest and best poems, "Verses on the Death

of Dr Swift, D.S.P.D.,"[3] a self-elegy which is both an *apologia* for himself and for his satiric art. Among the last prose pieces of Swift, published posthumously, is the amiable and sometimes biting "Directions to Servants."(JS 549-55)

J.A. Downie states that at age sixty-five Swift "had discovered that 'all things except friendship and conversation' were worthless, and that he was 'perfectly indifferent' to them." And three years later Swift wrote to Pope, "I have no body now left but you. Pray be so kind to out-live me, and then die as soon as you please, but without pain, and let us meet in a better place." (JSPW 330) The two old friends and literary giants (though Pope was twenty years younger) corresponded until 1740, when senility stopped Swift's concentration. In 1742 Swift was declared "of unsound mind" and placed under care in his Deanery. He died 19 October 1745, a year after Pope's passing. Swift's last few years were spent, Downie emphasizes, not at all in the turbulence of any psychosis, but in a condition we would now call motor aphasia, and a progressing but tranquil senility,troubled only if he thought he were being observed. (JSPW 339) After the heat and blaze of the satiric flames had done, he was left awhile with the glow and flicker of whatever dream might come.

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Near the end of his career in satire, Swift had said in a letter to Archbishop King, "I have lived, and by the grace of God will die, an enemy to servitude and slavery of all kinds."[4] The "kinds" were many, as his various works showed, exposing not only the condition of the victims but the wiles of the oppressors. In his most notable early satire, *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), Swift proves a formidable enemy to the abusers and corrupters of religion and learning. It is a tale told by

a hack, who has written many treatises but who is also a kind of genial madman as he narrates with equanimity the religious and intellectual follies of three brothers adrift in a tub: they are the Christian leaders and teachers, Peter (Popery or Roman Catholicism), Martin (Luther) and Jack (Calvin). In the brothers' arguing about their coats (their appearance of Christianity) Swift is exposing their pettiness and concern with superficialities rather than the original simple truths of the gospels. And by attempting each to justify his own faith by traditions and decrees, by zeal or "reason," and in blustering or evasive tones, the brothers all come through as false and dangerous ecclesiastics, misdirecting and deluding their multitudes of followers. Swift, of course, by contrast wishes his readers to see and appreciate the freedom, dignity and purity of Church of England beliefs. Its beliefs, Swift held, were reasonable but not rationalistic; and while Godly they were few, inspiring and liberating the heart and will without blinding the mind.

Swift as a godly man highly esteemed the faculty of reason as a virtue, so long as it be guided by truths of religion. He declared that man is not *animal rationis*, a rational animal, but only *rationis capax,* having capacity of reason, which he might use or pervert. At times Swift seems even to have exalted reason without Revelation, as when in *Gulliver's Travels* the enlightened Houyhnhnm master attributes the bad state of government and law in England to the people's "gross Defects in *Reason*, and by consequence, in *Virtue;* because *Reason* alone is sufficient to govern a *Rational* creature."[5] Yet Swift also asserted (I cannot find where) that while reason in the abstract is a faculty which is always true and just, the reason of every particular man is weak and wavering, subject ever to his

ignorance, passions, pride and self-interest.

In Section IX of the *Tale* (JS 138-48), "A Digression concerning... Madness, " Swift has the hack unwittingly expose his own mental madness as he praises credulity and sensory awareness while disdaining getting "into the depth of things." (JS 144) As even Gulliver acknowledged, "Truth always forceth its Way into rational Minds." (GT 140-41) Yet thinking, to arrive at the state of truth, was a process and often a painful one. Thus one of Swift's favorite satiric devices is the contrast of outside and inside, for these two conditions have very different values intellectually and morally. The mad hack, happily prefering the "outside," discourses: "In the proportion that credulity is a more peaceful possession of the mind than curiosity, so far preferable is that wisdom which converses about the surface, to that pretended philosophy which enters into the depth of things...." That is, Swift wants us to see, for the hack is blithely blind, if you want to be "peaceful" (blissfully ignorant), stick to the pleasant "surface" of things (appearances), for "curiosity" (thinking) into "the depths of things" (reality) is unpleasant: reason comes "Officiously, with tools for cutting, and opening, and mangling, and piercing...." (JS 144) Thinking is painful because its process may lead one to conclusions or at least to findings or questions that challenge or shatter one's comfortable assumptions. Reason leads us to question, and to question our answers: Am I free, Am I happy, Do I love, Shall I obey, and Why or Why not? The answers may never be satisfyingly final, but the journey and search has been a living struggle toward truth. Swift was inspired by one who called himself "the Truth," and who yet said to his followers, "You shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall make you free." (Jesus in the Gospels) "Shall know"

implies we do not yet know. But we are called to know, which means to try to find out, at least. What is the alternative to thinking, to exercising our *rationis capax?* We can go along in "felicity" of a sort, the happiness which is our comfort and security. But what does that mean? Here the voice of Swift the satirist breaks through: "This is the sublime and refined point of felicity, called the possession of being well deceived; the serene peaceful state of being a fool among knaves." (JS 145) To Swift, the "knaves" were those who misguided and oppressed others, whether as head of a family, state or religion. Swift would have no one accept a "serene peaceful" condition unthinkingly, foolishly.

In "An Argument against Abolishing Christianity" the ironic joke is that "Swift" is not defending real but only nominal Christianity. The proposer here (not Swift) gives many practical and materialistic reasons why *nominal* Christianity should be retained: it serves as an object of satiric wit to sceptics, who delight us thereby; the Church (of England) in existence keeps the Deists and other free-thinkers at bay; abolishing Anglicanism would open the way to Popery. (JS 225) Swift's ironic answer to the question is that "Religion in general" and not only "Christianity" should be abolished. For "religion in general" lays great restraints on human freedom and is therefore the "great enemy to the freedom of thought and action." (JS 226) This is Swift's theme again of the surface and the interior. If we look beyond or deep into the origin of the Christianity we profess, we should see that what we hold is superficial, and what is real we cannot bear. Man does not want godliness but only institutional Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and so on.

Lemuel Gulliver is Swift's comic hero in the *Travels*, and one of the

outstanding comic characters in English literature. As his name suggests, he is Swift's "gull ever," or at least until the end of his travels. In Book I, "A Voyage to Lilliput," he is among natives human in shape but scarcely taller than his ankle, and in Book II, among the Brobdingnags it is he alone who is a tiny creature among the giants.

With the Lilliputians Gulliver's humorousness consists in the inappropriateness of his reactions to the "Diversions of the Court" and to other customs he witnesses. He regards with composure the ludicrous Rope-Dancing by the servile ministers of state, who contend for the favor of the King by trying to excel in dangerous acrobatic feats and other gyrations. This is Swift's exposure of government run not by merit of mind and morality but by pride and vanity. To Gulliver, though, as English chauvinist abroad, such political practice among "foreigners" too is hardly remarkable. Similarly the stolid English loyalist reports without surprise what we perceive as Swift's satire of religious wars and political parties. The size of a shoe heel makes the real difference between a Whig and a Tory. And the history of contentions between Protestant England and Catholic France is reduced to a disagreement over which end to break a boiled egg. Thousands die on both sides as Christian leaders disagree about doctrine and ceremony. In myopic nationalism Gulliver does not perceive the "inside" of the matter; the shape and shell of the egg is not the egg. Appearance is not essence, reality, truth. The Restoration poet John Dryden had commented about political and religious violence: "Let us but see at what offense we strike; / 'Tis just because we cannot think alike." Gulliver is humorous partly, we feel, because it does not occur to him to try to think, to really look beyond or within, where it seems to us obvious that we should do so. Yet

dare we laugh at him superiorly, we who have come to see hardly better than he, if the end of seeing is wisdom, or the good use of truth? And even, when Gulliver does in fact observe some good and reasonable customs and laws in Lilliput, and remarks, "if they were not so directly contrary to those of my own dear Country, I should be tempted to say a little in their Justification," (GT 52) can our millions of world travelers and expatriates today deny we are his intellectual descendants? Inheritance of fond prejudices between groups and nations, strengthened by fears and learning, is an old and dark pride. It dies hard if at all, leaving countless unknown victims of the human family in its wake.

Gulliver has a flash of insight in referring to some practices of the Lilliputians as "scandalous corruptions" which they fell into by "the degenerate Nature of Man," (GT 54) but our overall impression of him as he leaves the country of little people is of the high and mighty visitor who has observed much and learned little.

In Brobdingnag Gulliver is cut down, physically, mentally, emotionally in a progressively painful experience. Terrified of death by being eaten or by accident, he is saved by a curious family and put on display to the public, and is at last adopted by the royal family. Three "great scholars" examine him and declare him an "abortive birth" or freak of nature. His shouting (to be heard) that he comes from a country of millions like himself is at first regarded with contempt, but at length the king and queen accept his claim and listen to his account of England and Europe, their "Manners, Religion, Laws... and Learning." When Gulliver has finished his "best account" of it all, the king responds with a fit of laugher, takes Gulliver up in his hand, and observes "how contemptible a Thing was human

Grandeur, which could be mimicked by such diminutive Insects" as the narrator, who now quails in humiliation as he had earlier shaken in fear. (GT 100)

Though chastened, Gulliver's pride is not subdued, and he feels helpless indignation that his "noble country, the Mistress of Arts and Arms, the Scourge of France,...the seat of Virtue, Piety, Honour and Truth, the Pride and Envy of the World," should be treated so with contempt. (GT 100) Thus Gulliver is happy and hopeful when another audience with the king affords a chance to do justice to England. He launches a five-lecture-long eulogy of his nation's rulers, bishops, judges and military leaders, and ends with a summary of English history for a hundered years past. The king replies to all this panegyric with a long lecture of his own, stating only doubt, shock and disadin to all that Gulliver has reported, and concluding that the events of England's last century were "only an Heap of Conspiracies, Rebellions, Murders, Massacres, Revolutions, Banishments; the very worst effects that Avarice, Faction, Hypocrisy, Perfidiousness, Cruelty, Rage, Madness, Hatred, Envy, Lust, Malice, and Ambition could produce." Stroking Gulliver as one might do to a naughty and noisy pet, the king scolds him in the same vein for some minutes more, and finishes: "My little Friend....I cannot but conclude the Bulk of your Natives, to be the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth." (GT 125-6) Should Gulliver at this point become humble in his shame, we should pity and in a measure sympathize with him, for the king's attack on his ignorance has been cogent and unsparing. Instead, we cannot help laughing climactically at his exposure, for so blind and obdurate is his pride that he bounces back almost at once to tell us,

"Nothing but an extreme Love of Truth could have hindered me from concealing this Part of my Story," To Gulliver, love of truth means simply reporting the king's criticism, not agreeing with it; for, after all, "great Allowances should be given to a king who lives wholly secluded from the rest of the World." (GT 127) That is, a strange "foreigner" can hardly judge Europeans.

Gulliver's third voyage, to Laputa and other countries, allows him to recover his spirits and his superiority, as it were. Swift uses the hero largely as a channel to expose harmful errors and delusions in science and philosophy of his time. The satire is trenchant and the scenes are vivid, but Gulliver is rather passive.

Through his last voyage, to the country of the Houyhnhnms, horses endowed with reason, Gulliver gains a painful enlightenment that destroys his complacency and pride but leaves him at last in unhappy misanthropy. Soon after arrival, he is set upon by animals in human shape, called Yahoos. So dirty, ugly, vicious and dangerous are they that Gulliver does not until later, in sudden horror, see in them "a perfect human Figure," (GT 220) whereupon he at once hates them, and he fast comes to love and admire the rational and virtuous Houyhnhnms, who are beautiful moreover in the simple naturalness of their lives. Swift reflects Pope's verses: "Vice is a monster of such frightful mien ／ As to be hated needs but to be seen." Conversely, true beauty is virtue, and lovable.

However, Swift early on gives hints that Gulliver is misguided to single-mindedly and wholly admire the Houyhnhnms, for their name means "the Perfection of Nature," which mankind inherently could not attain unguided by spiritual light. Alone, man was, as Pope said, "A being darkly wise and rudely great"; "Born but to die, and reasoning

but to err"; "Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confused"; "Great Lord of all things, yet a prey to all;/ sole Judge of Truth, in endless Error hurled;/ The Glory, Jest, and Riddle of the World!" (*An Essay on Man,* Epistle II, 4, 10, 12, 15-17) A second hint of Houyhnhnms' deficiency is that they "have not the least Idea of Books or Literature." (GT 225) Swift learned and proved the treasures of books in a rational life. Finally, the Houyhnhnms have no passion of sex, special loves, or personal ideals. Can, or should, humans be so?

Yet in their friendship and benevolence, their two principal virtues, plus their values of gentleness, temperance, industry and service, the Houyhnhnms are paragons, and Gulliver in a few years grows to adulate them and desires no more in life than to live with them as an inferior and to learn from them. However, because of what he had told them of his own race back in Europe, and because of evident similarities between his kind and the Yahoos, the Houyhnhnms decide in general council that he must either live like the Yahoos or swim back home. Gulliver is heartbroken; his kind master cannot go against the order, but provides help for Gulliver to build a boat. Gulliver at last returns to England to stay, though filled with grief and despair, for in his master's company and instruction he had come to regard his countrymen as Yahoos all, and even his own family strike him with "the utmost Shame, Confusion and Horror." (GT 279)

The loss of his pride, vanity and ignorance, tantamount almost to his identity, had been too sudden and sharp, and his sympathetic attachment to the Houyhnhnms too deep. Ironically, when the light of reason had exposed his folly and shone on the beauty of virtue, it had seared his judgment and enkindled delusion. Gulliver buys two horses, who understand him "tolerably well." "I converse with them at least

four Hours every Day.... They live in great Amity with me, and Friendship to each other." (GT 280) Gulliver is finally absurd in his extremity, more comic than tragic, but still there is meaning in his madness. His last words are a tirade not against all Yahoos: only those whose vices include pride. He can tolerate a whoremonger, a politician, a colonel, a bishop, a physician, and the like, if only they have not "any Tincture of this absurd vice," pride. (GT 286) In our time, too, we feel, it is not so much the wicked we would shun (could we shun ourselves?), but the proudly wicked, for the proud feel they can do no wrong, and are hence the more dangerous.

Gulliver's great insight and shame have shattered his pride, yet he has not become the good man, as his mania does not excuse rejection of his faithful family. Still, we who have followed and grown fond of him even in his illness may believe that his case is not hopeless. After five years he begins to let his wife take dinner with him, and if he questions her, she may answer briefly. Was ever wife so faithful? And so we trust that with her, as she waits patiently, the sorely retired world-traveler Lemuel may yet one day find true enlightenment and companionship, if not everlasting peace.

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The dominant sentiment in Swift's satires is indignation. Often we find fierce indignation—*saeva indignatio* he termed it in his epitaph (JS 604)—as in the harsh ridicule and denunciations of Gulliver and his race by the Brobdingnagian king and the Houyhnhnm master and at last by Gulliver himself. Such strong sentiment occurs also in some of the poems. In "On the Day of Judgement" Jove (God) speaks to trembling humanity risen from the dead and awaititng their sentence of heaven or hell:

"Offending race of humankind,
By nature, reason, learning, blind;
You who through frailty stepped aside,
And you who never fell——*through pride;*...

"through pride" indicts those who did not fall (remained sinless) for the wrong reason: self-righteousness or pride. Jove concludes:

"The world's mad business now is o'er,
And I resent these pranks no more.
I to such blockheads set my wit!
I damn such fools!——Go, go, you're bit." (JSCP 507)

This is scathing criticism of humanity. Swift has no less an authority than God denounce mankind as being not so much bad as stupid (blind). And did we really think God would "damn such fools" as we are? Why, we've been blockheads playing pranks, and beneath God's concern (wit) at last. Well, says God, you're deceived (bit). Just go away, wherever.

"A satirical Elegy on the Death of a Late Famous General" is Swift's harsh assessment of the life of a man whom many considered a hero. It is Swift's abhorrence of militarism that fires his attack here, uncharacteristically on an individual rather than a group. The poem was published long after Swift's death. The innocent victims of war, widows and orphans, do not attend and honor the hero's funeral in mourning. "But what of that, his friends may say," the poet remarks cuttingly: "True to his profit and his pride,/ He made them weep before he died." (JSCP 242)

Let us remember Swift last, if not best, for his tender sentiments. These are his feelings involved in friendship: benevolence and affection (among the highest virtues, we remember, of the Houyhnhnms).

Foremost of his women friends was Esther Johnson, called Stella. To her he addressed many letters, largely collected in the *Journal to Stella* . He sent her many poems, chiefly on her birthday. In her last illness he writes to assure her of his kindness: "Take pity on your pitying friends!/ ... Me, Surely me, you ought to spare,/ Who gladly would your sufferings share...." (JS 481) Upon her death he calls her "the truest, most virtuous, and valuable friend, that I, or perhaps any other person ever was blessed with." (JS 484)

In his "Verses on the Death of Dr Swift," the satirist looks humorously at himself and others, but voices earnestly the praise he wished for after he was gone: "Fair LIBERTY was all his cry;/ For her he stood prepared to die;/ For her he boldly stood alone;/ For her he oft exposed hs own." (JSCP 494)

Paraphrasing a part of Swift's epitaph, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats wrote: "Swift has sailed into his rest: / Savage indignation there / Cannot lacerate his breast./ Imitate him if you dare,/ World-besotted traveler. He / Served human liberty." To imitate Swift would be to fashion a sharp clarity and honesty of mind that guides an untiring strength of will in a spirit of compassionate service for liberty. Perhaps we travelers are not world-besotted but apathetic or resigned in a world rife with abuses of power causing injustices social and global. It may be that only a Swift could really see and strike out for all time at the sources of ignorance and vice. We may think that our personal action in service of justice at home or abroad is impossible or unnecessary. After sharing Swift's vision, however, in its hard-burning brilliance, it should always at least be easier for us to see what we are when we do nothing at all or all too little for truth and justice, which are the ways to the liberty that

Swift so cherished and struggled for.

Notes :

1. *Jonathan Swift*: *Political Writer*, J.A. Downie. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 340. Cited in the text as JSPW.
2. "A Modest proposal," in *Jonathan Swift*, The Oxford Authors, ed. Angus Ross and David Woolley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 492-99. Cited in the text as JS.
3. *Jonathan Swift*: *The Complete Poems*, ed. Pat Rogers. London: Penguin Books, 1983, pp. 485-98. Cited in the text as JSCP.
4. Quoted in JSPW, p. vi.
5. *Jonathan Swift*: *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Philip Pinkus. New York: The Odyssey Press, 1968, p. 249. Cited in the text as GT.