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Dynamic Identity and the Hazards of Satire in Swift

WILLIAM FREEDMAN

Early discussions of the intrusion of Swift's personality into his satire were likely to echo Thackeray's judgment of the fourth book of the *Travels*. "It is Yahoo language," he wrote: "a monster gibbering shrieks, and gnashing imprecations against mankind—tearing down all shreds of modesty, past all sense of manliness and shame; filthy in word, filthy in thought, furious, raging, obscene."¹ Thackeray's conclusion, as we know, was that "giant and great as this Dean is, I say we should hoot him,"² and in only slightly gentler ways, others did, or seemed to. "Swift's greatness," wrote Aldous Huxley in 1929, "lies in the intensity, the almost insane violence of that 'hatred of the bowels' which is the essence of his misanthropy and which underlies the whole of his work."³ Huxley denounces "the absurdity, the childish silliness, of this refusal to accept the universe as it is given."⁴ Middleton Murry, who introduced us to Swift's "excremental vision" in 1954, attacks it as "so perverse, so unnatural, so mentally diseased, so humanly wrong."⁵

Partly repelled, perhaps, by this revulsion, partly aided by the New Critical aversion to biographical, intentional, or psychological intrusions into critical discourse, most of the mid-century writing on Swift's satire turned away from the excrescences of personality in the work and focused on the more "purely literary" matters of satiric target and technique—as though the two were separable. So busy were Swift's critics hooting or ignoring his hooters that they were in a fair way to overlooking the fertilizing capacity of the leavings that had been the center of too limited

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attention. The result was a discernible thinness of treatment, a reductive denial of contradiction and complexity that kept Swift at a distance and identified his personae or narrators in comfortably univalent terms: the hack, the economic projector, the nominal Christian, the naive patriot, and so forth.

Given a sharp first push by Norman O. Brown in 1959,⁶ more recent studies of Swift's art have turned back to the psychological springs and motives of the satire and to their intricate contribution to the special nature and power of the work. The fearful psyche is there, in this new breed of shameless reading, judgment suspended or admiring; and in the work of John Traugott, Robert Adams, Claude Rawson, and Gardner Stout, the new fusion of mind and art has yielded splendid results.⁷ What these readers sense is what Rawson calls the "unending paths of vicious self-complication, bottomless spirals of human perversity" that are "less a matter of Swift's official ideological views than of mental atmosphere and ironic manipulation: that is, of a more informal, yet very active interplay between deliberate attacking purposes (and tactics), and certain tense spontaneities of self-expression."⁸ For Rawson, gratuitous cruelties detached from the ostensible satiric purposes spill into the surface of the texts where they shock and disorient us until the superego catches up with and moralizes them. The result is a minimally two-tiered structure and a complex interplay between conscious satire and insurgent impulse. The relationship between the real and putative authors, then, is no simple opposition, no easy matter of a mocked surface occasionally broken by an impatient authorial voice. Rather, the relationship, as Rawson rightly insists, "is at all times more elusive," the rigidities of mask-criticism tending to compartmentalize "what needs to remain a more fluid and indistinct interaction."⁹

In a brilliant effort to compartmentalize at least partially that elusiveness in *A Tale of a Tub*, Gardner Stout identifies a conflictual design in the relationship between Swift and his audible voices in the *Tale*. For Stout, "Swift's vivid parodies and personations are often projective embodiments of repressed aspects of his own personality"¹⁰ which he at once identifies with and, by ventriloquizing them into the frames of the mocked satiric dummies, disassociatively attacks. The operative psychological principle is what Freud calls "negation," whereby "the content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness, on condition that it is *negated*"¹¹—as Swift's are by the satiric assault on what he so clearly revels in describing.

The relationship between Swift and his personae, again, is not merely that of hidden author and exposed mask, but a dubious

battle among various facets of Swift's troubled personality, libido and conscience among them. It becomes a struggle, therefore, between the contrary pulls of affirmation and denial expressed so vividly in Swift's almost obsessive occupation with the subjects of concealment, "dark authors," and hidden messages, and in the marked ambivalence of their treatment. Swift is torn and tears the reader of the *Tale* between the foolish serenity of denial and the knavery or madness of full discovery.

Rawson aside, the writers I have mentioned focus almost exclusively on *A Tale of a Tub*. It is there they find the disconnected extrusions of the author, the projections of underlying urges onto satiric targets and the aesthetic surface, the struggle between revelation and concealment, and the fluid interaction of real and ostensible author. Again taking their impetus from Norman O. Brown's seminal essay, more recent treatments of Swift's "excremental poems" have extended some of these observations into the poetry. The real theme of these poems, as Brown observed and as others have since noted, "is the conflict between our animal body, appropriately epitomized in the anal function, and our pretentious sublimations."¹² And Peter Schakel is surely right when he commends the scatological poems for "their disclosure of a fallible, uncertain, struggling Swift" and for "the most intimate glimpse into himself that Swift ever permitted."¹³

But even the best of these readings of the poems, or any one of them, do less than full justice to the Protean complexity of the interaction between author and narrator (or character), to the depth of the poems' preoccupation with the larger question of exposure and denial, and, through that, to their possibly self-conscious implications for the satiric enterprise Swift was so ambivalently caught up in. It is with a view to these matters and to their representativeness of Swift's mode of operation that I turn to "The Lady's Dressing Room" and, less exhaustively, to "Strephon and Chloe." These two poems are especially revealing of habitual yet usually less accessible processes in that both employ an audible first-person narrator and an identified principal male character among whose sometimes different, sometimes identified inclinations, urges, and recommendations the narrative shifts. We see on their surface, in other words, the intricate dialogue between Swift's split and flowing selves that is equally present though less palpably exposed in the major prose satires: in *A Tale of a Tub*, "The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit," "An Argument against Abolishing Christianity," "A Modest Proposal," and *Gulliver's Travels*.

The early lines of "The Lady's Dressing Room" seem to maintain a relatively clear distinction between the prying Strephon and the recording narrator. The former, who functions principally as a probing eye, "took a strict Survey" of the contents of the room which the narrator, "to make the matter clear" to his readers, offers as "Inventory." Almost immediately, however, the narrator steps back from the reveling Strephon, calling him a "Rogue" for displaying with brazen glee his lady's filthy smock. We can already identify, I think, the principals in the drama. Strephon at this stage is the rogue who probes too eagerly into the hidden scurrilities of humankind and, for the revolted pleasure of all who watch, turns them "round on every Side." The narrator, on the other hand, is the repelled and cautious author who, implicitly counseling discretion or the wisdom of illusion, chides his action and affect. Strephon, in other words, is the Knave or Madman of the "Digression on Madness" who would see every truth at any price; the narrator is nearer to the Fool who commends the serene peaceful state of the well-deceived.

But since both are Swift, the separation barely outlasts the lines that define it. Strephon instantaneously slips from the role of the visual surveyor into that of the speaking narrator. On such a point, we are told, "few Words are best," and Strephon, who has suddenly absorbed the narrator's reluctance as well as his function as our direct interlocutor, "bids us guess the rest." The merger is disclosed and deepened when the narrator entreats us to "listen while he [Strephon] next produces / The various Combs for various Uses" (lines 19-20).¹⁴ Strephon is to be a speaker here; we are to listen to him. And, more important, he is, like the narrator or poet, one who produces. To produce, we know, is not merely to show forth, but to bring into existence, to give birth to, and that in two senses. Like the narrator or author he has become, Strephon is the creator as well as the discoverer of the produced material of the poem. And what he produces—the comb "Fill'd up with Dirt so closely fixt, / No Brush could force a Way betwixt" (lines 21-22)—is his own, an aspect of his bemired self.

Here, I believe, is the first hint of what Swift will acknowledge more explicitly later in the poem when he observes with revulsion and with almost certain reference to the satirist's task and sacrifice, that "excremental Smell[s] / . . . taint the Parts from whence they fell" (lines 111-12). Indeed, it is not difficult to read the mocking descriptions of the artful hypocrisy of beauty, here and elsewhere in Swift's writings, as covert allusions to the artful hypocrisy of art, including the art of satire. As "The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit" and the "Digression on Madness" make clear, all the

most glorious enterprises of human nature, the verbal and creative among them, may be traced to the basest origins. What is true of the lady, then, may be true of "The Lady's Dressing Room," a connection not lost on many of the less tolerant readings of this and the other scatological poems and productions. And it is Swift's sense of this, I believe, that both generates and dooms the effort to separate himself from the prying Strephon. Swift, as Gardner Stout observes, projects his darker impulses outward: the debased foundations onto Celia, the drive to wallow in and reveal them onto Strephon.

The pull and recognition, however, are too potent to sustain the saving distance. Swift is drawn to the revolting excrescences as powerfully as he is repelled by them, precisely because they are his own. The ambivalence is manifest in the two succeeding references to Strephon's enterprise: "But oh! it turn'd poor *Strephon's* Bowels," and a mere four lines later, "No Object *Strephon's* Eye escapes" (lines 43, 47). Strephon is repelled and fascinated at once, and it is his bowels that are turned because it is their projected image that he produces, in both the displaying and creative senses of that word. Divided now into the magnetized voyeur and repelled observer, Strephon has added the role of the narrator to his own, and their identity at this point in the poem is confirmed by a separation that is none. The narrator, attempting to distance himself from the Strephon whose eyes are relentless, asks, apparently rhetorically: "The Stockings, why shou'd I expose, / Stain'd with the Marks of stinking Toes" (lines 51-52); and in so doing exposes what he implies he should not and will not. Only a few lines later the narrator surpasses Strephon in his impulse to press on, and the two reverse roles. Contradicting his own injunction not to expose what he betrays in the very act of disclaiming, he now insists, "The Virtues we must not let pass, / Of *Celia's* magnifying Glass" (lines 59-60). His is a brazen courage no longer shared by the "frightened Strephon," whose leap from flight to fascination he has just duplicated.

There is ambiguity and ambivalence here, certainly. But they are the simplified expressions of a negation too weak to sustain itself; of what Gardner Stout rightly identifies as Swift's "tenuous sense of identity"¹⁵ which invades and destabilizes the defensive process; and of the fluid, elusive, and indistinct interaction between mask and author, mask and mask. The result is not merely the exposure of Swift's psyche in "unending paths of vicious self-complication," though they are visible. It is a complication of the aesthetic texture and surface of the poems. Viewed this way, the poems are no longer a confused assault on the mire and dung behind the gaudy

surface of female beauty. They are a perplexed inquiry into the relative virtues of denial and exposure whose ambivalence, articulated through the dynamic interplay of character and speaker, is the principal subject and the focus of informed attention. The poems (and the major prose satires) are dramas of the fluid interplay of character and idea.

The process is visible if less elaborate in another of the scatological poems, "Strephon and Chloe," where a similar struggle between the impulses of exposure and suppression is enacted. In this poem, Strephon occupies the extremes, leaping uncontrollably from a childish idealizing denial of female humanity or animality to a wanton familiarity and participation. The narrator, the speaking "I," wavers between the poles. He counsels women to discreet concealment of their anatomical secrets (lines 115-44); contradictorily advises men to discover these secrets by peeping into their ladies' bedrooms and gradually inuring themselves to their effects (lines 235-50); at times seems reluctant to perform his narrative function ("I know what— / Why let it go, if I must tell it— / He'll sweat, and then the Nymph may smell it," lines 82-84); at other times seems blithely unresistant, even eager, as when, having observed that "Husbands [inevitably] get behind the Scene" (line 137), he slips into the husband's role: "In Bed we left the married Pair; / 'Tis Time to show how Things went there" (lines 145-46). Things of course go revoltingly, and it is soon "with Grief I speak" of what transpires.

The Strephon of "Strephon and Chloe" is a self-deluding fool, yet the narrator exhorts women to preserve just such illusions and is himself grieved to dispel them. But when Strephon is converted through shock into an indulgent reveler in body functions, the narrator eagerly invites us into the bedroom where these revels will occur and suggests that Strephon would have done better to spy on his angelic Chloe and preventively lick her leavings (lines 235-43) rather than be taken too late by excremental surprise. Perhaps, we may surmise, Strephon is advised to spy because the narrator cannot resist his own temptation to do so. But whatever the sequence, Swift cannot fulfill what seems to be his own admittedly foolish wish for purity of sight and mind. When that defense breaks down and the exposed Strephon yields (like him) to shameless indulgence, a new defense is required. The blame shifts at this point to Chloe, to woman, to the world that "forces" us so revoltedly to see. Woman must hide from man and spouse the vile truths of anatomy and function, and "if they keep not what they caught, / It is entirely their own Fault" (lines 259-60). Having imputed responsibility to the object for what the subject discovers,

Swift details the repelling transgressions of woman in ways that suggest a vaguely, perhaps quite keenly recognized identity between them.

Some call it witty to reflect
 On ev'ry natural Defect;
 Some shew they never want explaining,
 To comprehend a double Meaning.
 But, sure a Tell-tale out of School
 Is of all Wits the greatest Fool;
 Whose rank Imagination fills,
 Her Heart, and from her Lips distills;
 You'd think she utter'd from behind,
 Or at her Mouth was breaking Wind.

(lines 273-82)

The woman, recently condemned for excessive self-exposure, turns satirist here. For it is the satirist in general, Swift in particular and in these poems, who reflects on every natural defect, who plays gleefully on double meanings, tells tales on women, sex, and body functions out of school, and whose rank imagination—which he tries to negate in both poems by projecting it elsewhere and condemning it—spills over into excremental speech. Woman in these poems is the world at large, all humanity that must take the blame for compelling the reluctant satirist to perceive what his eyes behold and his imagination holds. One Swift is the Strephon of “Strephon and Chloe” who would deny the frightful ugliness of body, self, and world; but that self is a mocked naif. Another Swift is the more mature figure who would inure himself with preventive doses of such filth; but that self is doomed to exceed its proscribed limits: he cannot lick the leavings and leave them there. A third Swift is all eager prying and thrilled exposure; but he is chastised and restrained by a fourth, the negating conscience who condemns the effort and fears its consequences for sanity and survival. The only escape from such conflict, if escape it is, is to blame the woman/world for compelling the man to see and the satirist self-smearingly to speak.

The process is vividly present in “The Lady’s Dressing Room,” to which we may return; “’Tis time to shew how Things went there.” When the narrator forfeits his protective denial and acknowledges his eagerness to speak and reveal (“The Virtues we must not let pass / Of Celia’s magnifying Glass”), he leaves the palpable world of perceived objects for the more frightful realm of the indulged imagination. For what is perhaps the most gratuitously repellent description in the poem is of what is not seen at

all but speculatively imagined. Celia's magnifying glass is one that does not, but merely

can to Sight disclose,
The smallest Worm in *Celia's* Nose,
And faithfully direct her Nail
To squeeze it out from Head to Tail;
For catch it nicely by the Head,
It must come out alive or dead.

(lines 63-68)

The imagination, as always, is more alarming and productive than the physical world, however repugnant the latter may be. Swift's defenses have deserted him here. His lurid imagination has usurped the bedroom and the poem, and he is in need of a new and stronger defense against his own overpowering impulse to see and then to exacerbate with imaginative elaboration. The target he chooses, as in "Strephon and Chloe," is woman herself, the vile world that provokes sight and imagination alike. For the first time in the poem he turns his assault on Celia herself; like Chloe, she is entirely at fault, or nearly so. Pleading with Strephon not to speak of Celia's slop-chest, he turns on its owner:

That careless Wench! no Creature warn her
To move it out from yonder Corner;
But leave it standing full in Sight
For you to exercise your Spight.

(lines 71-74)

The defense is doubled here. Celia is guilty of the world's provocative carelessness of self-display, Strephon of the voyeur's spite. Doubled, yet fragile nonetheless. For even as Swift attempts to drive the accusation from the satirist to the deserving world, he returns it to himself via his surrogate Strephon, whose reluctant fright has been transformed into exercised spite. The world, then, is culpable for the reality and assertiveness of its reprehensibility, the satirist for a vicious insistence on its publicity. Only the wandering, uncertain "I" temporarily escapes.

The ensuing description of Celia's waste cabinet places the satiric enterprise in a larger context and intensifies the reflexive attack. Others may try to conceal the repugnant realities with decoration and disguise. Such is the "Workman"/artist who "shew'd his Wit / With Rings and Hinges Counterfeit / To make it seem in this Disguise, / A Cabinet to vulgar Eyes" (lines 75-78). But Strephon, the identified spiteful satirist at this stage of the

poem, is relentless in his penetration of surfaces toward the lurid truth. Like Swift in one of his sometimes exalted, sometimes scorned, but always feared identities, he is "Resolv'd to go through thick and thin" in pursuit of the insides from which the narrator of the "Digression on Madness" counsels distance. Celia's cabinet of slops is a metaphor not only for human nature disguised for the delusion of vulgar eyes, but, as itself a crafted work of art, for the artist's habitual complicity in the idealizing illusion. The double assault on art and nature is the subject of "The Progress of Beauty," another of Swift's Celia poems, where the "beauty's" cosmetic decorations are compared to the more elevated art of painting and the deceptions of the moon. When Strephon "lifts the Lid," therefore, and reaches toward the foul leavings at the bottom, he lifts the lid on art (including the art of satire) and humanity alike. Like the satirist, he gropes toward the bottom of things with a vain and waning optimism and "foul[s] his Hands in search of Hope" (line 94). Swift betrays his recognition here that, like the woman in "Strephon and Chloe" whose rank imagination feeds her speech and who seems therefore to break wind as she speaks, the satirist, at first partially idealized by the motive of hope, is defiled by what he half perceives and half creates. Reaching through rings and false hinges toward the foul essence of the species to which he undeniably belongs, the satirist ineluctably soils his hands.

Swift's anxious questioning of the satiric effort is explicit in "Strephon and Chloe":

To see some radiant Nymph appear
In all her glitt'ring Birth-day Gear,
You think some Goddess from the Sky
Descended, ready cut and dry:
But, e'er you sell your self to Laughter,
Consider well what may come after;
For fine Ideas vanish fast,
While all the gross and filthy last.

(lines 227-34)

It is Swift, of course, who in this and other poems, notably "The Progress of Beauty" and "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed," sells himself and summons us to laughter at the exposure of radiant nymphs in birthday gear, and the warning cannot have been lost on the warning voice. In "Strephon and Chloe" Swift takes refuge from the intimidating realization by recommending prophylactic disclosure—as though that, perhaps, were the satirist's true enterprise and contribution. In "The Lady's Dressing Room,"

the defense is three-fold: first, the insistence that "*Strephon* cautious never meant" to grope to the bottom of the pan; second that the true object of the satirist's search is not human vice or filth, but, as in the opening of Pandora's Box, hope; finally, a projection of responsibility once again onto the source of those discovered leavings: "O may she better learn to keep" those "Secrets of the hoary Deep" (lines 97-98).

That art and self are on Swift's mind seems to be confirmed by the extended conceit that follows the sullyng discovery. The analogy is from the "art" of cookery to the "expression" of vile materials; the covert subjects are art and satiric expression. The lines are worth quoting in full:

As Mutton Cutlets, Prime of Meat,
Which tho' with Art you salt and beat,
As Laws of Cookery require,
And toast them at the clearest Fire;
If from adown the hopeful Chops
The Fat upon a Cinder drops,
To stinking Smoak it turns the Flame
Pois'ning the Flesh from whence it came;
And up exhales a greasy Stench,
For which you curse the careless Wench;
So Things, which must not be exprest,
When plumpt into the reeking Chest;
Send up an excremental Smell
To taint the Parts from whence they fell.

(lines 99-112)

Behind these lines, I believe, lies the phenomenon Rawson has called to our attention in his valuable study of "Order and Cruelty" in Swift's writing. Swift's work, as Rawson observes, is specked with gratuitous cruelties—the flayed woman and the beau's innards in *A Tale of a Tub*, for example, the use of Yahoo skins for making clothes or sails in *Gulliver's Travels*, and the addition of "several plump young Girls in this Town" to the cannibal's cauldron in "A Modest Proposal." These cruelties and others like them are short eruptions from below that leap surprisingly and almost irrelevantly to the surface, where they hover until the moralist in Swift discovers and neutralizes them. Like the fat that drops upon a cinder, these momentary intensities are excrescences from within that "spill over" the immediate moral purpose into amoral expressions of personal animus.¹⁶ One may add to these spillovers of arbitrary cruelty the threatening urges, the repressed instinctual material which, in Stout's view, Swift

negates by projecting it onto the mocked surface of the satire. Stout and Rawson are correct, and if my reading of these lines is viable, Swift was painfully aware of it. These extrusions of rage, these negated instincts are the fat that, Swift recognizes, turns to stinking smoke and poisons the flesh it drops from, humiliatingly his own. Such a self-reflexive reading seems confirmed by the pun that completes the conceit. "Things which must not be exprest" fall not only from the rear, but from the pen or mouth as well. Hence the identity of "expressions" in "Strephon and Chloe"—"you'd think she utter'd from behind, / Or at her Mouth was breaking Wind"—and pervasively in "The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit" and the Aeolist passages of *A Tale of a Tub*. The satirist also, Swift knows and half wishes to admit, expresses into the reeking chest of his dubious art things better kept suppressed. For the consequence of their expression is the emission of "an excremental Smell / To taint the Parts from whence they fell." Thackeray, Huxley, and Murry, I believe, say nothing Swift did not suspect and does not confess in these lines.

So much that is intimidating has been said or implied about the satirist (here Strephon), that Swift characteristically seeks a saving distance. The concluding paragraph of "The Lady's Dressing Room," wherein the narrator (presumably Swift) apparently disassociates himself from the rantings of a maddened Strephon, has engaged and puzzled its readers. On the face of it, the separation seems earnest. Having seen too much, having abandoned the serene peaceful state of effective deception for immersion into the grim "insides," Strephon, the Gulliverian misanthrope and raging satirist, has gone too far. Swift seems in this passage to negate his own bilious Timonic bent by projecting it onto Strephon (as he had four years earlier onto Gulliver) and attacking it. Strephon, cursed with a "foul Imagination," can no longer separate the perceptible woman from the images he carries from Celia's dressing room. Like the embittered satirist, more particularly like Swift in the "Progress" and scatological poems, and in much of the prose satire as well, he scores the cosmetic surface ("impiously blasphemes / Her Ointments, Daubs, and Paints and Creams," lines 137-38) and rants at the fetid reality beneath it. Strephon's imagination, it seems, is as much to blame as the natural world; the tainting things which must not be expressed (vile thoughts no less than deeds) are his own as well as woman's or the world's. The satirist, in other words, has been stained by his contact with the world's repugnant insides. But he is defiled too by the uncontrollable fixation that compels him to speak his discovery

(to express what should not be expressed) and that may be at least partially traced to origins within himself.

The view that satire is a veiled subject of the poem is encouraged by the obscure reference to Statira in these final lines. In the usually reliable Williams edition of the poems, "Satira" is mistakenly substituted for Statira, and the error is felicitous as well as invited. Statira is the virtuous queen in Lee's *The Rival Queens*, but satira is the real subject of these lines. When Swift writes that "To him who looks behind the Scene, / S(t)atira's but some pocky Quean," he is confessing through near homophony what he suggests earlier in the pun on "exprest": that to those, like the author himself, who look behind the mask or surface of the work, satire is indeed a pocky queen, a royally diseased whore beset with the mire that attaches itself to satirist and satire from the inside and outside alike.

The narrator would distance himself from Strephon (as Timonic satirist) at this point, and he does so with the aid of a defense he has not previously employed—a sublimating praise of the virtues of conscious sublimation. Nowhere prior to this closing paragraph is the gap between the acting and the speaking personae so great; nowhere has it been required to be. The narrator is no longer merely hesitant to tread where Strephon rushes in; nor does he mirror Strephon's vacillations or exchange identities with him. Now, from the widest protective distance, he pities Strephon's foul obsession and his resultant blindness to "the Charms of Female Kind." Unlike Strephon, the narrator retains his capacity—or so he claims—to enjoy the Queen of Love, though she rise from stinking ooze. The "Queen of Love," I believe, bears a relation by association to the "pocky Quean" of satire; that too he will not refuse, despite its polluted source. But it is principally against the woman-as-world that the narrator smugly advises Strephon to stop his nose. So guarded, he affirms in the poem's surprising last lines,

He soon would learn to think like me,
And bless his ravisht Sight to see
Such Order from Confusion sprung,
Such gaudy Tulips rais'd from Dung.

(lines 141-44)

Few readers have been able to accept this hearty transcendence at face value. But the perplexity that accompanies any effort to sort out the seriousness from the cancelling ironies bears witness to the uncontainable fluidity of the narrative and authorial identities in the poem and in Swift's writing generally. Nora Jaffe finds the

concluding recommendation "ironic in part."¹⁷ Maurice Johnson agrees, but more complexly sees the irony losing its usual force and apparently mocking itself. "It is as though the reformer has been convinced of his own argument and the preacher has frightened himself with his own descriptions of Man's flaws and failings."¹⁸ And Peter Schakel finds the poem as a whole unsuccessful comedy, "mostly because Swift was unable to disassociate himself from his material sufficiently."¹⁹ My point throughout has been that Swift is his material. Disassociation, therefore, is not a problem *of* the poem, but *in* it. Association and disassociation are in fact among the principal forces and subjects of the poem and of much of Swift's other satiric work as well. They spur and constitute the dynamic of shifting attitude and movement between the masks that will not be steadily distinguished from one another or from the farce we too comfortably posit behind them.

Few modern readers take the closing recommendation as a literal reflection of Swift's attitude toward the tulips of deception and the dung of reality. Reading these lines, reflecting on their emphases, and recalling all that leads up to them, we are reminded of the narrator's warning in "Strephon and Chloe" that "fine Ideas vanish fast, / While all the gross and filthy last." Swift, we assume, understood that we would continue to perceive the stinking ooze and smell the dung with which the poem ringingly closes long after the Queen of Love and the gaudy Tulips had receded from experience and memory. But only Herbert Davis seems to have noticed the retroactive implications of this view from the conclusion of *Gulliver's Travels*, written but four years earlier.²⁰ For if we are willing to read this apparent irony back to Book Four of the *Travels*, the soft reading of that Voyage is severely shaken. If Swift is not radically disassociating himself from the misogynist ravings of Strephon, but only ironically claiming to do so, can we be so certain he unironically rejects and invites our rejection of Gulliver's almost identically "lunatic" flight from all mankind? In both instances, I believe, Swift lures us toward identification with a comfortable, hence ultimately untenable view of humankind. In *Gulliver's Travels*, smartly observing the pridefulness with which Gulliver would banish from his sight those proud Yahoos who will not accept themselves as such, we read the irony, with no slight relief, as a signal that we may disassociate ourselves from Gulliver and all he has come to stand for (or all he self-condemningly refuses to stand for). To do so, however, is to fall into a trap that is only less meticulously covered over in "The Lady's Dressing Room." For rejecting Gulliver's obsessive identification of stinking ooze and Yahoo dung with essential human

nature, we adopt or come embarrassingly near the position contained in the narrative recommendation at the end of the poem. Rejecting Gulliver's misanthropy for a "middle-nature" view of man and pointing to Pedro de Mendez for confirmation, we accept, even praise if we do not bless, order from confusion sprung, generous mankind raised from dung. To adopt this reading of the *Travels* is to confirm Swift's judgment that "Satyr is a sort of Glass, wherein Beholders do generally discover every body's Face but their Own";²¹ for surely the next short step is to identify ourselves not with the Yahoos, but with the benevolent captain who exemplifies man's finer possibilities. We become, in other words, the proud reader who rejects the proud Gulliver for rejecting proud Yahoos. The trap is more plainly marked in "The Lady's Dressing Room"—with "stinking ooze," "gaudy Tulips," and "Dung"—so fewer have dropped into it. But it is the same pitfall. The unironic narrator of the last lines of "The Lady's Dressing Room" is the soft reader of *Gulliver's Travels*.

A closer look at both texts and at the analogy between them suggests that to read the final affirmation of the "Dressing Room" narrator as univocal irony is no less an error than to miss the irony altogether, and there is a warning here with application for much of Swift's satire. Swift, whose floating identity winds an unsteady path from author to persona to character and back again, has it several ways simultaneously and by turns. The legitimacy of an attack on a given target does not validate the attacking voice. Nor does the absurdity or excess of the assault absolve its victim. A man, as the gentleman tells Robin Molineux in Hawthorne's tale, may have several voices as well as two complexions. Swift is such a man, and more, and it is an error that shortchanges his complexity and distorts his work to describe the relations of author, character, and mask in ways that stabilize their divisions. Swift is Strephon and narrator alternately and at once—in the conclusion no less than in the poem that, read carefully, prepares us for the ambiguous finale with the repeated ringing of the changes I have tried to record.

The fusion of the pair surfaces in "Strephon and Chloe" which contains a recommendation that may explain the closing stance of the "Dressing Room" narrator. In this poem, written less than a year after "The Lady's Dressing Room," the narrator advises not a stopping of the nose, but an equally immunizing preparatory exposure. Were Strephon to follow the earlier suggestion, he would "learn to think like me." Should he heed the later, his "Heart would be as whole as mine." In both instances, he would be securely tolerant of woman's (and the world's) offal and offense.

And yet there is also an apparent difference whose dissolution leaves a characteristic doubleness of identity behind. To spy through a cranny before marriage, to lick the lady's leavings at that stage rather "Than from Experience find too late / Your Goddess grown a filthy Mate" ("Strephon and Chloe," lines 242-43) would, the narrator of that poem suggests, make Strephon's heart as whole as his, but only because he would be as obsessed as the Strephon of "The Lady's Dressing Room." Like that Strephon,

Your Fancy then had always dwelt
On what you saw, and what you smelt;
Would still the same Ideas give ye,
As when you spy'd her on the Privy.
And, spight of *Chloe's* Charms divine,
You Heart had been as whole as mine.

("Strephon and Chloe," lines 245-50)

Strephon's heart, then, will be as whole, as wisely understanding, as the narrators of both poems only if he retains the obsession the speaker in "The Lady's Dressing Room" seems to excoriate. The obsession and the rejection of obsession that are fused in "Strephon and Chloe" but that seem to divide the speaker from Strephon in the earlier poem are, however, equally present there—in the final four lines of the "Dressing Room" that urge transcendence of, yet cannot forget or help being flooded by the images of stinking ooze and fertile dung. Here, and recurrently in Swift's satires, immersion and escape, obsession and rejection are not exclusive but concurrent and tightly interlocked. The emphatic act of naming required for the counsel to disown makes disassociation impossible and sullies the speaker with the mire he would reject or overcome. In that, for Swift, lies the reality and the personal tragedy of the satirist's art, the spiralling path of its performance.

NOTES

¹William Makepeace Thackeray, "Swift," *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century*, in *The Complete Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, 13 vols. (London: Smith, Elder, 1891), 10:406.

²*Ibid.*

³Aldous Huxley, *Do What You Will* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1929), p. 101.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵John Middleton Murry, *Jonathan Swift: A Critical Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), p. 440.

⁶Norman O. Brown, "The Excremental Vision," in *Life Against Death* (London: Sphere Books, 1968; originally published by Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 163-81.

⁷John Traugott, "'A Tale of a Tub'," in *Focus: Swift*, ed. Claude J. Rawson (London: Sphere Books, 1971), pp. 76-120; Robert M. Adams, *Strains of Discord: Studies in Literary Openness* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 146-79; Claude Rawson, "Order and Cruelty: A Reading of Swift (with some comments on Pope and Johnson)," *ELC* 20 (197): 24-56; Rawson, *Order from Confusion Sprung: Studies in Eighteenth-Century Literature from Swift to Cowper* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), pp. 3-67, 147-92; Gardner Stout, "Speaker and Satiric Vision in Swift's Tale of a Tub," *ECS* 3 (1969):175-99; Stout, "Satire and Self-Expression in Swift's Tale of a Tub," in *Studies in the Eighteenth Century*, 3 vols., ed. R. F. Brissenden (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1973), 2:323-39.

⁸Rawson, "Order and Cruelty," p. 24.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁰Stout, "Satire and Self-Expression in Swift's Tale of a Tub," p. 337.

¹¹Sigmund Freud, "Negation," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey et al., 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 19:235.

¹²Brown, p. 169.

¹³Peter J. Schakel, "Swift's Remedy for Love: The 'Scatological' Poems," in *Contemporary Studies of Swift's Poetry*, ed. John Irwin Fischer and Donald C. Mell, Jr. (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1981), p. 148. See also Donald Greene, "On Swift's 'Scatological' Poems," *SR* 75 (1967):672-89; Nora Crow Jaffe, *The Poet Swift* (Hanover: Univ. Press of New England, 1977), pp. 102-20; and Rawson, *Order from Confusion Sprung*, pp. 160-75 *passim*.

¹⁴All quotations from the poems are from *The Writings of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Robert A. Greenberg and William Bowman Piper (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1973). Line references are in parentheses in the text.

¹⁵Stout, "Satire and Self-Expression in Swift's Tale of a Tub," p. 335.

¹⁶Rawson, "Order and Cruelty," pp. 24-30, *passim*.

¹⁷Jaffe, p. 118.

¹⁸Maurice Johnson, *The Sin of Wit* (Brooklyn: Gordian Press, 1966), p. 119.

¹⁹Schakel, p. 139.

²⁰Herbert Davis, "A Modest Defence of 'The Lady's Dressing Room'," in *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature: Essays in Honor of Alan Dugald McKillop*, ed. Carroll Camden (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 47.

²¹Preface to "The Battel of the Books," in Swift, *A Tale of a Tub, to which is added The Battle of the Books, and the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*, ed. A. C. Guthkelch and D. Nichol Smith (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), p. 215.