3.18

Jonathan Swift: The Ultimate Realities of Satire

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE SATIRIST’S ULTIMATE REALITY

To speak of Swift (1667–1745) is necessarily first to speak of Satire, for only through Satire can the essential meaning and reality of the man and his work be defined. On the subject of Satire there are several self-evident truths to be noted. Rhetorically Satire serves as a mode or genre, or both simultaneously (Starkman, 1969). As a genre Satire comes down to us in the western world from the Greek and Roman traditions as illustrated by Aristophanes, Juvenal, Persius and Horace; in addition we must reckon with the mixed genre of a kind of prose narrative called Menippean Satire. All these rhetorical traditions have remained reasonably constant and recognizable, although they have been subject to many modifications in the course of their histories. As a mode Satire is a much more fluid and commonplace phenomenon than generic Satire; the mode is generated by a point of view, a turn of wit, a taste for the ludicrous or absurd, although tragic overtones may make themselves heard; it is secondary, derived, often lacking in the high seriousness of generic Satire. The mode is always evident in the genre, but the genre does not necessarily control the mode. Satire as genre controls its devices rather stringently: its themes, plots, situations, structures, ideas, figures, language — all the so-called ‘strategies’ of Satire. Satire as a mode, as a manner of thinking and speaking, a point of view, involves us less in crucial, comprehensive moral comment. It suffers the fool and the knave more casually, on the whole, than does generic Satire; it can afford to. The satirist speaking satirically outside the genre of Satire encounters absurdity in passing and makes the most of it. It does not determine his world picture nor constitute his moral system. Furthermore, he is a cuckoo bird, ready to move into any genre he finds usable, to establish a temporary residence: in lyric, in drama, in the novel.

Few satirical novels or dramas are able to preserve their conventional narrative or dramatic integrity once Satire has moved in. What kind of novel is Tristram Shandy, or Giles Goatboy? What kind of drama Measure for Measure or Waiting for Godot? If they are not novels or dramas of any orthodox description, they are not Satires in any generic fashion either. In its modern absurdist phase, Satire has all but cannibalized some of our most talented ‘novelists’ and ‘dramatists,’ and turned them into something other, impressive but other. Of all literary genres, lyric poetry appears to have withstood satiric
metamorphosis best; indeed it has flourished in a satiric mode while retaining its lyric integrity. T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Wallace Stevens, to speak only of modern poets, have seemed to be able to move comfortably in the contexts of lyricism and Satire both. But that may well be because satiric poets, Horace, Juvenal, Dryden, Pope, Byron, and many others, had long since established a free zone between the limits of mode and genre and marked out avenues of access. The satirical novel, on the other hand, often tends to be a bit polemical, to subordinate narrative to didactic, dialogue to wit, and naturalism and experimentalism to moralism. In its modern phase, Satire, it appears, has all but liquidated some of our most significant novelists and dramatists, and taken over the mortgage.

When the satirist is working in his proper genre, in the time honored tradition of Aristophanes, Menippus, Horace, Juvenal, and Persius, as well as the addenda and revisions that history has attached to theirs, he enjoys a very wide latitude of matter and manner. He may become a social spokesman, a public defender, a moralist, though technically not an apologist. He may play the fool and cavort about like a clown, or promiscuously spew wrath and contempt around to all and sundry, especially his ‘betters.’ Either way he leaves his victims impugned, looking stupid or evil. He feels entirely free to use almost any rhetorical device, inherited or self-created. He is no respecter of persons, and he is entitled to the perquisites of a wide range of wit, irony, sarcasm, caricature, exaggeration, burlesque, slapstick, parody, mimicry, and more. He is justified by his moralism and is enabled by his temperament, and he refuses to hold himself responsible for any excesses since he is only reporting, not creating them. They merely measure the depths of his moral indignation, even when that indignation moves into hostilities of all kinds, rage, abusiveness, and misanthropies. To the satirist’s vocation of slum clearance, the ball and chain he swings so energetically against the rotten structure being demolished there are no limits set by propriety or benevolence. As for the new structure that ultimately must replace the old, that is not the satirist’s concern.

On the whole, the satirist’s role is a puzzling, negating one, fraught with the dangers of excess, a way of confronting an unacceptable status quo, with a special license to attack or destroy, and with no obligation to rebuild, in tone ranging from the ludicrous to the desperate, with no holds barred. The satirist’s moralism is diluted by his scepticism, his much vaunted rationalism by his passion, and his balance by excess. Wayne Booth calls it ‘the habit of negative rhetoric,’ in which affirming and denying are rhetorically interchangeable.’ (Booth, 1974 pp. 192ff; 84, n.3). Formally it flourishes in what Robert Martin Adams has called ‘open form,’ an apparently formless form, like that of Swift’s Tale of a Tub, dedicated to its ‘unresolved conflict with the intent of displaying its own unresolvedness.’ (Adams, 1958 pp. 13–16, 167). At times it all seems to approach madness. Undoubtedly such corrosive satire as Swift’s often is cannot be relegated exclusively to the formal literary or socio-political exigencies confronting the satirist; neither will moral realism, however urgent, alone suffice to account for Satire. Certainly the personality and temperament of the Satirist are heavily invested in his Satire, but they are not easily analyzed, and perhaps cannot be. The psychological and psycho-analytical post mortems that Swift invites are at best uncertain and at worst obscurantist.
If Jonathan Swift was made by any legitimate definition of that term, which is possible (we know only that he suffered from Menière’s disease and from several of the serious disabilities of old age), one is inclined to feel that he did not impose the madness on the work so much as that the work imposed its madness on him. (Greenacre, 1955; Brown, 1961 chap. 3) For in its amalgamation of the comic and the deadly serious, Satire takes an inordinate talent for suffering, for containing the pain of things, and rarely is the satirist free of his own ambivalences and frustrations that we are privy to only in the work. Swift’s *saeva indignatio* was both private and public. The epitaph Swift ordered for his tombstone has become part of the heritage of English Satire: ‘*Hic depositum est Jonathan Swift, S.T.D. hujus ecclesiae Cathedrae Decani, ubi saeva indignatio ulterius cor lacerare nequit. Abi viator, et imitare, si poteris, strenuum virili libertatis vindicatorem.*’

However formulated, the satirist’s ultimate reality is rarely entirely light hearted, however much laughter his wit elicits. He lacks the outer directedness of the parodist. But his vision is not necessarily tragic either. His reality rests in the orthodoxy, the reason and rules which, though they may be tacit, define what he finds already imperilled or attacked. Very often that orthodoxy lies in the age immediately preceding his, the good old days of his fathers, just before the radicals or liberals, of whatever stripe, threatened the tried and true common forms of yesterday. The conflicts of *A Tale of a Tub*, for example, were already outdated by the time it was published. And though the ‘scope’ of Swift’s satire is ‘radical,’ its ‘basis’ is ‘deeply conservative’ (Lock, 1980, p. 148; 1983, pp. VII–VIII).

2. SWIFT’S LIFE AND WORKS

In one sense Jonathan Swift was a conventional enough citizen of his time and place. Born in Ireland in 1667 of an Anglo-Irish ancestry that included five prelates, he remained an Anglican and a monarchist for the days of his life, and he left the Whigs for the Tories in 1706 for what were good and sufficient political and religious reasons for Swift. In another sense, Swift’s life was from the beginning the complex matrix of his art, fraught with problems and disappointments. His father, Jonathan Swift the elder, died eight months before the birth of his son leaving his wife, Abigail Errick Swift, a young daughter and his posthumous son to the care of his brother Godwin. Before he was a year old the infant Jonathan was abducted to England by his nurse and not returned for almost three years. (She claimed the journey back too risky for the child.) Brought up in the household of his uncle Godwin, Jonathan and young Godwin, his cousin, were educated together, at Kilkenny School and at Trinity College, Dublin. At neither did Jonathan particularly distinguish himself. There is no record of any effort on his mother’s part to reclaim her son, nor of any rancor for it on Jonathan’s part, any more than there is record of particular gratitude on Swift’s part for his uncle’s generosity. Most charitably one may assume that Jonathan Swift’s prospects for advancement in the world would have been better served in his uncle’s than in his mother’s household. Modern psychology has found reason in Swift’s parental deprivation for his satiric turn of mind as well as for his curious relationships with women, with Varina (Jane Waring), Vanessa
(Esther Vanhomrigh), and principally with Stella (Hester Johnson). On the whole, however, I am persuaded that in this instance at least one treads on safer ground in the analysis of Satire rather than of the psyche of the satirist.

In 1689, in the face of the threat of the King's forces' entry into Dublin, Trinity College disbanded to England, and Swift became secretary to Sir William Temple, a notable Whig statesman, now retired, a remote family connection of the Swift's. Here in Temple's estate at Moor Park Swift remained for a decade until the death of Sir William in 1699. During that decade Swift was ordained an Anglican priest in 1695, and he gained modest livings in Kilroot and Laracor in Ireland, probably not through the efforts of Sir William, who, it would appear, failed to provide the preferment to his secretary that he might very well have expected to gain. It was the first of several such disappointments for Jonathan Swift, whose heart lay not in the Irish Church but in the exciting atmosphere of political London.

It was also at Moor Park that Swift began his poetical career with his five pindaric odes, though eventually Swift's poetical talent, which modern criticism values much more than has the past, has rested more securely in his *jeux d'esprit* than in his classical poetry. Most significantly, at Moor Park Swift began his *Tale of a Tub* volume which contained not only the *Tale* but also the *Battle of the Books* as well as the fragment on *The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*. (The volume was not to be published until 1703.) There are those who have found this volume almost as noteworthy as *Gulliver's Travels* written almost a quarter century later; but whatever the comparative judgments, the *Tale* volume, long misunderstood and undervalued, in the last half of our century has been much analyzed, appreciated, and acclaimed. The volume was initiated by Swift's defense of Temple's essay on the *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning*, which was sharply criticized by William Wotton; this sparked a major battle in the perennial war between Ancients and Moderns, along with a tangential fracas called the Phalaris controversy. In all the strife Swift's *Tale* volume was a major episode (Starkman, 1950, p. 47).

The Temple household was elegant and sophisticated, adorned by Lady Temple (formerly Dorothy Osborne) and Lady Gifford (Temple's sister), as well as a family connection of more humble origin, Mistress Johnson and her daughter Hester, eight years old when Swift arrived at Moor Park and eighteen when he left. By that time Swift and his Stella, as he called Hester, appear to have been inextricably bound to one another. Their relationship remained anomalous. As summarized by Ehrenpreis

Having removed Stella from her family when she was twenty, having isolated her in a strange city and then failed to stay at her side, he seemed to be testing Stella's devotion by the standard of his mother's. She must remain loyal to him and reject all suitors; she must not follow him or expect marriage; and he must be free to enjoy a secret friendship with a young heiress. (Ehrenpreis, 1983, I, 203)

One of the reasons for the anomalous relationship between Swift and Stella has been attributed to the disputed paternity of both, the possibility that both Swift and Stella were the 'natural' children of Sir William Temple. But whether it was consanguinity or neurosis that kept Swift and Stella tightly bound but never married (if indeed they were unmarried) remains questionable. It seems clear, however, that it was at Moor Park that
Swift’s adult personality and talents were fixed, for good or ill, one of his two major works begun, his satirical vein established, and his emotional center, however anomalous, fixed.

Upon leaving Moor Park, Swift became chaplain to Lord Berkely who was appointed Lord Justice for Ireland, and Swift’s recurrent shuttling from the Ireland where he did not want to be to the England where he did, continued; Swift was a divided soul not only in spirit but in place, and to a certain extent even in time. Nevertheless in Ireland he proceeded D.D. from Dublin and published his Tale volume in 1703. After 1707 he remained in England for two years still negotiating the First Fruits controversy for Ireland (an English tax on the Irish Church). It was during this period in which Swift was in England as much as in Ireland that he enjoyed position in the government and friendship with the greatest social and political figures of his day: first with the Whigs, especially the Addison group, and then the Tories, the Scriblerians, Arbuthnot, Pope, and Gay, and, of course the Tory Lords, Oxford and Bolingbroke. It was unquestionably the happiest period of Swift’s life. It was also the most prolific period in which Swift wrote many of his major political works, not to mention the many jeux, both in prose and verse. It was in this period that he wrote a half dozen of his most significant pamphlets, of which only the Argument against the Abolishing of Christianity was satirical. Two extended works, the Contests and Dissensions in Athens and Rome of 1701, and the Sentiments of a Church of England Man and A Letter Concerning the Sacramental Test of 1708 are among the most important political works of the period. In 1710 the Whigs fell, Swift was taken up by the Tories, and again he gave his pen to the party in power. He edited the Examiner papers for them, in 1711 wrote The Conduct of the Allies in 1711, and The History of the Four Last Years of the Queen (Anne) after her death in 1714. The Tories fell in 1714, and for all his service to them Swift was left only with the deanery of St. Patrick’s in Dublin.

The period between 1699, the year of Temple’s death, and Swift’s final return to Ireland in 1714 is a complex one. Several volumes have been given to the full and true account of all the shifting details of Swift’s Whig and Tory fealties, but what emerges clearly and needs to be noted even in the briefest account is that Swift’s primary and deepest loyalty lay in the Church. Perhaps the most apposite brief statement on the subject was made by Quintana, when in his consideration of The Sentiments of a Church of England Man and The Letter Concerning the Sacramental Test, of 1708, he found Swift enamoured of neither Whigs nor Tories, for he ‘sought neither a Whig state-church nor a Tory church-state’ (Quintana, 1953, p. 138).

1714 finds Swift at the Deanery of St. Patrick’s, so far as he was concerned, in exile. For all his efforts Swift had failed at every point to receive the preferment he wanted and deserved: from Sir William Temple, the Whigs, the Tories, and, indeed, the Church. Why he was always denied preferment one can only guess. His satiric tongue? Tale of a Tub which early alienated so many? More than likely it is a fact that satirists make uncomfortable bedfellows, no matter on what side of the bed they lie.

Swift’s final persona, that of the Irish patriot is probably one of his greatest. In the Draper’s Letters of 1724, sparked by Wood’s half pence, Swift attacks the avarice of the English in their devaluation of the Irish currency in a fiction that has the hilarity of desperation, a mood, in fact, that colors a great many of Swift’s most powerful satires.
The wagon loads of devaluated pence that would be needed to pay for the most commonplace of commodities are no more outrageous than the devaluation of body and spirit that England has imposed on the Irish. The *Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being a Burden to their Parents or Country and for Making them Beneficial to the Public* of 1729 is actually a parody of economic tracts of the period in which ‘political arithmetic’ (statistics) is used to differentiate between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving poor.’ Here again we find the hilarity of despair, the proposal that since Ireland is cannibalized by England anyway, one might as well turn signifier into signified and establish a profitable cottage industry of Irish babies for English tables. Though a brief tract, on some horrible level a *jeu d'esprit*, the *Modest Proposal* almost shares the authority of *Gulliver's Travels* as a satire which ‘the world would not willingly let die.’ Only once again did Swift return to England, briefly in 1727. In 1728 Stella died leaving Swift crushed, unable to participate in her funeral, an observer from his window. In 1742 Swift was found incompetent; in 1745 he died leaving a generous bequest for housing the ‘mad,’ which still flourishes as St. Patrick’s Hospital for the Insane. Though Swift died infirm, probably senile, beset by the infirmities of age, there is nothing to prove he was insane. His epitaph is the rage of a man profoundly dedicated to his love of mankind albeit in ‘endless error hurled.’

3. FAITH, REASON AND SATIRE

To arrive at the ultimate realities of Swift’s mind and art careful distinction must be made between what Swift says and how he says it, the kinds as well as the themes of an essentially bifurcated body of work. The great body of his work, as has already been noted, is occasional, journalism of one kind or another, occasionally moving fortuitously into *belles lettres* by reason of its brilliance. These are also the work of a self-interested man whose core of being is lived through his pen in a controversial period in a brilliant society. These works find their ultimate reality in their immediate relevance to the specific occasions that bred them. Church and State were intimately intertwined, and Swift’s religious beliefs are of necessity conformable to the political reality in which he finds himself. Though Swift was an Anglican and a rationalist, the label Rational Anglicanism is not exclusive enough to delineate him in detail. Fideists, Deists, Latitudinarians of all sorts, even ‘new philosophers’ (by which is meant scientists) were also rationalists and many of them Anglicans (Harth, 1961, chap. 2). Furthermore, there is rationalism and rationalism, that which supports reason against the senses and the passions, as in the good old ‘Elizabethan world picture,’ in which Swift believed, and the rationalism which opposed faith to reason, which Swift did not. Herein lies what has been called Swift’s anti-intellectualism. For him faith rests on the mysteries of God who has seen fit to reveal them through his church. Swift was a moralist, not a theologian, and he was quite comfortable with the common forms of faith and reason, and he felt, as he said in his *Thoughts on Religion*, ‘appointed by Providence’ to defend the Church, and, of course, thereby the State. These ideas are clearly enunciated in his *Sentiments of a Church of England Man* of 1708.

What is perhaps more to the point than establishing the orthodoxy of an Anglican Dean
in Ireland during this period is consideration of the way in which that faith relates to Satire. The problem is already evident in *A Tale of a Tub*. If Martin is the norm (or as close as any one Swift provides) between the excesses of Catholic Peter and non-conformist Jack, he doesn’t speak very well either for Swift’s Church or its doctrine. He is merely less deranged and wilfull than his brothers, but he is by no means a model of the true faith. The point arises again in the *Argument against Abolishing Christianity*, which has something of the same relationship to religion that *Modest Proposal* has to politics. Neither norm is acceptable. Feeding Irish babies to English landowners will not solve the political or economic problems of the Irish any more than substituting nominal for real Christianity will solve the problems of the Church. Nominal Christianity may sound better than no Christianity at all, but by how much? In general Swift seems more concerned with the Church than with Christianity; it was, after all, the Church that was his métier, and the Peters and Jacks were less a threat to real Christianity than they were to the comfortable functioning of the Church. In general one sometimes gets the impression that overcome by the heady fumes of his satirical inventiveness, Swift seemed to be less concerned with ultimate realities than with immediate absurdities. Good satirists do not make good philosophers, yet one must not take Swift too seriously when he said he would rather ‘die in a ditch’ than pursue the ‘causes’ of philosophy. Nor do satirists make good theologians, though they may be excellent churchmen.

The question is how Swift moved so persuasively from his clerical orthodoxy into some of the satirical deconstructions of his *Tale of a Tub*, how Martin who remains as much of a norm as the volume has, manages to support his disingenuous equivocations. Were the historically developed pluralisms and ambiguities of even contemporary Anglicanism, however ‘rational’ and realistic, as acceptable as they claimed to be? Is Gulliver really ultimately trapped between reason and the passions? Or does any religious orthodoxy, whatever its distribution of faith and reason, inevitably provide for what a modern theologian, in another context, has called ‘an utopian possibility of belief?’ (Tracy, 1986) Does not Swift reject that possibility by having Gulliver escape Utopia only to return to England to create his own version in the stable? Is it ultimate belief in Christianity that Swift is renouncing, or is it everyman’s ability, or his own, to live with it? Or without it? Is it ‘frail man in endless error hurled’ who raises Swift’s bile, or is it a crisis of faith in God rather than, or perhaps as well as, in man. Though the point is disputable, I prefer to think that the aged Swift mumbling ‘I am what I am,’ is less a proof of his dotage than of his lifelong concern with the ‘ways of God to man’ (Starkman, 1981).

For more than two centuries now *Gulliver’s Travels* has continued to fascinate its diverse audiences. Yet the Satire continues to resist dogmatic interpretation, and one approach is not really much more authoritative than another; it may just be more fashionable at any one point. Perhaps the fact is that to the attuned ear the operative text of the work is not ‘Curse God and die,’ but more likely ‘There is not one righteous among you, nay not one.’ In the words of the King of the Brobdignagians of the second book of *Gulliver’s Travels*

My little friend Grildrig [Gulliver], you have made a most admirable panegyric upon your country. You have clearly proved that ignorance, idleness and vice are the proper ingredients for qualifying a legislator. That laws are best explained, interpreted, and applied by those whose interests and abilities
lie in perverting, confounding, and eluding them. I observe among you some lines of an institution, which in its original might have been tolerable, but these half erased and the rest wholly blurred and blotted by corruptions... 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 face of the earth. (Swift, 1957–68, XI, p. 137).

On the whole satirists do not flourish in an operative reality that is not in some way endangered. The danger lies either in the immediate past, or it looms in the future; the present is holding its own, but just barely. Swift began writing in a period that had already accommodated itself more or less to the Civil Wars, but their neutralizing by the Restoration and the Revolution of 1688 had not yet erased the recent past. It was a rationalizing, self-justifying period. Still, Swift left Ireland and returned to it for good practical reasons, though not under duress. Puritans and Papists both get slapped soundly in A Tale of a Tub, but Martin the establishment, is not exactly championed. Indeed it is the mark of the good satirist to hang loose, always to leave himself an escape hatch from his perilous balances. Swift’s dependence upon the reigning power structure, the tenuousness of his social and political alignments kept him wary of too total a conformity to contemporary power.

Ultimately, however, the justification of the satirist lies not in prevailing structures so much as in his own moralism and reformist temper. His moralism finds its justification in the world it confronts at any one point as it is available to the serious and enlightened mind. The context is determined by the social, political, religious, and intellectual realities of time and place, enunciated or tacit, challenged or accepted, but still operative in the milieu. This is what nourishes the peculiar needs of the satirist, a person chosen, determined in a way, by his hostilities, justified by his moralism, and enabled by his wit. He is no philosopher. Your philosopher, as Hobbes put it, is a person peculiarly subject to the ‘privilege of absurdity.’ (Leviathan 1,5,20) In this respect, at least, Swift would have been in entire accord with Hobbes. To the extent that a prevailing ‘world picture’ constitutes a philosophy of sorts, it is necessary to deal with Swift’s even remotely derived philosophical tenets, however axiomatic they may have been to him. That is perhaps best described by Irwin Ehrenpreis in his summation of A Tale of a Tub

Under the stunning complications of its surface the Tale has an intellectual symmetry. Everywhere in it, Swift is preaching the same lesson. His countrymen’s lives should possess the virtue and cultivation of Graeco-Roman antiquity, improved by Christian ethics and a cheering hope of salvation. To put themselves in this condition, they had only to accept the doctrines of the Church of England and the political constitution of 1688, to let their understanding instruct them in decisions outside the province of revelation, and to form their taste from the monuments of unaging intellect. (Ehrenpreis, 1962, p. 203)

This is the Ancient position in the war between Ancients and Moderns. To what extent that position defines Swift’s ultimate meanings and realities is not so easily determined. At the same time that Swift took on Modernity in an inclusive way as a major target of his satire in A Tale of a Tub, the fact is that his mind and art, certainly in his early works, were deeply influenced by current philosophical positions, no matter how tacit, opportunistic, or even erratic his use of them may have been.

Satire and formal philosophy have divergent intentions. The satirist soon learns to
give up on systems, and proceeds by negations and indirections to find his realities. Swift was never as serious about philosophy as he was about church and state. He was, in one sense, a rationalist, though an embattled one. When God and Nature bid the same, and both are sent sprawling into a ditch, where is your philosopher then? The ‘new philosopher’ of Swift’s Tale, is no more than a virtuoso, a projector, his natural habitat in Book III of Gulliver’s Travels, and his old one, as in the Tale, is a candidate for Bedlam, satirically speaking, of course, but as seriously intended as ‘The Digression on Madness’ of Swift’s Tale. It is not that reason has gone astray for the satirist, or that error abounds, but that any pursuit of nature and the limits of knowledge is bound to become an ‘epistemology of error,’ as Frances Deutsch Louis proves in her Swift’s Anatomy of Understanding: A Study of Swift’s Epistemological Imagination in ‘A Tale of a Tub’ and Gulliver’s Travels. ‘Gulliver’s Travels, like Tale of a Tub, does not hide Swift’s anatomy of error, it is the anatomy’ (Louis, 1981). Inasmuch as the philosopher is an enabler and ultimately concerned with man as he lives his life in the world, the satirist must deal with him and his philosophy, but he will never legitimatize it. Swift’s philosophical concerns must be approached warily, often by the indications of Satire, for his philosophy is strictly in the service of his Satire. One of the richest quarries in A Tale of a Tub is the blind epistemophilia of the Moderns.

As early in his career as A Tale of a Tub Swift recognized the dangers of Cartesianism, of the comfort Descartes provided to a mechanical interpretation of the universe and to the concept of God as a deistical prime mover. Hence he made Descartes a prototype of the mad Modern philosopher of the ‘Digression of Madness’ in A Tale of a Tub. Because ‘Cartesius reckoned to see before he died the sentiments of all philosophers like so many lesser stars in his romantic system rapt and drawn within his own vortex’ (Swift, 1957–68, I, p. 105). Swift is only too ready to consign him to Bedlam. Descartes provided the last link to the chain of progress and the role of the New Philosophy, that is the New Science, in it. Atheism was omnipresent in the air, surrounding rationalism overt or tacit, materialistic or mechanistic, atomic or corpuscular in its definition of matter, Baconian or Cartesian or Hobbesian, all carried the germ of an ultimate atheism. This is not to say that Swift is indiscriminate in his attacks. However anti-Hobbesian, he does not reject all of Hobbes’s hard realities. Though Hobbes’s material soul might well have filled Swift with more amusement than anxiety, he did share ‘something of the same fear of the abyss’ with Hobbes. (Lock, 1980, p. 10) The crux of Swift’s Satire rests more in Lockean empiricism than in Hobbesian materialism, yet as Louis suggests, the influences of Hobbes and Locke were not entirely separable; they both grew out of a growing epistemological awareness (Louis, 1981, p. 171).

W.B. Carnochan’s Lemuel Gulliver’s Mirror for Man of 1968 had sparked the growing interest in Lockean influence on Swift. Carnochan wanted ‘to explore’ the satirical element in the Lockean epistemology of Gulliver’s Travels, ‘the themes of perception, and the metaphysical essence of man and of nature and criteria of truth.’ But he was uncertain whether as a philosophical-satirical essay, Gulliver was actually a ‘commentary on Locke’s Essay.’ He acknowledge the possibility that Gulliver might be no more than generally Lockean, though he is enthusiastic at the possibility that it may indeed be so (Carnochan, 1968, pp. 120–27, 165). Although Carnochan remains very
tentative, his work helped produce a considerable amount of interest in Lockean influence on Swift.

Ricardo Quintana's *Two Augustans: John Locke, Jonathan Swift* of 1978 forms a welcome eddy in the pursuit of Lockean influences on Swift: he found them neither copious nor crucial. He related Swift's rationalism to prevailing Anglican rationalism rather than to directly philosophical sources, and he urged a recognition of more generally prevailing 'empiricisms.' He conjectured that for Swift, Locke's *Essay* would have rested on a 'false epistemology,' which rejected the traditional theory of knowledge that had served from Aristotle's time to his own. Nevertheless Quintana conceded that whatever their differences, Swift and Locke 'reveal in a number of ways that they were shaped in the same matrix of cultural forces and events' (Quintana, 1978, pp. 8–9, 75).

In the following year, however, Frederick Smith, in his *Language and Reality in Swift's 'Tale of a Tub,'* argued strenuously for specific influences of Locke on Swift. Like Locke, he said, Swift questioned the value of the rational not only in daily living but in ultimate reality; he doubted the ability of reason to 'locate verifiable, fixed, certain meanings about things.' Yet even though the empirical world is elusive, we have no recourse but to rely on our senses, for they are our 'lowest common denominators,' the 'empirical touchstones against which all else must be tested.' Smith quotes Hugh Kenner's approach to *Gulliver's Travels* as a 'satire on mindless empiricism,' and describes the *Tale* in terms of the 'opposition between the Cartesian rationalism of the Moderns and the Lockeian empiricism of Swift himself' (Smith, 1979, pp. 138, 165, 71, 126).

Frances Louis's account is more temperate and persuasive. She ascribes to Swift's 'epistemological imagination' a vision of man in which 'misunderstanding' is the 'satiric side of the epistemological coin.' She links Swift to the 'epistemological concerns of Locke, Hobbes, Bacon, Pascal, Sprat, Barrow, and Charon' rejecting a direct influence but suggesting that 'Swift looked at what they looked at,' but differently. Swift's art, she says, derives from a 'liaison' between his satiric vision and his epistemological inheritance. In his subversion of the epistemological categories of mind, matter, and language lies Swift's 'anatomy of misunderstanding.' Louis lays no claims for Swift as a systematic philosopher, only as a satirist for whom epistemology provided 'part of his satiric fiction.' And again, *Gulliver's Travels,* like *A Tale of a Tub* does not hide Swift's anatomy of error. It *is* the anatomy (Louis, 1981, pp. 4, 171, 113, 45, 179, 'Introduction').

Following Louis one is easily enabled to perceive the misguided epistemophilia of both Ancients and Moderns in *A Tale of a Tub* and *Gulliver's Travels.* In the 'Digression Concerning Madness,' of the *Tale,* perhaps more than anywhere else in Swift, we find a brilliant satiric manipulation of a benighted epistemophilia at work, spiritual and corporeal scrambled like eggs: mind and matter, body and soul, sense and reason; all the faculties are either mechanized or mystified. 'Last week I saw a woman flayed,' says Swift, 'and you would hardly believe how much it altered her person for the worse.' For is not it true that: 'He that can with Epicurus content his ideas with the films and images that fly off upon his senses from the superficies of things, such a man, truly wise, creams off nature, leaving the sour and the dregs for Philosophy and Reason to lap up?' All
Philosophy! And so the anatomy concludes. ‘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 (Swift, 1957–68, I, p. 108–9).

In this and other strange encounters among mind, matter, and language we do indeed find epistemology turned upside down and inside out so methodically, in fact, that they enable Louis to find that ‘the inconsistency of the narrator is not an artistic blunder but a structuring premise of the satire.’ Thus she enables one to read Swift’s Tale not as confused but as ‘a witty expose of confusion – the games people play with themselves and others in their attempts to learn. The continuity of the satire is the continuity of human error; wherever we look, Tale-dwellers go astray trying to read scripture, philosophy, theology, literature, and themselves’ (Louis, 1981, pp. 120, xx, 50, 105, 113 ff.).

Louis’s approach is ingenious and exciting, but it does breed some questions which do not, however, impugn her thesis. For one, it brings Satire very close to parody, which is only one brick in the complex structures of Satire. More significantly it seems to assign a kind of games playing mentality to the satirist: schematization, reductiveness, and something of a neutralizing of the intentionality and ‘seriousness’ of the satirist, whose moral justifications are in some peril of being trivialized by all the ingenuity. (Of course no one is more to blame for inviting such a reception than Swift himself.) When Satire and Philosophy are seen as riding in tandem, it is Satire, not Philosophy, that can become impugned. Though they both enjoy their justifications and realities, Philosophy’s abstractions and schematizations enjoy a greater respectability; whatever the assumptions of Philosophy, they remain caviar to the general and are taken seriously even when not understood. The moralistic preoccupations of Satire, on the other hand, its inherent hostilities and negations and exaggerations threaten us and suggest, however indirectly, that we too are fools or knaves. Philosophy is important to Satire and the satirist, but not as an equivalent, rather as one aspect of the imperfect status quo he is trying to impugn. Philosophy as well as politics, religion, science and esthetics must all validate him. If he limits himself to any one of them, he is hovering around the edges of parody. For this reason Satire flourishes best, as has been suggested, either in the strict conventions of Roman verse Satire, or in the open prose narrative formlessness previously described. To close prose Satire around any one philosophical or any other intellectual system is to deprive it of its inclusiveness and continuities, to tidy up its natural disorders, to estheticize it, and to minimize its deep socio-political foundations. Philosophy, like all systematized knowledge, is available to Satire as one target among several, not as a major ally. Satire’s ‘games’ can be philosophical, incidentally.

When, however, philosophy served Swift’s satiric needs, he exploited it brilliantly, as Professor Louis proves. ‘Men, as Swift’s epistemological imagination presents them to us, are forced by the nature of the encounter between mind and matter through the dubious medium of language to make mistakes,’ she says. The Tale and the Travels are anatomies of these errors. Epistemology formed ‘part of his satiric fiction,’ but that Swift’s Satire and epistemology are inseparable may be questioned. There is no doubt, however, that in Hobbes and Locke Swift ‘looked at what they looked at – in a different way’ (Louis, 1981, pp. 46, 113, xvii).
All this is to suggest that to look to formal philosophy for insight into Swift’s meanings and realities too confidently is to deny some of his deepest feelings and even convictions. As Swift wrote to Bolingbroke in 1729: ‘I renounce your whole philosophy because it is not your practice by the figure of living’ (Correspondence, III, 329). Ultimately it is in his letter to Pope, rather than to any other of his writings, that we must rest our case for Swift the moralist. In 1725 he wrote

I have ever hated all nations, professions and communities and all love is towards the individual. I hate the tribe of lawyers, but I love councillor such a one, judge such a one, for so with physicians (I will not speak of my own trade) soldiers, English, Scotch, French; and the rest, but principally I love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth. This is the system upon which I have governed myself many years (but do not tell) and so I shall go on till I have done with them. I have got materials towards a treatise proving the falsity of that definition animal rationale; and to show it should be rationis capax. Upon this great foundation of misanthropy (though not in Timon’s manner) the whole building of my Travels is erected; and I never will have peace of mind till all honest men are of my opinion. (Swift, 1963–65, Correspondence, III, p. 103)

And shortly thereafter Swift wrote to Pope again:

I tell you after all that I do not hate mankind. It is vous autres who hate them because you would have them reasonable animals and are angry for being disappointed. (Swift, 1963–65, Correspondence, III, p. 118)

4. CONCLUSION

Where in all the complexities of Swift’s mind and art we are to look for his ultimate meanings and realities remains uncertain and one dogmatizes here at one’s peril. Whether, finally, they rested in his Church, or his faith, such philosophy as he was willing to admit to, or to a more provisional and limited faith in his moralistic art, Satire, remains debatable. Quintana was certainly right when he found that Swift’s adherence to Anglicanism was not a purely intellectual matter, but his intellectual assent to the Church’s defined position (Quintana, 1978, p. 10). Nor is it any less probable that Swift’s certainties lay clearly and unquestionably in his Satire, for some of his most powerful satiric strokes are neutralized to some degree by his own antitheses. In the famous ‘Digression on Madness’ in A Tale of a Tub, that so clearly and so early declared his satiric genius, we are at the mercy of ambivalences. Sign and symbol, signifier and signified, fact and image, all are confused to marvellous effect; reason is subverted, philosophy irrationalized, and both are put into the service of madness. However brilliant, this kind of Satire offers us little comfort in our quest for meanings and realities, nor is it either intended or obliged to. It is, rather, intended to support our disbelief, for ultimate truth, of course, which, however, is rarely spelled out.

When at the very end of Swift’s ‘Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of poor People in Ireland from being a Burden to their Parents or Country and making them beneficial to the Public’ of 1729, Swift steps out of his satirical persona and speaks as a statesman, as an Irish patriot, he is entirely and straight forwardly didactic. He urges the Irish to tax their absentee landlords, to boycott English goods, and to organize in the
restraint of trade. This section, usually printed in italics, takes up less than one tenth the space on the printed page than the rest of this relatively brief tract. It stands in sharp contrast to the satiric fiction that constitutes the body of the tract, the plan to cannibalize Irish babies for export. It is a brilliant parody of the new science of political arithmetic advocated by Sir William Petty, among others. It is a powerful piece but it is also a relatively minor work on which to end even this brief examination of Swift’s ultimate realities. Nevertheless it serves its purpose: to conclude even a brief glance at the ultimate realities of one of the greatest satirists of the western world. For what is concluded is that the satirist’s dedication to ridiculing vice and folly, his outrage with man’s inhumanity to man, needs no justification beyond itself. His work needs no further validation, nor can he be invalidated so long as he preserves the strenuous mind and art of the satirist.

REFERENCES


