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Eighteenth-Century Madness, Swift and *A Modest Proposal*

Simplicity, however one may yearn for it, is not always the same as clarity in literary criticism, and it can do a disservice to an understanding of Swift's work. Professor Max Byrd in *Visits to Bedlam, Madness and Literature in the Eighteenth Century*¹ does much to simplify the way in which we may view the public attitude and the literary use of madness in the eighteenth century, and in so doing makes for sufficient clarity for the work to be a welcome addition to criticism. In short, Professor Byrd sees the early part of the century as fearful and unsympathetic towards the madman, not only in its literature but in society itself. The public spectacle of Bedlam, the madmen and madwomen chained, hysterical, dangerous and indulging their irrational spleen in throwing excrement at the spectators who had paid for the pleasure, is true, and the same unfortunates are grist for the mill of Swift in *A Tale of a Tub* and Pope in *The Dunciad*. Professor Byrd is quite right in seeing in the later half of the century, in Johnson, Sterne, Cowper and Blake, a sensitive awareness of the helplessness of the insane which Swift and Pope often ignore. But that is not the whole story for Swift, and the simplicity of the division between an unfeeling first half century and a feeling last half century breaks down when one thinks of *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*.

I suggested in an earlier essay² that Gulliver is surely a madman at the end of the tales, but he is not the same kind of madman that one meets in the *Tub* (where the Grub Street writer is also edging on madness, but not quite in quality or degree as Peter or Jack), nor is he the same kind of madman as the projectors in the third book of *Gulliver*. Gulliver is not, as a matter of fact, treated with anything like the harshness that one would expect either from Professor Byrd's division of the century or from Swift when he is on the satirical scent. He is something of a tragic figure at the end of his story, wandering unhappily from horse to

house—but nowhere at home. Professor Byrd is right in suggesting that “If in Johnson’s hands madness is no longer the metaphor around which satire may be constructed, then it may be travelling back along the literary spectrum toward tragedy: though Johnson will not laugh at madness, he will cry for it.”³ Swift may not cry for it with Gulliver, but there is not much to laugh at in that simple man’s final plight.

The truth is that satire is not so simple as it may look and that Swift’s satire, in particular, is not always one and the same thing even within itself. Swift insists on having his cake and eating it too, and too often for easy analysis. We know that the narrator-author of *Gulliver’s Travels* does not get off with being simply the medium for satiric attack on others. What we must remember is that he, of all the satiric targets in that book, is finally the most severely compromised of all, not however in quite the same dismissive way that we experience for the others: the fools, the vicious, the enthusiasts. Gulliver is basically a decent man who has been broken on the wheel of too much moral sight-seeing. While most satirical characters start out flawed, with a long history of moral culpability, Gulliver is betrayed by his openness, his curiosity, his refusal to judge, and in this way, he is closer to the tragic than the satiric victim. This does not mean that he cannot act satirically (Hamlet is no mean satirist, and there are some faint lines of satirical attack upon Hamlet himself) but that Swift cannot and does not drop him callously into the same pot of swirling filth with the wilder characters of his satiric world. There is nothing very wild about Gulliver; he may be prideful about what he thinks he has discovered, but he is, at worst, in the end surly and unhappy, not only about the way of the world, but with himself. He is closer to the harmless astronomer in *Rasselas* (“Johnson does not fear the madman, but he fears his madness, and what the astronomer demonstrates, Imlac declares: ‘All may suffer his calamity.’ ”⁴) than to the Grub Street writer of the *Tub*, just as the Grub Street writer must be distinguished from those he describes and praises simply because he is so peculiarly feckless and harmless in his maunderings. Gulliver, in his way, and the Grub Street writer in his are possessed by a certain helplessness which makes it difficult for the reader to judge them swingingly, on any count. They do have a kind of sad charm which makes severe judgment difficult; the reader is concerned about them in a way which belies the suggestion that Swift is determined to destroy them and what they stand for. We may suspect that Swift wants his readers to respond sympathetically to Gulliver, the symbol of the fragility of the human mind in the most decent of men. He may not have been

so amused by his Grub Street victim, but the structure, accumulation and point of the satire in the *Tub* is such that the Grub Street writer need not be destroyed for the points to be made.

The real difficulty lies with the projector of *A Modest Proposal*, and here Byrd is, in part at least, very good in seeing the distinctions with which Swift used madmen.

Without doubt Swift's archetypal projector is the blood-chilling personage who puts forth *A Modest Proposal*, that notorious scheme for marketing Irish infants as food and skins. What shocks us in Swift's satire, of course, is the gulf between the modest, well-intentioned author and all normal human feelings, indeed all sense of reality. His fixed idea, encrusted with elaborate reasonableness, drives a wedge between him and the truth and makes him appear to us as horribly, disfiguredly insane.⁵

Professor Byrd knows that something is different here and makes for an interesting distinction without a difference: "The point is not, however, that Swift here suddenly recognized the failure of the Augustan response to madness—his satiric tactics are determined, after all, by his satiric strategy—rather it is to see how for Swift even reason, when it aspires to more than common sense, pulls the seesaw of the mind off balance and makes a man mad."⁶ The latter half of the sentence is valuable, and leads us to the real point: that for Swift there were different kinds of madness and this particular kind is sadder than that of the madmen who indulge in chaotic "fecalization" and violence. If we agree that the modest proposer is modest and well-intentioned we are quite out of Bedlam—indeed we are quite out of Lagado, where the projectors, as Gulliver is warned, are testily thin-skinned.

The projector of the *Proposal* shows no signs that he is likely to be dragged away to the mad house. "Recent scholars have shown that the Modest Proposer is not only a typical projector but, more important, a typical theorist of a certain kind, a political arithmetician."⁷ Swift knows this kind of man inside out; indeed, he often works the same line of country in his political pamphlets. One can see the same game of sweet reasonableness and mathematical argument being used by Swift in his personal attacks on Marlborough and in the Drapier's letters. Ewald's analysis of part of the technique of the *Proposal* might well apply to many of Swift's political essays: "In his statistical computations also the author interweaves facts with his proposal . . . This device of working essential facts into a system which also includes non-essential facts is characteristic of the essay."⁸ In his political papers Swift writes in a similar manner, mixing facts, and non-essentials, leaving things

out, keeping his argument as narrow as possible, and anyone who depends upon Swift to tell the whole truth about Marlborough or the Whigs and Tories or the Irish currency problem would be, quite deliberately, misled. The historians know that; that is, of course, what political pamphleteering has always been about. However much Swift may go on about lawyers, he is a master of aggressive, slanted advocacy, and is rarely censured for doing, with such grace and wit, what his adversaries were doing with blunter instruments. The *Examiner*, whatever Swift says to the contrary, does not tell the whole truth. He picks and chooses and would have been of little use to Harley and St. John if he had done otherwise.

So does the writer of the *Proposal*. What he puts in seems bad enough, and the critics have made the very best of what he says and how he says it. But one of the most important points about the essay is what he does not say. What is lacking is a sense of *what* he is talking about. The tone is all right and all wrong at the same time. "There is a certain fastidious preciseness of phrase in this which belies the sympathy one might expect."⁹ That is as one would expect from a political economist, out to set things right. What is missing is a sense of, not just humanity, but of horror, and it is just this which cannot be satisfied by talking about the projector's lack of awareness; he is aware. Edward J. Corbett in his stylistic analysis of the essay seems to suggest that the projector knows all the time what he is on about: "The proposer not only underplays his proposal (note "a modest proposal") and his arguments to justify the proposal but also underplays his emotions. One has a hard time of it finding emotionally freighted words in the essay."¹⁰ This may be explained in part by the tidy professionalism of the projector; perhaps there is no place for sloppy emotionalism in a technician's paper. As Bullitt says in his discussion of the ease with which reality becomes words, mere words in the world Locke suspected: "Words, therefore, often become mere appearance which hide the reality of the objects they describe."¹¹ If this is the case with the projector, the unemotive language is not only a mark of professionalism, but a deliberate attempt to hide the moral and emotional ramifications of his subject. What is absent is the pain, just as it is absent in the magnificent "flaying" passage in the *Tub*. The fastidiousness, the professional discreteness is essential if he is to make his point, and the point is all. If he is horribly, disfiguredly insane as Byrd suggests, it is not in the same way as Peter or Jack or the Grub Street narrator or Gulliver. Their insanity is right out front: the modest proposer has hidden his behind blandly professional competence, his step-by-step reasonableness, his

good intentions; he is all the more dangerous for that reason. He is Swift's most lethal character. When we look over the entire group of satiric foils used by Swift, we may see varying degrees of moral and intellectual failure, but none who get away with it. The intent of the satirist is to demolish fools and villains; Swift's other works make mincemeat of them. We need not suggest that Swift is blatantly direct in telling his readers what to think of his victims' conduct. Kathleen Williams is probably right in her suggestion: "In fact, there is not usually a 'norm' in Swift's satire, positively and unequivocally stated. As far as any positive position can be discovered, it must be by piecing together the hints and implications and indirections of Swift's whole method; it is foreign to that method to embody in one person or one race a state of things of which he fully approves."¹² Certainly the modest proposer is not wrong in identifying Ireland's desperate poverty. "The purpose of any project is to propose a remedy for certain present bad conditions. In the criticism of these conditions the author frequently speaks for Swift. In his proposed remedy, he speaks for himself."¹³ The Irish problem is real enough, as is Swift's obvious first target, his old nemesis, the professional who has so refined his skill that it is all skirt. "The essential characteristic of this mechanized thought is that by concentrating upon the fabrications of one's own brain instead of looking at nature, one never sees things as they are . . . artifice is substituted for nature, the means for the end, the manner for the matter, the nonessential for the essential."¹⁴ In a sense, the style is the meaning; the solution is more important than the problem. The modesty, the caution, the logic, the tidiness of gathering up all the loose ends (*vide* the way in which relations between man and wife are approached from all angles), the coolness in the face of national disaster are thoroughly professional. The projector's world is simply one of elemental marketing, supply and demand, and as such it allows for the absence of humanity which is so important to the wider satirical subject: the inhumanity visited upon the Irish by English commercial repression and manipulation. This is where much of the pressure of the essay lies and where tension builds up through the work (*vide* the way in which a theme of "tenderness" is used to hint at the horror: the meat is tender, too tender, in fact, for long passage, the dishes prepared will be delicately gourmet, the skins make the softest gloves, husbands will be unusually tender to their wives, etc.). Eventually the reader expects all this to be exposed for what it is; no satirist will let this go on and on.

There is, as a result, enormous "back-pressure" in the *Proposal*; the projector is allowed to pile on the agony in accumulating the details of a viable commercial enterprise without intrusion of the satiric voice of the

author. Only the duality of interpretation (such as manifested in the "tenderness" idea suggested above and in the animal imagery) breaches the structure and then goes unheeded in the sweet reasonableness of the projector. This "back-pressure", this building demand by the reader that the projector be stopped or at least undermined remains at the end because the satiric voice never does enter. Rosenheim's satiric spectrum is working in the sense that the reader must see that, aside from its sheer lunacy, the project is offensive to any civilized mind. What makes for difficulty is that, in a sense, the projector is left quite unscathed by the essay. This is not usually true in Swift; his satiric foils come away marked by the experience of writing—the work is in that sense "meaning". Gulliver, for all his determination to write his journeys as he thinks he saw them, arrives finally at *his* dead end. The Grub Street writer is more fragile than ever at the end of his work, however much he hopes that the writing will make sense of his world.

But the modest proposer never has a moment of self-doubt, first or last. He is not destroyed by the revelation of his shallowness; he is, as a matter of fact, proud and clean-handed at the end of his work. Gulliver admits how desperately unhappy he is, despite his prideful knowledge of what is best for him and the world. The Grub Street writer, one suspects, must do it all again tomorrow or slip back into Bedlam. The modest proposer has done a good job of work, thank you very much.

The absence of intrusion by Swift or by a satiric mouthpiece for Swift may be explained, in part, by John Bullitt who suggests that Swift is least likely to appear when he is most committed emotionally:

Perhaps the ultimate difference between the satire of Swift and that of most of his contemporaries both in England and France—is that Swift really cared. However, revealed intensity of feeling, as Swift recognized early in his writing career, is incompatible with the comic spirit; and both consciously and perhaps unconsciously with a self-protective need—he developed a variety of techniques which dissociated himself, and consequently his feelings from any direct *vis-à-vis* relationship with his object.¹⁵

Bullitt seems to think that only by such "distancing" can great satire be achieved, although this seems more dubious than the suggestion that, at least for Swift, the farther he kept away the better, given his desire to amuse as well as castigate and given his strong feelings about many of his satirical subjects. Certainly Bullitt's idea is not incompatible with Kathleen Williams' suggestion that Swift would often rather not tell us how to take his satire, would often hide the "moral norm" completely. What is unsatisfying about applying this suggestion to the *Proposal* is

the fact that two strong elements of the essay are not touched by it. In the first place, it is not really an essay within the ambit of any "comic spirit", and consistent with this the horrified indignation of the sensitive reader is in fact intensified rather than diminished by the fact that the proposer is never really tackled either severely or in anything like the aura of comic generosity which surrounds the Grub Street writer in the *Tub*. Bullitt may be right in proposing that Swift knew that no audience wants to be present at a tedious harangue: "the reader may distrust violence in a moralist and the person attacked may congratulate himself on his importance. On the other hand, ironic laughter from the corner is, perhaps, the most effective form of diminution at the satirist's disposal."¹⁶ What Swift seems to be proving in the *Proposal* is that a lack of ironic laughter is even more powerful.

In Michael V. DePorte's book on the theme of madness in English eighteenth-century literature, one finds a finer apprehension than Byrd's of the kind of madness that we find in the proposer: "Through him Swift shows that one can be absolutely dispassionate, wholly guided by reason, without being in the slightest degree moral or right. He shows too that to give one's mind to reason alone may carry one farther from the common forms than ever are Peter and Jack. Madness is not, therefore, identified exclusively with excess passion or misguided imagination; it is linked rather with what is private, idiosyncratic, and perversely subjective."¹⁷ It is just this kind of madness applied to the Irish problem which precludes Swift from going funny all over. The Grub Street writer may be mocked not only because he is patently ineffectual, but also because Swift and Congreve and Addison and others of similar intellectual power are around to put the case right for responsible journalism. The modest proposer, however, is not so harmless; the problem is a real one of alarming and desperate proportion—and no one is interested in putting it right. Indeed, the prevailing political idea of Ireland as a colony makes such changes impossible, as it was to do later with damaging results in the American colonial question. Swift may well have anticipated the uselessness of trying to do anything, and this may have something to do with the critical problem as it stands.

Here we might bring two formidable critics, Louis Landa and F. R. Leavis face to face, since the trick of the *Proposal* may lie between their respective comments. Leavis puts the case at its bleakest: the essay is essentially negative and destructive.¹⁸ Landa denies this; for him the positive point lies in the fact that the proposer is right all along in suggesting that human beings are the riches of the nation, if only they are allowed to act to their own advantage.¹⁹ Certainly the germinating seed

is that idea, but Swift allows the proposer to take that idea far from its beginnings, and the essay never really gets back to that humane beginning. Swift does not allow the essay to turn that compliment to humanity. We may know it, but the essay does not ultimately confirm it. Swift has simply gone away, leaving the satirical destruction of the proposer to someone, anyone, else. This is where the intense "back-pressure" throbs and where the work achieves greatness. "The place and the incident take their character as much from what is left out as from what is named."²⁰ For Leavis this is moral irresponsibility, mere destruction. But the irresponsibility may not, as a matter of fact lie with Swift, as Leavis seems to suggest. In the face of an impossible task, even for so formidable a satirist as Swift, the negative, at that historical time and place, may be the only kind of honesty available. This is what we might call "ironic" satire if "ironic" has any critical freshness left: perhaps "aborted" satire might do for a work in which the author so blatantly admits the failure of his weapons to make for a change of heart or policy.

Two other works might help us to understand the *Proposal: The Country Wife* and *Major Barbara*, both comedies, but both ending somewhat wryly for the comic world. *The Country Wife* is, in many ways, an archetypal Restoration comedy; it is also peculiarly cynical in allowing the greatest villain of all to escape detection. He may be the cleverest, the handsomest, the wittiest, but he is surely the most amoral, and, in the end, he is allowed to get away, to continue, indeed, beyond the play in his winning ways. What has happened to the comic healing of society? *Major Barbara* is no less ambiguous. The young and the beautiful may marry in the end, but only under the calculatingly kind eye of Undershaft, again the wittiest and the most intelligent character, but one severely compromised by his murderous profession. Surely Wycherley and Shaw are saying, in different ways, that given *this* society, given what *this* society wants, the good cannot win, but the Horners and the Undershafts will. As the modest proposer says: "I desire the reader will observe, that I calculate my remedy for this one individual kingdom of Ireland, and for no other that ever was, is, or, I think, ever can be upon earth."²¹ Given this time, this place, these people, respectively, Horner, the modest proposer, and Undershaft will win.

Swift practices varying degrees of this "aborted" satire throughout his career. His *Argument to prove that the abolishing of Christianity in England may, as things now stand, be attended with some inconveniencies* has the seeds of such approach in its title, although it is more *jeu d'esprit* than anything else; he saves his serious thoughts on the

problems of the Anglican church for the *Sentiments* which is one of the least satirical of his works. Rosenheim's "satiric spectrum" may help in judging the kind of satirical disapproval or "weight" which falls, from work to work, in Swift's canon, but it is possible that we need another scale to catch Swift completely. The target in the satires may call for varying kinds of disapproval by the reader, but Swift's position *vis-à-vis* the subject may be on another scale and at a different distance from that of the reader. The Grub Street writer, for instance, is without moral worth, but Swift is often uncommitted. Indeed, the *Tub* is strongly comic however much the things that the Grub Street writer champions are antipathetic in the extreme to any right-thinking man. The subject, then, is far into the obviously offensive on Rosenheim's scale, but Swift's authorial voice is very often near the comic line; so often so as to severely diminish the satiric attack. The "satiric voice" of the author is so muted as to diminish the satiric "heat" of the work simply because it does not confirm the attack on the moral obloquy revealed in the satiric subject. Fielding does something similar. The conduct of his less admirable characters is often clearly criminal, but Fielding often will undermine the satiric exposure by allowing his authorial *persona* to explain away or compromise the moral judgment. But then Fielding was always attempting to get his world into comic shape.

Swift does the same sort of thing, sometimes supporting the obvious moral judgment, sometimes intensifying it—sometimes not. *A Modest Proposal*, however, is a peculiar case. Swift has quite simply gone away, throwing his reins on the neck of the reader. Horrifying the proposal and the details of the projector's ideas may be; most horrifying is the lack of satiric rebuttal. The satiric voice does not mock, does not deride, does not attack. What Swift does do is leave the scene of the crime. Given England's political indifference to Ireland, the prevailing political theory of the relation of colony to motherland, the social attitudes of Englishmen to Ireland, Swift gives his readers what they want and what they deserve: a tender and delicious bundle of bloody meat. If the success of satire lies in going too far, then Swift has done it. He leaves the clever, neat-thinking proposer in full control. As De Porte says in discussing Swift's general satiric technique: "his satire accordingly aims at cutting off avenues of escape into the thickets of rationalization and alibi. Realizing that the easiest mode of escape from satire is to identify with the satirist rather than his objects of ridicule, Swift often changes his perspective within a work so that the line of attack is harder to anticipate."²² Anticipate all you like—there will be no attack by the satirist in the *Proposal*. He has washed his hands of it; it lies with the reader to

get the blood off his, and Swift does not seem to expect such conversion.

Written relatively late in his career, the essay is perhaps best read in conjunction with the *Examiner* essays, when Swift was confident of his hold on his readers and knew he could influence them. This one question, the freeing of Irishmen from colonialism, was too much for even the greatest satirist of the age. "Negative" is not quite the right word to describe the work. It is, in fact, a cry from the heart. The madness continued.

NOTES

1. Max Byrd, *Visits to Bedlam, Madness and Literature in the Eighteenth Century* (Columbia, South Carolina, 1974).
2. Pullen, "Gulliver: Student of Nature", *The Dalhousie Review*, vol. 51, pp. 77-89.
3. Byrd, *Visits*, p. 96.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
7. Martin Price, *Swift's Rhetorical Art* (New Haven, 1953), p. 71.
8. William B. Ewald Jr., *The Masks of Jonathan Swift* (Oxford, 1954), p. 171.
9. Price, p. 72.
10. Edward J. Corbett, "A Method of Analyzing Prose Style with a Demonstration Analysis of Swift's *A Modest Proposal*", in *Contemporary Essays on Style*, eds. Glen A. Love and Michael Payne (Glenview, Illinois, 1969), p. 94.
11. John M. Bullitt, *Jonathan Swift and the Anatomy of Satire: A Study of Satiric Technique* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), p. 125.
12. Kathleen M. Williams, "Gulliver's Voyage to the Houyhnhnms (1951)", in *Swift Modern Judgements*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London, 1968), p. 249.
13. Ewald, p. 165.
14. Bullitt, p. 148.
15. Bullitt, pp. 38-39.
16. Bullitt, p. 50.
17. Michael V. DePorte, *Nightmares and Hobbyhorses Swift, Sterne, and Augustan Ideas of Madness* (San Marino, Calif. 1974), p. 79.
18. See F.R. Leavis, "The Irony of Swift", in *Swift Modern Judgements*, ed. Jeffares, pp. 121-134. Also Ewald, p. 168.
19. Louis A. Landa, "A Modest Proposal and Populousness", *Modern Philology*, XL (Nov., 1942), pp. 161-170.
20. Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York, 1953), p. 216. Speaking in context about literature in general.
21. Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal" in *Irish Tracts 1728-1733*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford, 1971), p. 116.
22. DePorte, p. 93.